

Megiddo Message

Summer 2012



*By **humility** and the **fear of the Lord**
are **riches** and **honor** and **life**. –Proverb 22:4*



How Much Tolerance?

Engineers think in terms of dimensional tolerances, so that when the parts are assembled into a machine, the machine will operate optimally. In the field of medicine, maximum and minimum dose tolerances are a serious concern because the patient's safety is at stake. In the social world, tolerance is "the practice of deliberately allowing or permitting a thing of which one disapproves"—which raises serious moral concerns, issues of integrity and principle, of right and wrong. The question is always: how much tolerance?

Our personal standards affect our tolerances and—most important—our relation to God. A simple yes-or-no question sticks in my mind from a medical checkup I had a few years ago. The question was: "Do you always use a seatbelt?" The problem was that little word *always*. It was a question without any tolerance of shortfall. If I were to say *almost always* or *very nearly always*, the answer still would be "No" because *almost* isn't *always*.

Why does that question stay with me? Because it reminds me of my pledge as a follower of Christ, because I have committed to "*keep all [God's] commandments always*" (Deut. 5:29). Jesus said, "*Watch and pray always*" (Luke 21:36); and Paul told us to be "*steadfast and unmovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord*" (1 Cor. 15:58); to "*rejoice in the Lord always*" (Phil. 4:4) and "*always be thankful*" (Col. 3:15 NJB).

Do you realize the standard Jesus was maintaining when He could say, "*I do always those things that please ... the Father*"? (John 8:29). He didn't have to say, "I almost always" or "nearly always" do as My Father says. He didn't have to apologize for any shortfall. His commitment and His obedience were total. He had no tolerance for any self-seeking ambitions. He never compromised His integrity, or modified His message to please His hearers. He had no tolerance for bitterness, or envy, or lust. And that is the standard God has set for us (Eph. 4:13). He knows that we will fail, but He gives us time, has promised to help us, and will forgive as we turn and do right (Ezek. 33:14–15). We show our love to God by our obedience. In the words of the Apostle John, "*This is the love of God, that we keep His commandments*" (1 John 5:3). It was among Jesus' last words to His disciples before the crucifixion, "*If you love Me, keep My commandments*" (John 14:15).

In contrast with Bible teaching, our culture today is lauding the "new" tolerance. What makes it new? A quality that started out as an acknowledgment of another person's right to their view has evolved into "an attitude of mind that implies non-judgmental acceptance of different lifestyles or beliefs" (Wikipedia). And if you think your idea or belief or viewpoint is better, you are bigoted.

Tolerance is the all-in-one virtue. In fact, about the only thing that cannot be tolerated is intolerance.

How does this apply to religion? In the view of many people, religion should be global, a one-size-fits-all. Don't let religious differences divide us. Don't discuss your differences. Don't offend, and don't condemn. "Don't be bigoted," they say—as if bigotry and conviction were one and the same.

Prior to World War II, it is said that British papers held back reporting some Nazi atrocities in Europe because "Hitler might be offended."

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Happy is he who does not condemn himself in what he approves.
—Romans 14:22

WE BELIEVE...

- ★ **in God, the Creator** and sustainer of the earth, the world, the universes, and all life, in whom we "*live, and move, and have our being.*"
- ★ **in the Bible** as our only source of true knowledge about God and His purposes and plans for His creation and for the salvation of humankind.
- ★ **in Jesus Christ**, the Son of God and our Perfect Example, who was conceived of the Holy Spirit and born of a virgin; who ministered among His brethren, was crucified, resurrected, and taken to heaven and seated at the right hand of the Father, crowned with immortal glory, and who shall shortly return to be King of the whole earth.
- ★ **in the Holy Spirit**, the openly manifest power of God, which God bestowed at various times and in various ways to reveal His knowledge to humankind, to support His spokesmen, to confirm His utterances, and to demonstrate His supreme power and authority.
- ★ **in life as the gift of God**, and in our sacred responsibility to use it for God and His coming Kingdom.
- ★ **in humankind** as providing the raw material from which shall be selected and developed a superior, God-honoring people upon whom God will bestow the blessings of immortal life in His soon-coming Kingdom.
- ★ **in ourselves** as capable, with the help of God, of applying to our own lives the precepts and principles taught in the Word of God, in this way perfecting that high quality of moral character which God has promised to recompense with life eternal in His heavenly Kingdom on earth.
- ★ **in the promise of God**, that Jesus Christ will soon return to rid the earth of all sin and suffering and inaugurate an eternal and worldwide Kingdom of peace and righteousness, until God's will is done here as it is now done in heaven.

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MEGIDDO MEANS...

"a place of troops" (*Gesenius' Hebrew Lexicon*); "a place of God" (*Young's Analytical Concordance*). Megiddo was and is a town in Palestine, strategically located, and the scene of frequent warfare. In the spiritual parallel, it is a place where soldiers engaged in spiritual warfare gather to renew their strength and courage (2 Cor. 10:4-5).

Front cover photo: Northern Idaho
Taken by Margaret Tremblay



Focus On Character

"Endurance develops strength of character, and character strengthens our confident hope of salvation." –Rom. 5:4 NLT

Character: proof of genuineness, trustworthiness.... one who has proved oneself true. –WSNT

the result of standing a test, enduring something that promotes and validates the character of the one undergoing it. –BDAG

Our world today is witnessing a widespread devaluing of character. Some years ago the President of Moody Bible Institute commented, "For a long time, credentials have eclipsed character in America. Who you are and what you do runs ahead of what you are

and what you are becoming." Says the writer of an editorial, "The frame of America's social fabric is fast becoming a national obsession. Three out of every four Americans think we are in moral and spiritual decline." Another observer writes, "Our problems are beyond government's reach. They

while violence continues. Social workers push programs to save our youth from the scourge of drugs—while the international drug trade thrives. Politicians promise an easy, painless corrective to the nation's ills which they are powerless to deliver. Lawmakers hope to cure our national ills by passing new laws, while sidestepping the root cause: the lack of respect for authority. Meanwhile, megachurch leaders offer a feel-good-about-yourself religion that is designed to be popular, but is powerless to save.

Is it any wonder that atheists are growing in numbers and influence, while youth are apathetic, cynical, even fearful?

A survey conducted among Canadian teens started with the question, "What do you wish for most in your life?" The number one answer was, "Somebody we can trust."

Needed: *Truth*

Truth is becoming a rare entity. Malcolm Muggeridge wrote in his autobiography, "In the nearly seven decades I have lived through, the world has overflowed with bloodshed and explosion; all in purportedly just causes. The quest for justice continues, and weapons and hatred pile up; but truth was an early casualty. The lies on behalf of which our wars have been fought and our peace treaties concluded! The lies of revolution and of counterrevolution! The lies in advertising, in the news, in salesmanship, in politics! The lies of the priest in the pulpit, the professor at his podium, the journalist at his typewriter! The lie stuck like a fish bone in the throat of the microphone, the



Peace

*Be of one mind,
live in **peace**;
and the God of **love** and
peace shall be with you.*

–2 Corinthians 13:11

are rooted in the loss of values."

Some analysts are interpreting it as a crisis of truth. Glaring billboards relate happiness to buying the right car, or using the right toothpaste, or choosing the right entertainment. Educators promise to remove the threat of violence by proper education of our children—

hand-held lies of the prowling cameramen!...It is truth that has died, not God."

Jesus observed the same problem in His day. In a moment that was the severest test of His own great character, he met the problem head on. In a brief but significant conversation with Pontius Pilate, Pilate asked Jesus, "Are you a king?" We can almost see the slight grin on the face of this puppet in the hands of Caesar as he looked down his nose at the Jewish carpenter.

Jesus responded by questioning Pilate's question, asking, in essence, "Are you asking this on your own or has someone set you up to it?" This method of questioning the question was used very powerfully by Jesus because it compelled the questioner to disclose the weakness of his own position.

Pilate was somewhat exasperated by the question. "Look," he answered, "I did not bring you here—your own people have done that."

Then Jesus answered, "My kingdom is not of this world. If it were, my servants would fight to prevent my arrest. But now my kingdom is from another place."

Pilate said, "Ah! so you are a king."

Jesus' response shows plainly His fearless, unshakable faith, and Pilate's real problem: "You are right in saying I am a king. In fact, for this reason I was born, and for this cause I came into the world, to testify to the truth. Every one on the side of truth listens to me." Here was Pilate, face to face with the truth yet openly rejecting it. Your problem, says Jesus, is not a lack of truth but your own closed heart.

Jesus was—and is—the way, the truth and the life. How we answer Him reveals much more about us than it does about Him.

"What is truth?" Pilate muttered, and did not even wait for an answer. But in those three simple words Pilate had proved Jesus' point precisely. The quest for truth was not Pilate's longing or desire. For in spite of all his pomp and glory, Pilate was a slave—a slave to the system, a slave to his own political ambitions, a slave to power and lust, a slave to himself. Pilate did not really want to know anything about truth, so long as he had the favor of Caesar and the applause of the crowd.

Where Pilate showed his weakness—in his indifference to the real issue, his ignorance and lack of interest in that which was momentous—Jesus showed the tremendous strength of true and proven character, plus the fearlessness of knowing that God was with Him.

Did the truth of God ever have a stronger defense? ♦



God has a great plan and purpose for this earth. He is going to have a Kingdom here that extends "from sea to sea, and from the river to the ends of the earth" (Ps. 72:8). This worldwide kingdom will be under the direction of Christ and His chosen ones, and everyone living on earth will be part of it, either as rulers (Rev. 2:26; 3:21; 5:9–10) or subjects (Rev. 7:9, 13–15). Right now He is seeking people like you and me to be part of His Kingdom.



You must be *holy* in everything you do, just as God who chose you is *holy*.

—1 Peter 1:15 NLT

The question that concerns us is, **What can I do so that the great God will choose me for one of His select ones?** What can I do so that He will choose me, use me, preserve me as one of the eternal inhabitants of this planet?

God wants the best. When He commanded Israel to offer sacrifices, they were always to be perfect, without any defect (see Lev. 1:3; 3:1; 4:3, etc.)—not for His benefit but for theirs. He said the same of His people the Church: "that He might sanctify and cleanse her with the washing of water by the word, that He might present her to Himself a glorious church, not having spot or wrinkle or any such thing, but that she should be holy and without blemish" (Eph. 5:26–27). The Bride of Christ is figuratively described as dressed in "fine linen, clean and bright," which represents "the righteous acts of the saints" (Rev. 19:8). Paul told his young protégé that he should "keep this commandment without spot, blameless until our Lord Jesus Christ's appearing" (1 Tim. 6:14). The

qualifying standard is always the same, and it is the standard Jesus Himself attained (Heb. 7:26).

Can we expect God to accept less—when His resources are limitless?

How to *Qualify*

What can I do to qualify? What does God want from me?

The prophet Micah pondered this question centuries ago. *“With what shall I come before the Lord, and bow myself before the High God? Shall I come before Him with burnt offerings, with calves a year old? Will the Lord be pleased with thousands of rams, ten thousand rivers of oil? Shall I give my firstborn for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul? He has shown you, O man, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justly, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God?”* (Mic. 6:6–8).

How could he or anyone else please God? Did God want burnt offerings? The cattle upon a thousand hills already belonged to God (Ps. 50:10). Should the prophet offer his own children? Absolutely not! God had always prohibited

honor mercy. There is no place for retaliation, no law of the jungle here; no “might is right” or “you deserve what you got” attitude. God knows our nature. He knows that we are not naturally merciful. Yes, we want others to be merciful to us. And if we “love mercy” we will consistently *show* mercy, and showing mercy is an acquired quality, a God-like quality. With God is “*mercy and abundant redemption*” (Ps. 130:7)—it is “with us” only as we re-make our character to His standard.

How do we “love mercy”? When there is conflict/differences, give more than justice, even seek out ways to give another the benefit of the doubt; go the second mile toward helpfulness and understanding; when there is a question, err on the side of mercy, not on the side of harshness. We lose nothing—except our own selfish pride and misplaced authority—when we give up our own way, or overlook a slight, and we gain immeasurably with God.

The type of life that God’s prophet Micah preached and practiced is geared to everyday life. The point is: We cannot be wrong with our fellowman and be right with God.

3: “Walk humbly with your God.”

To walk with God is a tall order. It implies enjoying His company, going where He approves, staying in “His way.” It is living as under His watchful eye, having His interests over our interests, His loves over our loves, His concerns over our concerns. *“Can two walk together unless they are agreed?”* asked the Prophet Amos (Amos 3:3). No, they must agree, and when that second party is God and the destination is eternal life in His Kingdom, what a fruitful agreement!

To walk *humbly* adds yet another dimension to duty—that in anything we do, we be always willing to exalt God, to honor His way, to choose what He prefers, and let go our own wishes. To be humble, submissive, willing to obey Him—this is the attitude God honors. This places the whole focus on adopting His character attributes.

Righteousness Only

All through the Old Testament the standard was fixed: integrity, purity, righteousness. *“For the Lord is righteous, He loves righteousness.”* The Lord has “*pleasure in uprightness.*” *“He loves righteousness and justice.”* *“For the Lord loves justice, and does not forsake His saints; they are preserved forever.”* *“The Lord opens the eyes of the blind:...The Lord loves the righteous.”* *“The way of the wicked is an abomination to the Lord: but he loves him who follows righteousness.”* *“Behold, You desire truth in the inward parts, and in the hidden part You will make me to know wisdom.”* *“The Lord preserves all who love him.”* And Jesus proclaimed the same standard, *“He who loves Me will be loved by My Father, and I will love him and manifest Myself to him.”* And what is it to love God? Jesus answered this question: *“If you love Me, keep My commandments”* (Ps. 11:7; 1Chron 29:17; Ps. 33:5; 37:28; 146:8; Prov. 15:9; Ps. 51:6; 145:20; John 14:21, 15).

Though our present culture—unfortunately—puts little or no weight on character, God has not changed. He is “*the*



human sacrifices. What, then, was the answer? *“What does the Lord require of you?”* The answer has three parts:

1: “Do justly...”

The first requirement was a proper regard for one’s fellowmen: *“To do justly.”* Strange as it may seem, we find favor with God by the way we treat one another—friend or foe, family or stranger. God commands us to act with integrity, fairness and moral rectitude toward all. The one who would be accepted in His presence must maintain a right relationship with his fellowmen. No selfishness, no harshness, no unfair dealings, no self-centered ambitions—he must be always fair and upright.

2: “Love mercy.”

Not simply “be merciful” but love—esteem—regard—

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Jesus: the Way, the Truth, the Life!

Do we realize how much Jesus was saying when He spoke those words, “I am the way, the truth, and the life”? (John 14:6).

Jesus is “the way”—the path, the road, the connecting link—between something present (and inferior) and something future (and indescribably better). Jesus is the way to the heavenly Kingdom that will one day be set up right here on earth. In that world, everyone will be free from suffering and pain, free from sin, free from everything that distresses and plagues us here.

How is Jesus “the way”? By what He taught—both by His preaching and teaching, and by example. He was showing that way constantly, the way of holiness and virtue.

Could those who knew Him ever appreciate Him enough? Could they realize that they were seeing in human flesh and blood an open demonstration of the way to eternal life, a life so magnificent, so superior to ours? What more could the Father give us in the life of His Son than to show the way!

But that was not all. Jesus is also “the truth.” Who else could say it—truthfully? In Him was no sham, no hypocrisy, no imitating of what He was not. In Him was no excuse, no guarded reserve, no “politically correct,” no careful covering up—He had nothing which needed any covering. His life, in every expression, in every word and motive and move, was the embodiment of truth. Do we wonder that it was written prophetically of Him, a thousand years before He was born, “You love righteousness and hate wickedness; therefore God, Your God, has anointed You with the oil of gladness more than Your companions”? (Ps. 45:7; applied to Jesus in Heb. 1:9). Of Him it was prophesied again, “He put on righteousness as a breastplate, and a helmet of salvation on His head” (Isa. 59:17).

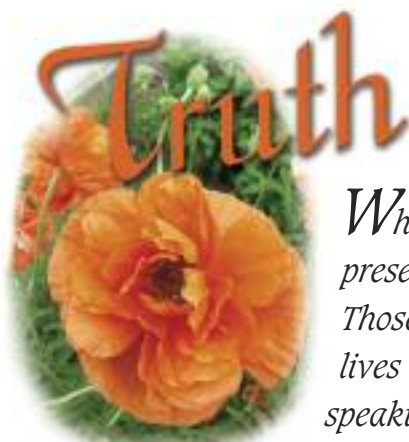
It was written of Jesus after He had lived, died, been resurrected and ascended to heaven, that He was “holy, harmless, undefiled, separate from sinners” (Heb. 7:26). Even His enemies said of Him, “This man has done nothing wrong” (Luke 23:41). Of whom else could one of His closest associates say, he “committed no sin, nor was deceit found in His mouth”? (1 Pet. 2:22). Who else could introduce Himself as “He who is holy, he who is true,” as Christ did in His letter to the believers at Philadelphia? (Rev. 3:7).

Who but Jesus could say, “He who speaks from himself seeks his own glory; but He who seeks the glory of the One who sent Him is true, and no unrighteousness is in Him” (John 7:18). Who but Jesus could call Himself “the true vine”? (John 15:1).

Do we wonder that Jesus is also “the life” when He proclaimed a message of life everlasting to all who would follow His footsteps? Great teachers and philosophers before Him had talked of a better society and new directions of knowledge. But whoever came offering a real, physical life that would never end? Who but Jesus could say, “I have come that they might have life, and that they may have it more abundantly”? (John 10:10).

Who but Jesus could say, “I am the bread of life. He who comes to Me shall never hunger, and he who believes in Me shall never thirst”? (John 6:35). Who but He could advise, “Do not labor for the food which perishes, but for the food which endures to everlasting life, which the Son of Man will give you, because God the Father has set His seal on Him”? (John 6:27). Who but He was so close to the center and source of life that He could say, “For as the Father has life in Himself, so He has granted the Son to have life in Himself...For as the Father raises the dead and gives life to them, even so the Son gives life to whom He will...Most

assuredly, I say to you, he who hears My word and



Who may enter your presence on your holy hill? Those who lead **blameless** lives and do what is **right**, speaking the **truth** from sincere hearts. –Psalm 15:1–2 NLT

believes in Him who sent Me has everlasting life, and shall not come into judgment, but has passed from death into life” (John 5:26, 21, 24).

The life Jesus offered is not the present life that we have now; it is a life that He will give to each faithful servant of His when He returns to set up His Kingdom. And that life will not be life for a century or even a millennium, but a life that will go on through all the ages to come!

Can we even begin to comprehend the magnitude of Jesus’ meaning when he said, “I am the...life”? ♦



Jesus and Character

When Jesus came teaching the words of His Father, He put character first. What was the subject of His very first sermon? What were the entrance requirements that He put on the Kingdom of God? *"Unless your righteousness exceeds the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees, you will by no means enter the kingdom of heaven"* (Matt. 5:20).

Who would receive His rich blessings? Those who were **meek, humble, pure of heart, hungering and thirsting after righteousness**. Read Matthew, chapters 5, 6, 7, and notice His repeated emphasis on obedience: *hear* and *do* what God commands. Were any other achievements of this

world highlighted? Would any preference be given to the high achievers of this world? Would there be any special credits for the social

love, just as I have kept My Father's commandments and abide in His love" (John 15:10). Was something else bigger in one's life than following Him? There was no need to start until one was ready to put His interests first (see Luke 9:57–62). This shows Jesus' emphasis on character, a willingness to put obedience to Him first in one's life.

We who are committed to follow Jesus Christ so as to have a share in His coming Kingdom must also put obedience to Him first, above every other interest in life. Credentials are transient; upright character is permanent. Credentials build memories; a righteous character builds for eternity. Credentials in this world often evoke jealousy; godly character commands respect and—hopefully—inspires others to copy it. And—most important of all—it wins the favor of God.

A commitment to character is a commitment to principle above personal gain or satisfaction, even above one's own reputation. It is a commitment to attaining the standard God has prescribed for us, even *"the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ"* (Eph. 4:13). Easy? Not at all. But here is real worth because it is the way to endless life!

Character is a commitment to the long view over the immediate. Here is our strong motivation to be like Jesus. To follow Him is an inner compulsion to be like Him in thought, in principle, in deed—in character. Here is achievement of real worth. And like our elder Brother, we do not seek earthly credentials because their value is fleeting. We want what Christ achieved because that is what God will reward with life everlasting.

Following Jesus Christ means being intent on one thing: pleasing our heavenly Father, just as Christ, who said, *"I always do those things that please Him"* (John 8:29).

When those who have served Christ stand before His judgment seat (2 Cor. 5:10), the great Judge will not check the value of their savings accounts, or the worth of their houses and lands. He will not even consult others' opinions of them. His verdict will depend on just one thing: whether they attained the character likeness of Christ. ♦

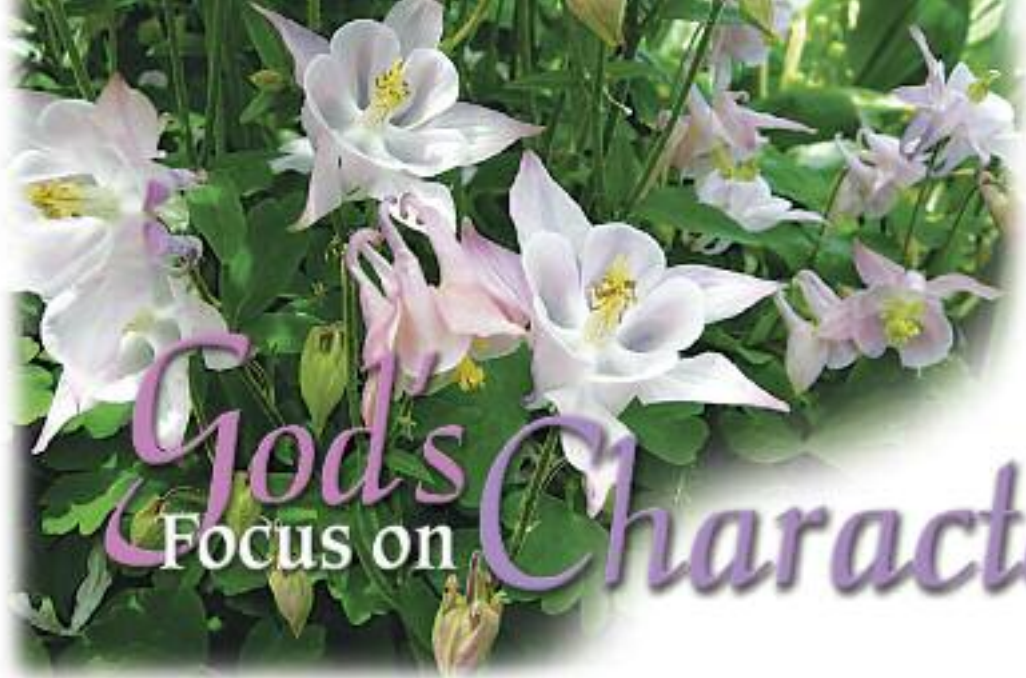


Purity

All who have this eager expectation [of being made like Christ] will keep themselves pure, just as he [Christ] is pure. – 1 John 3:3 NLT

reformer, the political leader, the one who could attract and hold the attention of thousands? No, God was looking for purity of heart; upright, godly character.

Whom did Jesus choose to be His apostles? Did He choose the wealthy, the influential, the political giants of His time? No, Jesus chose those in whom He saw potential, who would be willing to follow Him whatever the cost—not literally walk behind Him down the road, but those who would be willing to leave their former way of life and follow Him in His life, copy His holy character, obey His commands. *"If you love me,"* He said, *"keep My commandments"* (John 14:15). And, *"If you keep My commandments, you will abide in My*



God's Character

Focus on

All through the Bible, in the words of every prophet and teacher, the focus has been on character.

It was God's plan from the beginning that His people should meet a pre-determined standard of behavior.

How did God judge the offerings Cain and Abel brought to Him? Did He accept one because it was animal and reject the other because it was the fruit of the land? No, the Bible tells us clearly what was the criteria for judgment: character. *"If you do well, will you not be accepted? And if you do not do well, sin lies at the door"* (Gen. 4:7). Hebrews tells us also that Abel *"obtained witness that he was righteous"*—**righteousness** was his credit (Heb. 11:4). And we learn from the apostle John that Cain slew Abel *"because his works were evil, and his brother's righteous"* (1 John 3:12). God was judging by character.

Why was Abraham called the friend of God? Why did he find favor with God? Again the focus was on character—Abraham's unflinching obedience. When Abraham was about to sacrifice his dear son Isaac, the angel of the Lord stayed his hand and called out, *"Now I know that you fear God, since you have not withheld your son...from me....Because you have done this thing, and have not withheld your son, your only son—blessing I will bless you, and multiplying I will multiply your descendants as the stars of the heaven ...because you have obeyed My voice"* (Gen. 22:12, 16–18). Abraham was blessed because he obeyed God's command; this is character.

When God was choosing a king for Israel, He made a point to tell Samuel that His view was different—because *"The Lord does not see as man sees; for man looks at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart"* (1 Sam. 16:7)—the inner life, the character.

What did the prophet Samuel recommend to the Israelites who had begged for a king? How were they to find favor with God? *"Only fear the Lord, and serve Him in truth with all your heart; for consider what great things He has done for you"* (1 Sam. 12:24). They were to *"serve Him in truth with all [their] heart."* Again, the focus was on character.

When David, the Psalmist, was contemplating



Kindness

*Be **kind** to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another.*

– Ephesians 4:32

God's holy presence and who might be accepted into it, what did he state as the criteria? *"Who is it, Lord, that will make his home in your tabernacle, and rest on the mountain where your sanctuary is?"* He answers his own question: *"One that guides his steps without fault, and gives to all their due; one whose heart is all honest purpose, who utters no treacherous word, never defrauds a friend, or slanders a neighbor. He scorns the reprobate, keeping his reverence for such as fear God, and is true, come what may, to his pledged word"* (Ps. 15:1–4, Knox). Again the Psalmist says, *"Who dares climb the mountain*

of the Lord, and appear in his sanctuary? The guiltless in act, the pure in heart; one who never set his heart on lying tales, or swore treacherously to his neighbor. His to receive a blessing from the Lord, mercy from God his sure defender" (Ps. 24:3–5, Knox). It did not matter whether one was a peasant or a king; the criteria for judgment was one's character.

This was how David said the Lord had dealt with him. In the 18th Psalm he said twice, "The Lord rewarded me according to my righteousness; according to the cleanness of my hands in His sight" (Ps. 18:20, 24).

What will cause God to change His attitude toward us from that of enmity to friendship? What will bring us restoration and acceptance when we have sinned? Only repenting and turning from the transgression. "God's sacrifice is a soul with its evil crushed: a heart broken with penitence never wilt thou despise" (Ps. 51:17 Moffatt).



*This is My commandment,
that you **love** one
another as I have **loved**
you. –John 15:12*

WHOM DOES GOD LOVE?

It is widely believed that God loves everybody. Is this the teaching of the Bible? God, speaking as the voice of Wisdom, says, "I love those who love me" (Prov. 8:17)—the "me" is the wisdom of God personified, His truth, His governing law. Again, the focus is on character—for who can love a law he does not abide by?

All through the Bible, God set conditions on His love. What was the problem when God through His prophets condemned the sacrifices of His people with such powerful terms as, "I hate...I despise...I delight not..."? He even told the Prophet Jeremiah not to pray for them, or God would not hear (Jer. 11:14). What was the reason? They were conforming outwardly, but it was all show. Their heart was far from God (Isa. 29:13, quoted by Jesus in Matt. 15:8). Like Ezekiel said about the worshipers in his time, "With their mouth they

show much love, but their hearts pursue their own gain" (Ezek. 33:31). It was form without faith, ritual without respect, outward compliance without inner cleansing. Always God wanted obedience to His laws, along with reverence and fear, and so He commanded through His prophet Isaiah, "Wash yourselves, make yourselves clean; put away the evil of your doings from before My eyes. Cease to do evil, learn to do good" (Isa. 1:16–17). His focus was on character.

What will cause God to hear our prayers? Is it our fine sounding words? Is it our position or achievement in this world? Is it our wealth of goods, our prominent social standing, or our shrewd buying and selling, our talents, good appearance and abilities, or the honors we have earned in this world? Will our works of charity catch His attention? The book of Proverbs says that God "hears the prayer of the righteous" (15:29). The prophet Isaiah says it from the other side, that our iniquities block the communication between us and God. "The Lord's arm is not so short that he cannot save; nor his ear too dull to hear, it is your iniquities that raise a barrier between you and your God, because of your sins he has hidden his face so that he does not hear you" (Isa. 59:1–2 NEB).

When Isaiah the prophet speaks of coming judgments, whom does he say will escape? Who will be spared? "The man who lives an upright life and speaks the truth,...He will dwell in the heights, his place of defense will be the fortresses of rocks" (Isa. 33:15–16 NEB, RSV). Again, the focus is on character.

The prophet Zechariah, addressing the nation of Judah, repeated God's demands for upright character. "These are the things you shall do: speak each man the truth to his neighbor; give judgment in your gates for truth, justice, and peace; let none of you think evil in your heart against your neighbor; and do not love a false oath. For all these are things that I hate, says the Lord" (Zech. 8:16–17).

Prophesying the requirements of those who survive the purifying judgments of God, Zechariah again focuses on character. He says, speaking for God, "I will bring the one-third through the fire, will refine them as silver is refined, and test them as gold is tested. They will call on My name, and I will answer them. I will say, this is My people; and each one will say, the Lord is my God" (Zech. 13:9). Even among them, God will be looking for character.

Why was Jesus so loved of His Father? Why was He accepted and honored? Not because of anything that was His by birthright, but because

He loved right and hated wrong. As the Psalmist wrote prophetically of Christ's high character: "Then said I, Lo, I come: in the volume of the book it is written of me, I delight to do thy will, O my God: yea, thy law is within my heart" (Ps. 40:7–8; applied to Jesus in Heb. 10:7; see also Ps. 45:7 and Heb. 1:9). Do we wonder that God loved Jesus?

What shall we do? How can we get God's attention? How can we distinguish ourselves so that He will choose us, save us, bless us with life everlasting? God's Word is clear. By becoming like Christ, righteous and upright in every way. Only the upright shall dwell in the land; only the perfect shall remain in it (Prov. 2:21). The Apostle John wrote, "And everyone who has this hope in Him purifies himself, just as He is pure" (1 John 3:3).

All who will be a permanent part of the body of Christ must reach "the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ" (Eph. 4:13). God has set the standard and to be a righteous judge He must judge by that standard. He can't perpetuate us just because we say we love Him or have a knowledge of His law, or a long record of service in His cause. He is looking for righteousness. Did not Jesus say, "Seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness"? (Matt. 6:33). And if we produce the righteousness, He has promised to supply the LIFE, "even life forever more," along with glory and honor and immortality (Rom. 2:7). Could we ask for more? He will

give that, too, for "No eye has seen, no ear has heard, no mind has conceived what God has prepared for those who love him" (1 Cor. 2:9 NIV).

Our days are swiftly passing. All the signs around us are shouting that we are running out of time. The great Day of the Lord is near, speeding apace. God grant that we may make a more seri-



*Pursue **righteousness** and a **godly life**, along with **faith, love, perseverance,** and **gentleness.***

– 1 Timothy 6:11 NLT

ous effort toward right living. Let us do our utmost right now to put on the character of the Lord Jesus, that we may greet the Day of the Lord with joy and be granted a full share in the blessings of the Kingdom to come, world without end. ♦

What Is *God* Looking For?

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 6

God of knowledge; and by Him actions are weighed" (1 Sam. 2:3). He looks not at what we **promise** but at what we **perform**. He judges not by what we **know** but by what we **do**. God is not looking for unusual talent, or high IQ. Whatever status symbols our culture dictates, God is not impressed. He is not looking for medals, awards, or degrees. He is not impressed by good looks or physical prowess. He does not care what kind of car we drive, or what neighborhood we live in, or what we own, or who we know. He is looking for the good and honest heart, the educated conscience that will not allow one to lie or deceive even if great personal gain or reputation

is at stake. He is looking for one who is God-honoring, reverent, humble, contrite, and submissive, always ready to acknowledge a wrong and turn from it. He wants character, and will be satisfied with nothing less.

A small incident from the life of Adam Clarke highlights an exceptional appreciation for character (Adam Clarke wrote a detailed commentary of the Bible, along with a complete translation of it about the turn of the nineteenth century). One of his first jobs as a youth was working for a linen draper. He had not been working long when his employer reprimanded him for measuring the material *correctly* and not stretching it—as he had been shown how to do—so as to make more profit. "Sir," young Adam replied, "I can stretch your cloth indeed, but I will not stretch my conscience." ♦

SCENE TWO:



THE END OF THE AGE

From the Days of Lot

Characters:

- Heth: Lot's son-in-law—mocker
Ophir: Heth's father—thinks Lot is a fanatic
Birsha: Heth's mother—likes Lot's family
Rizpah: Heth's sister, 10 years old—
Makar: Heth's wife, older daughter of Lot—
defends her father's God
but doesn't worship Him
Elam: neighbor, also Lot's son-in-law—mocker

Narrator:

We all know what happened to the world of Noah's time. They lingered, refused, and were lost. The end came, just as God had determined.

And the same urgent warning comes to us: Who? Who will hearken and hear? Who will listen at the end of this age?

Now we go to another day and another age, and hear another warning. It is the voice of two angels speaking to God's servant Lot:

Voice:

"Then the men said to Lot, 'Have you anyone else here? Sons-in-law, your sons, your daughters, and whomever you have in the city— take them out of this place! ... because the outcry against them has grown great before the face of the Lord, and the Lord has sent us to destroy it.'" —Genesis 19:12–13)

Narrator:

Heaven had issued the decree: Sodom's hours were numbered. Doom was to descend upon it, along with several other thriving but wicked "cities of the plains." We know little about these cities except that their sin was "very grave" (Gen. 18:20).

God did not always punish wickedness immediately, but this time He chose to act. Perhaps it was for the example these cities would be to those who in years to come should choose to disregard God. Jesus perpetuated the memory of Sodom with His timeless warning: "Remember Lot's wife" (Luke 17:32). And as was written years later by one named Jude, "I want

to remind you [that] ... Sodom and Gomorrah, and the cities around them in a similar manner to these, having given themselves over to sexual immorality and gone after strange flesh, are set forth as an example, suffering the vengeance of eternal fire [destruction]" (Jude 5, 7).

It was evening when two men approached Lot at Sodom's city gate. Exactly what prompted Lot to invite what turned out to be angels to his home for the night we are not told. But after the evening meal, perverted men mobbed Lot's home with their lewd demands. It was the hand of the angels that saved Lot. Then the angels warned Lot—he and his family—to leave Sodom because God was going to destroy the city. To his credit, Lot believed and went to warn his sons-in-law, as God had directed him. Did any in Sodom believe Lot's warning? Let us see.

(Curtain opens)

Setting:

A modest city home. It is late at night and the large common sleeping area is disheveled—the result of Lot's excited visit. Lot's warning had fallen on deaf ears, and he is about to leave. Ophir and Heth don't believe and mock. The women in the background are afraid.

Lot: *(about to exit)* I've warned you! *(turns back)*
Oh, believe me! Get out of Sodom while you can—

Heth: *(scoffing)* Run like a scared rabbit? Not I.

Ophir: It's late, Lot. You should be in bed.

Heth: *(scoffing)* See you tomorrow.

Lot: *(urgently)* Mark my word. The God of heaven will destroy this wicked city.

Rizpah: *(wails)* I don't want to die...

Makar: *(runs to her Father and grabs his arm)* Oh, Father, I'll go with you...

Heth: *(pulls Makar away and shoves her toward the back)* You're staying right here. Your father is out of his mind. *(Makar weeps, Lot exits)*

Ophir: *(reassuringly)* Nothing is going to happen to Sodom.
(confidently) Sodom has been here a good long time, and
it will be here for a long time to come.

Birsha: I'm not so sure! Lot's God is different from other
gods...

Heth: *(interrupts)* He's different all right. He is cruel,
demanding...

Makar: *(defensive)* He is *not* cruel. He's good—He's righteous...

Heth: *(shoots back)* Then why don't *you* worship Him?

Ophir: *(changes approach)* Why would any god destroy a beau-
tiful, thriving city like Sodom?

Birsha: Because it is wicked...

Ophir: *(scoffing)* Sodom wicked? I like it!

Heth: *(scoffing)* So do I!

Birsha: What if those two men *were* sent by Lot's God?

Makar: *(adds)* —to warn us to get out.

Ophir: Nonsense! Its just a bad dream.

Heth: *(laughs)* I hope so. I'm too happy to die just yet.

Ophir: *(adds)* And I'm too busy.

Rizpah: *(wails)* I'm too young to die.

Elam: *(knock at the door)* Ophir, Heth, open!

Heth: *(mockingly)* Well, my good friend Elam what brings
you here at this late hour?

Elam: *(feigned fear)* Veeerrry urgent business... *(all 3 men laugh)*
Something terrible is going to happen to this wonder-
ful city...

Heth: So you know about it...

Ophir: *(looks Elam up and down)* You don't look too frightened.

Elam: *(laughs)* Fact is, I'm not. But Father Lot certainly is.

Heth: *(sincere words said insincerely)* I feel sorry for poor Father
Lot. He really believes his God sent those men.

Makar: Heth, you would too if you had the experiences I had
before I married you. It was Uncle Abraham's God that
saved us when Sodom was attacked and we were taken
captive. I can tell you...

Birsha: *(interrupts)* What if there is something to the report?

Ophir: I say, forget it.

Heth: But perhaps, Father, we should give a sizable gift to
the sun god tomorrow?

Ophir: *(yawns)* Perhaps we should.

Makar: *(not ready to let the matter drop)* You're fools! —that's only
making the priests rich—those gods are powerless to...

Ophir: *(to change the subject)* And now, Elam, what are your

plans for next winter? I mean, after Sodom is
destroyed! *(men laugh)*

Birsha: *(still worried)* Lot says his wife and two other daughters
are busy packing. They plan to leave as soon as they can.

Rizpah: Like tomorrow?

Elam: Just wait. They won't be gone long before you'll see
them dragging *(acts it out)* all their stuff back again.

Heth: *(disconcerted pause)* You know, Lot never blended in with
others—rather odd in many ways. I remember the first
time he took me out to his altar to worship with him.
Strangest religion I ever saw. No priest, no image,
nothing you could see. Just a very plain altar, and—

Makar: My father says his God made everything. He can't be
seen—only worshiped.

Elam: I think I could go along with that part, but what I did-
n't like were the restrictions. When I set out to get his
daughter, I never dreamed what I was getting into! But
now that we are married, I have it *my way*, *(laughs)* and
it doesn't resemble Lot's religion.

Makar: That' how I feel. I believe in my Father's God, but I
don't want all the restrictions.

Ophir: Lot is always telling how wicked this city is—

Elam: *(interrupting)* Yes, to hear him talk, you'd think Sodom
was about the worst place in the world.

Ophir: Wonder what ever brought him here, if Sodom is so
bad.

Makar: It's my mother that likes the city.

Heth: *(cheerfully)* Tomorrow Elam, why not send your wife
and sons to see how her parents are doing?

Ophir: Tomorrow will be another busy day. Let's get some
sleep. Sodom will still be here.

Elam: *(turns to leave)* See you all tomorrow.

(Curtain closes)

Narrator:

We know what they did not live to learn—that it is fatal to
disregard the Divine decree. When God commands, we dis-
obey at our own peril.

This is why the Lord caused the record of these events to
be preserved for us, so that we can escape the doom which
fell upon them.

These are Jesus' words left on record for us: "*As it was in
the days of Noah...likewise as it was also in the days of
Lot...even so will it be in the day when the Son of Man is
revealed*" (Luke 17:26–30).

Human nature has not changed; the instinctive rebellion
of the human heart has not changed; and the unalterable
certainty of the Divine decree has not changed. As it was, so
shall it be.

Let us take heed. ♦

Don't CLING to the FIREWOOD



I would like to share the following story, by Dr. Ralph F. Wilson.

They're just a young couple, I can tell. These mouse-holders who have taken up residence in the woodpile are just starting out in life. They've built a nest under the pile of oak firewood I am loading into the back of our station wagon.

We had our first frost a few days ago, and had spent several days winterizing our house. So had this mouse couple. At the bottom of the woodpile their nest would be dry and warm in all but the wettest of storms, ready for the young ones that would surely be coming soon.

I think of my wife and me in our first apartment 32 years ago. So excited, so optimistic.

These are tiny mice, equipped with miniature jumping legs, their little bodies only 2-1/2 inches long—if you don't count the tail. I must seem like a huge giant as I deconstruct their carefully built lives, one log at a time.

I feel sorry for them. Such cute little creatures, so hopeful for the future, yet so filled with terror at what is happening to them.

"What's going on, dear?" the mouse bride cries.

"I don't know," her husband answers. "Nothing like this has ever happened before."

He's wrong, of course. Change happens—constantly. But, thankfully, it's not too often that our entire lives are altered forever by external events....

I keep loading the firewood into the back of the wagon. I'm about to stack it higher yet when I see one of the tiny mice clinging to a piece of firewood in back of the wagon. Another few seconds and he would have been crushed. I pick him up by his long tail, set him on the ground, and go back to get more logs. When I return he is still at the same place on the ground where I put him—stunned by these events, barely able to get out of harm's way.



Aren't we quite mouse-like at times? Settings change. The actors on the stage come and go, and life goes on. We are so tempted to cling to the props that we become accustomed to, even though we know they will soon be dragged off. Sometimes we are so attached to what is being taken away that we find ourselves unable to welcome what is coming.

Change requires courage, great amounts of courage. My mind goes back to Moses. For forty years he had enjoyed the quiet of the Midian Desert, when suddenly he was called to a great task. The call was from God, and it wasn't a take-it-or-leave-it proposition. It was a definite command, prefaced by the little word "Go!" For every reason that Moses could offer not to go, God's angel had an answer. He would be with Moses. He would help him speak. He would make it possible for him to succeed in every way.

Still Moses hesitated. The change would be drastic. Moses finally consented, but only after repeated, visible confirmations that God would be with Him.

Consider Moses' successor, Joshua. After forty years of living in the shadow of the great leader, suddenly Joshua found himself alone. The strong figure of Moses, who had always been there, towering above him, interceding with God, pleading for the people, seeking the answers to the perplexities, was gone. Now the leadership belonged to Joshua. What could he do, but go straight ahead, across the Jordan and into the land of Canaan. Talk about change? Joshua had it swirling all around him.

How could Joshua have courage? Because the Lord gave Joshua the same assurance He had given Moses: *"I will be with you...."* Again and again God's angel repeated the command he had given also to Moses: *"Be strong..."* (Deut. 11:8; 20:3). So now, the Lord assured Joshua, *"no man shall be able to stand before you all the days of your life; as I was with Moses, so I will be with you. I will not leave you nor forsake you. Be strong and of good courage"* (Joshua 1:5–6). Then he repeated the command: *"...have I not commanded you? Be strong and of good courage; do not be afraid, nor be dismayed, for the Lord your God is with you wherever you go. Only be strong and very courageous, that you may observe to do according to all the law which Moses My servant commanded you; do not turn from it to the right hand or to the left, that you may prosper wherever you go"* (Joshua 1:9, 7).

It is a promise that reaches to us today. God has promised to be with all of His people, whenever and wherever they are. He has promised never to leave or forsake one who is true to Him. What He asks of us is total commitment, and the faith to know that He is true and will fulfill what He has promised. Then our courage can grow to meet our discouragement, and faith to overcome fear or any adversity.

Change is inevitable, not only for Mr. & Mrs. Mouse, but for us also. Just as Mr. & Mrs. Mouse could look up and see their world coming apart, log by log, their well constructed shelter disappearing, so can we see our lives changing. No area can last unchanged for more than a few years, a few decades at most. But the Lord our God is unchanging. His soil is the only place where you can put down your roots, and know that you will never be uprooted.

Courage, coupled with faith, is what we need to do what is right, and noble, and true; to live for that world where there will be no hardships or troubles or uprootings or difficulties, nothing to hurt or destroy or disarm us (Isa. 11:9).

It takes courage to live in these times that change so quickly! Every day, it seems, we enter something unknown. Isn't this the way the explorers lived? They were looking for what is new, unknown, unconquered. They had the courage to go where no one has ever gone before. God does not ask this of us. He is summoning us to go where His Son has already gone, along with countless others who went before Him. It is not a path unknown and untried; it is a road clearly marked out in His Word. And all along the road He has posted signs to guide us and keep us on track. We may never have been there before, but others have been, and we can go ahead with the assurance and confidence that we are not alone, and God will never leave or forsake us.

Do we feel like the mouse family, still recovering from one serious challenge when another overtakes us? Psychiatrists tell us that three major changes within one year often lead to a nervous breakdown, changes such as a loss in the family, the loss of a job, a serious illness, a forced move, etc.

As Christians, we can be prepared. We know changes will come. How can we bear up under them? There are at least three things we can do

1) We can grow in faith, that quality so crucial to godliness. To grow in faith, we must train ourselves to keep thinking beyond the dimensions of the "woodpile," the props that we see around us, that seem so solid and secure, yet which we know are transitory. That is why God has given us His Word, so that we can fill our minds with His inspiration and know for a certainty that "*the things which are seen*"—the things of this world—"are temporal," that only "*the things which are not seen*"—the qualities of character we build into our lives as we live by God's law, and all the great and magnificent rewards He holds in store for those who serve faithfully—"are eternal" (2 Cor. 4:18).

As we read His Word, we can trust our Creator and know that His promises for the future are just as sure and just as certain as the sunrise tomorrow morning. The result will be a living, growing, glowing faith! Then,

2) We can grow in courage. Armed with a strong and unshakable faith, we will have courage to face the issues that are bound to come as the "woodpile" is taken away. God does not guarantee us security in this present world,

and we should not expect it. In fact, He assures us that the "woodpile" will be moved. At the same time, He prepares us for that move, by showing us the greater securities that He holds for every faithful one. The Bible calls the "woodpile" the "*things that can be shaken*," and it will be removed, so that "*the things which cannot be shaken may remain*" (Heb. 12:27–28). If we put our confidence in anything which can be shaken—our money, our possessions, our friends and family in this world, or the attainment of any earthly goal—we are leaning on a prop that can—and will—be moved. What will remain? Only the realities which we hold in God, the things which cannot be shaken, the eternal verities of truth, faith, love, and all the great and wonderful promises God is holding for His faithful children. Proverbs tell us (Prov. 10:30), "*The righteous will never be removed.*" And the Psalmist said, speaking of the one who is upright, pure, and has a clean heart, "*He that doeth these things shall never be moved*" (Ps. 15:7).

Where can we go for courage? We can go to the Word of God, and read about the lives of those who have gone before us, who have had very severe tests, or very great losses, but who, with God's help, were stronger and greater for the trial. Some of these people, like Jesus, Paul and Steven, suffered exceedingly. Yet they succeeded because they did not cling to the firewood. Finally,

3) We can conquer our fears and not let them paralyze us, because we have fixed our minds on what is true, honest, just, pure, lovely, and of good report (Phil. 4:8). Is this kind of mental control possible in a world filled with every kind of danger? Yes! Because we can learn to occupy our minds not by snuggling down in the "woodpile" of our present circumstances but by recognizing these trials as temporary yet seeing them as opportunities to develop those qualities of faith, love, courage and endurance. These virtues belong to everyone who qualifies as part of God's glorious, heavenly family.

One thing sure: there will be change, sometimes traumatic change. But if we learn not to "cling to the firewood," nothing can hurt us because God will work all things together for our good (Rom. 8:28)—our eternal good.

At this point I am still thinking about Mr. & Mrs. Mouse. My heart goes out to them, because they do not have any greater vision beyond the woodpile. When it is removed, they do not know where to turn. They have no higher guidance, no insight from heaven, no greater dimension on their lives. Isn't this exactly where the majority of people are today in our world? If the woodpile is removed, all they can do is go in search of another home, and stay there until something happens to it. They can only hope that in the meantime they can keep dry and warm. By contrast, how blessed are they whose faith and hope are in God and the surety of His promises!

I hope that Mr. Mouse has finally got over his shock and got with the program, older and wiser than before. But even if he did not, I have learned this lesson which I would like to pass on to you: don't cling to the firewood. ♦



How MANY MANSIONS in The Father's House?

What is God's plan for Planet Earth?

Jesus Christ is coming back, to set up His eternal Kingdom here, and Earth will be annexed to heaven. Yes, Earth will become part of heaven! It is God's promise.

The question comes from Jesus' words spoken to His disciples at the Last Supper:

"In my Father's house are many mansions: if it were not so, I would have told you. I go to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again, and receive you unto myself; that where I am, there ye may be also." –John 14:2–3

It is generally believed that Jesus, now in heaven, will return to earth and take His people back to heaven with Him so they can dwell there in some heavenly "mansion" forever. Another common belief is that Jesus comes in the power of His spirit each time a believer dies and takes them to heaven to be with Him.

Either conclusion creates a conflict with Jesus' own teaching and many other passages of Scripture.

THE EARTH IS THE FUTURE HOME OF THE RIGHTEOUS

Consider just a few of the many Scriptures that state clearly that the EARTH is to be the eternal home of the righteous. For example (emphasis ours),

- ✓ the words of the prophet Daniel, that *"the kingdom and dominion, and the greatness of the kingdom **under the whole heaven**, shall be given to the people, the saints of the Most High. His kingdom is an everlasting kingdom, And all dominions shall serve and obey Him"* (Dan. 7:27). A kingdom *"under the whole heaven"* surely doesn't suggest Jesus in heaven with His saints.

- ✓ Jesus' words in His first sermon, *"Blessed are the meek, for they shall **inherit the earth**"* (Matt. 5:5). Of what value is an inheritance of the earth if they are in heaven with Jesus?
- ✓ the promise of the angel to Mary before Jesus was born, that *"He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Highest; and the Lord God will give Him **the throne of His father David**. And He will reign over the house of Jacob forever"* (Luke 1:32–33). David never reigned from heaven; his throne was always on earth, an earthly setting.
- ✓ God's prophecy through Zechariah: *"And the Lord shall be King over **all the earth**. In that day it shall be— 'The Lord is one,' and His name one"* (Zech. 14:9). If Jesus is King on earth, His saints must be here also to be with Him.
- ✓ the 37th Psalm, where it is repeated six times, in varying words, that *"the meek shall **inherit the earth....** The righteous shall **inherit the land**, and dwell in it for ever"* (vs. 11, 29; see also vs. 9, 22, 27, 34).
- ✓ the 15th Psalm, where David asks, *"Lord, who will abide [stay, remain] in Your tabernacle?"* then answers his own question, concluding with the words, *"He that does these things will **never be moved**."* To relocate one's home to heaven, one would have to be removed from the earth.
- ✓ the Lord's Prayer: *"Your kingdom come. Your will be **done on earth** as it is in heaven"* (Matt. 6:10). How can the Kingdom come and God's will be done *"on earth"* if the saints are all in heaven with Jesus?

- ✓ Revelation 5, where the saints are pictured with Jesus as reigning **"on the earth"** (Rev. 5:9–10)—no suggestion that the Kingdom will be in heaven.
- ✓ the Revelator's description of Jesus standing with His faithful ones **on Mt. Zion** (Rev. 14:1). Mt. Zion is a location on the earth.

Would Jesus have contradicted the main line of His own teaching and that of the Prophets before Him? Certainly not.

WHAT JESUS SAID:

In John 14:1–3, Jesus stated five facts:

- 1) He was going away;
- 2) His purpose in going away was to prepare something special for His people;
- 3) He would be coming back;
- 4) When He came back He would receive His people to Himself.
- 5) From that time forward, He and His people would be together.

Jesus did not say He would take His people away, only that He would *"receive"* them so that they would be together. And this statement about receiving His people follows His statement that He was coming back. *"Receive"* means *"to take into close association, ... accept."* He approves and accepts them, but nothing is said about leaving the earth or about returning to heaven.

"IN MY FATHER'S HOUSE ARE MANY MANSIONS"

What is *the Father's house*?

Jesus called the temple in Jerusalem *"My Father's house"* (John 2:16). In a metaphorical sense, **the believers or saints** are called the **"temple of God"** or *"God's building"* or *"house,"* as in Heb. 3:6, where we read that Christ is *"a Son over His own house; whose house are we [the Saints] if we hold fast the confidence and the rejoicing of the hope firm to the end"* (Heb. 3:6).

The Apostle Paul said that **believers** have a responsibility to be pure because they are *"God's building"* (1 Cor. 3:9). Again, *"Do you not know that you are the temple of God?"* (1 Cor. 3:16–17).

The term *"house of God"* is also used to refer to a **seat of authority**. Speaking figuratively, the prophet Isaiah states that the **"Lord's house"** will be established *"on the top of the mountains"* – above all earthly authority—*"and all nations shall flow to it.... For out of Zion shall*

go forth the law, and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem" (Isa. 2:2–4).

The term **"house"** is also used frequently of a **family** related by descent or by a common heritage, as the *"house of David"* or the *"whole house of Ahab"* (2 Kings 9:8), or the *"whole house of Israel"* (Ezek. 37:11).

What does the Bible tell us about the vast plan of God for His creation? Vastly beyond our scope of understanding, the plan is clearly indicated in Scripture. It is:

- ◆ God's mercy that reaches *"from everlasting to everlasting"* to all who *"keep his covenant, and to those that remember His commandments to do them"* (Ps. 103:17–18).
- ◆ His purpose that is eternal in duration (Eph. 3:11).
- ◆ His family that extends to the farthest reaches of His creation (Eph. 3:14).
- ◆ His plan with its many folds of development, altogether the *"manifold wisdom of God"* (Eph. 3:10; see also Ps. 104:24).
- ◆ God's will being done *"on earth as it is in heaven,"* as Jesus said in His prayer (Matt. 6:10).

Are the galaxies being photographed by the Hubble telescope only balls of burning gas? If so, why do they have such significance that David, speaking of the Creator said, *"He counts the number of the stars, he calls them all by name"*? (Ps. 147:4; Isa. 40:26).

Why did Jesus say the *"righteous"* would *"shine forth as the sun in the kingdom of their Father"*? (Matt. 13:43). Glorified beings shine (Daniel 12:3). Witness the shining garments of the angels mentioned in connection with Jesus' resurrection; also the glow on Moses' face after He had been with the angel in the mountain 40 days; again, the fact that the angel would not allow Moses to look on His glory until he had passed by, because *"no man shall see me and live"* (Ex. 33:20). Try to imagine such glory, such shining!

MANY MANSIONS ...

What are the *"many mansions"* in the Father's house?

In John 14, Jesus tells His disciples that the Father's house has *"many mansions."* The original word translated mansions is ***mone*** in the Greek, and is defined as *"a staying, abiding, dwelling, abode"* (Thayer). Strong's Dictionary gives, *"a staying, i.e., residence: abode, mansion."* It carries the idea of permanency, abiding, staying. It is used only twice in the New Testament, both in John 14. In verse 23, it is translated *"Our abode"* or *"Our home."* *"If anyone loves Me, he will keep My word; and My Father will love him, and We will come to him and make Our home with him"* (John 14:23).

**Jesus is coming
back to be with His
people right here
on the earth.**

A PLACE FOR YOU ...

The word “place” means “an area of space... task, a role of activity and responsibility... position, rank of a person in a group” (DBL). It is also used “metaphorically, [as] the condition or station held by one in any company or assembly” (Thayer); “rank, position” (LSJ).

The temple in Jerusalem, called the House of God, had different chambers or rooms which had different uses. In Jer. 35:2, we read of the people bringing substance “*into the house of the Lord, into one of the chambers.*” Since the faithful together compose the spiritual “*temple of God*” (1 Cor. 3:9, 17) and will be the new ruling authority in the kingdom of Christ (Rev. 3:21; 2:26), could not each of them be said to have a “*place*” or room in that spiritual “*temple*,” each with a different share of the authority? Certainly the Apostle Paul would be worthy of greater honor than one of his followers, though both would receive immortality.

Everyone to be rewarded “according to his works.”

God’s plan is fair and just. He promises to give just according to what we do. This is the plan of God stated and restated all through the Bible (see Jer. 17:10; Gal. 6:9; Rev. 22:12). Jesus has promised to reward all His faithful servants. He has gone to heaven to “*prepare*” these rewards, and will return, bringing “*a crown of glory*” for every faithful one (1 Pet. 5:4). “*To those who eagerly wait for Him He will appear a second time, apart from sin, for salvation*” (Heb. 9:28). When He comes, He will bring salvation (rewards) which have been “*reserved in heaven*” for those who prove worthy (1 Pet. 1:4–5, 13).

Giving every person according to what he or she has done (Matt. 16:27) suggests different rewards for different levels of service. In His parable of the Sower (Matt. 13 and Luke 8), the seed, or Word of God, which fell into the good ground sprang up and brought forth fruit—some 30, some 60, some 100 fold—again suggesting different levels of authority rewarding different levels of faithful service. The places or positions—the responsibilities of office—are being prepared for prospective “*heirs of salvation.*”

The meaning of the word “*place*” that Jesus used suggests this same thought.

“I GO TO PREPARE A PLACE FOR YOU”

Jesus has now gone to heaven, where He is “*preparing*” the places for His chosen ones, His

co-administrators. He Himself must be trained to be able to function effectively as earth’s supreme ruler.*

Is training necessary? Just think about the number of offices in a single government, such as that of the United States. World government will involve much more than this, as all the different cultures in the world have to be exchanged or reformed to fit into His new order. It is a prodigious undertaking.

Jesus was fully prepared to receive the crown of Life when He was taken to heaven. He had “*learned obedience by the things which He suffered*” to the point of doing “*always the things that pleased*” the heavenly Father (Heb. 5:8; John 8:29). But even this was not what would be needed to administer the government of the earth. One would not expect the most gifted person to be able to properly direct even a small political entity without training. Jesus is coming back to be king of the entire earth and train His co-rulers. To organize and administer the affairs of an entire planet needs much more than a perfect character.

In Jesus’ parable of the Talents, He explained this part of the plan. He pictured Himself as a “*man traveling to a far country, who called his own servants and delivered his goods to them*” (Matt. 25:14.) In a similar parable (Parable of the Pounds or Minas), again He illustrated Himself as “*a certain nobleman*” who “*went into a far country to receive for himself a kingdom and to return*” (Luke 19:12). From history we learn that this was a custom of the time. A person would travel to a distant city, perhaps Rome, to be trained and to be given his credentials for a governorship, then return to the area to be governed ready to exercise authority over it.

We are not told how long Jesus’ training was to be, but we know that it was to be for an extended time, as His parable indicates: “*After a long time the lord of those servants came and settled accounts with them*” (Matt. 25:19). If we allow approximately four thousand of the six thousand years to have passed before the birth of Christ, that leaves approximately two thousand between His first and second advents, including the time He will be in heaven at the Father’s right hand. Two thousand years seems like a long time to us, but what is that compared to eternity? Once this government is set up and all people are under its authority and laws, Earth will become part of heaven, the eternal order, a “*world without end*” (Eph. 3:21).

Christ's kingdom will be *"an everlasting kingdom, and all dominions shall serve and obey him"* (Dan. 7:27). Once set up, it will *"stand for ever"* (Dan. 2:44).

PUTTING THE PICTURE TOGETHER

How big is the House? How many mansions? How many rooms?

Our finite minds cannot comprehend the breadth and length of God's plan for His vast universe, but the Bible gives us some tiny glimpses into its reality that are thrilling beyond words. Just think about a few passages:

- ◆ God is said to build His *"stories in the heaven"* (Amos 9:6).
- ◆ The Apostle Paul was *"caught up"* in vision to the *"third heaven"*—what is that? (2 Cor. 12:1–4)
- ◆ David said, *"The heaven, even the heavens, are the Lords"* (Ps. 115:16).
- ◆ Jeremiah the prophet exclaimed about the God who made the earth and *"stretched out the heavens"* (Jer. 10:12).
- ◆ In Nehemiah's time, they lauded the God who made *"heaven, the heaven of heavens, with all their host"* (Neh. 9:6).

The angel who delivered Jesus' message to John (see Rev. 1:1) told John that he himself was John's *"fellow servant"* and *"of your brethren the prophets"*—the angel had come from some other world where he had served God faithfully just as John was now serving. God's plan is eternal, the earth is only one small part of it. See Rev. 19:10; 22:9.

Now think about the total size of the *"Father's house."* We won't be able to get our minds around this, but let's try. Think about the countless galaxies photographed by the Hubble telescope, a small part of the Great Creator's handiwork. Think also about the words of the apostle Paul, who spoke of *"the whole family in heaven and earth"* (Eph. 3:14). Here is another term for *"My Father's house."*

Jesus said, *"In My Father's house are many mansions."* How many mansions? Jesus tells us that those counted *"worthy"* will be made *"equal to the angels, neither can they die any more"* (Luke 20:35–36). Angels came and went many times as they visited Abraham, Moses, Daniel, Jesus, and many others who were serving God. Their heavenly homes are not named, but they are real, part of the heaven where *"God's will is done"* already, as it will soon be done on earth.

When God's plan for this earth is complete, all who live will be rewarded with immortality. They will be *"equal to the angels,"* part of God's glory that will fill the earth *"as the waters cover the sea"* (Num. 14:21; Hab. 2:14).

If each finished, glorified world throughout God's vast creation is a *"mansion"* in the Father's house, how many *"mansions"* are there? Vastly more than we can imagine or comprehend!—yet not beyond the care or keeping of the heavenly Father who *"counts the number of the stars"* and *"calls them all by name"* (Ps. 147:4)! How do we know? Because this is the plan being enacted on earth, and the Bible tells us it is all according to God's *"eternal purpose"* (Eph. 3:11). As each new world is finished, the Father simply adds another *"mansion"* to His house—this is what Jesus says in His prayer, *"Your kingdom come, Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven"* (Matt. 6:10).

Jesus has gone to prepare a place for His children, so that another mansion can be added to the *"many mansions"* already in His Father's great house.

Do we wonder that the Apostle Paul exclaimed, *"Oh, the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are His judgments and His ways past finding out!"* (Rom. 11:33).

Jesus went away, and we have every reason to believe He is coming back to fulfill His promise and be with His people **right here on the earth**, not in some faraway heavenly estate. However, the residents of that mansion will not be earth-bound. Angels came and went throughout the Bible record, and it is their ongoing purpose to *"minister"* to *"those who shall be heirs of salvation"* (Heb. 1:14)—a task we can realistically look forward to performing on behalf of another people on some other world in God's ever expanding universe, once our world becomes part of heaven.

As believers, our task now is to get ourselves ready for a room (a *"place"*) in that mansion, so that we can have a permanent part in the Kingdom of God when Earth is annexed to heaven and God's will is done here as it is done in every part of His vast creation (1 Cor. 15:28; Matt. 6:10).

We look forward eagerly to that Day! ◆

* Jesus is not God Almighty who created the earth and the universe. He called God His *"Father,"* and Himself *"Son of God"* and *"Son of Man."* For further discussion of this subject, see *"Jesus Christ,"* Section 4 of our Understanding the Bible series.

Your kingdom
come, Your will be
done on earth as
it is in heaven.

—Jesus

THE FEARFUL MANY, THE FAITHFUL ONE



*If our life were to
be described in
just a few words,
what would
they be?*

What happened when “all Asia ... turned away from” Paul (2 Tim. 1:15)? Only a few years later Jesus sent letters to seven churches in Asia (see Revelations, chapters 2 and 3). Was Paul referring to every Christian in Asia, or might he have referred to a specific group that deserted him?

The problem may come from our reading of Paul’s words. At the time Paul was writing this letter to Timothy, he was a prisoner in Rome, his only “crime” being a political charge: that he was a follower of Christ. During these waves of persecution, to befriend a political prisoner was dangerous, and it is possible that some believers deserted him, fearing for their own safety.

The *International Critical Commentary* offers this thought:

Ephesus was the leading city in the province of Asia Minor. By saying everyone ... has deserted me, Paul may have been referring to a general lack of concern or support for him in his difficult time of need. Many had refused to stand up for him or at least stay at his side during his trial. This occurred not accidentally, but apparently on purpose. This caused Paul much pain. The “everyone” was not literal, but was used by Paul as a sweeping generalization.

Many Fearful

It is possible that Asian believers who were in Rome at this time had deserted him. As he wrote to Timothy in chapter 4 of the same letter, “At my first defense no one stood with me, but all forsook me. May it not be charged against them” (2 Tim. 4:16).

Whoever deserted him, Paul’s character shows in his magnanimous spirit. Even though some had failed to support him, he did not want it to be held against them. Paul was thinking only of the good of the cause and of those believers who were sincere but still needed to grow in courage to be able to face a situation that might threaten their lives.

Another possibility is in the meaning of the word “deserted.” Some believers may have left Rome because of persecution there and

returned to Asia, not thinking of Paul’s need. Some years earlier when Paul came to Ephesus, Priscilla and Aquila were there because they had left Rome on order of Emperor Claudius (see Acts 18:2).

It is also possible that Paul was speaking of some believers in Asia at the time he was arrested, who had failed to help him there, or who had not wanted to accompany him to Rome. In any case, he would not have been referring to literally “all” the believers in the Asian churches.

One Faithful...

But notice, on the other side, one courageous, faithful brother from Ephesus (city in Asia) who stood by Paul in his time of need, a man named Onesiphorus. Paul says of him that he “often refreshed me, and was not ashamed of my chain; but when he arrived in Rome, he sought me out very zealously and found me. The Lord grant to him that he may find mercy from the Lord in that Day—and you know very well how many ways he ministered to me at Ephesus” (2 Tim. 1:16–18). There is no doubt that when Onesiphorus came to see Paul again and again, he took his life in his hands: “He sought me out.” It was dangerous to keep asking where a certain criminal could be found—and we read that he had to search out Paul “very zealously.” It was more dangerous to visit him; it was still more dangerous to keep on visiting him. But that was what Onesiphorus did.

All we know of Onesiphorus is told in those few words. But how much they say—of his courage, his faithfulness, his devotion to Brother Paul. All we know is that he risked his life—and perhaps lost it—to strengthen Paul.

If our life were to be described in just a few words, what would they be? ♦

ABOUT JOSHUA

1. What was Joshua's most outstanding quality of character?
2. When the 12 spies returned from searching the land of Canaan, what made the report of Joshua and Caleb different from that of the other 10?
3. Who was Joshua the son of?
4. After the death of Moses, God commanded Joshua to be strong and _____.
5. What was the first battle led by Joshua in their conquest of Canaan?
6. What resident of Jericho aided Joshua's men in spying out the city of Jericho?
7. After the Israelites crossed over the Jordan, what did Joshua do to remember their crossing?
8. What assurance did Joshua get from God that He would be fighting for them?
9. How many times did the army circle the city of Jericho before the walls fell down, and in what order did they march around the city?
10. What did Joshua command the priests and the soldiers to do before the walls of Jericho fell?
11. Why were the Israelites told not to take any booty from Jericho?
12. What nation, after the conquest of Jericho, tricked Joshua into making a treaty with them?
13. How many cities of refuge did God have Joshua designate?
14. How old was Joshua when he died?

WHAT DO THEY HAVE IN COMMON?

1. Euodia and Syntyche
2. Cornelius and Julius
3. Dorcas and Eutychus
4. Matthew and Zacchaeus
5. Mary and Martha
6. Onesimus and Philemon
7. Barnabas and Silas
8. Priscilla and Aquila
9. Rufus and Julia
10. Jesus Christ and John the Baptist
11. Isaac and Ishmael
12. Bartholomew and Thaddaeus
13. Elijah and Enoch
14. Jeremiah and Zechariah
15. Jotham and Hezekiah
16. Ahab and Jezebel
17. Ruth and Cornelius
18. Timothy and Titus
19. John the Baptist and Elijah
20. Deborah and Samuel
21. Aaron and Hilkiah
22. Manasseh and Ephraim

ABOUT JOSHUA

1. He "wholly followed the Lord." (Num. 32:12)
2. They had faith in God and did not doubt He would deliver them from the giants in the land. (Num. 14:6-9)
3. Nun (Ex. 33:11)
4. "very courageous" (Josh. 1:7)
5. The battle of Jericho (Josh. 6:1-27)
6. Rahab (Josh. 2:1-6)
7. Joshua set up 12 stones as a memorial to the children of Israel of God's deliverance in Gilgal and in the Jordan River. (Josh. 4:1-7, 9, 20-24)
8. The captain of the army of God appeared to Joshua as he surveyed Jericho. (Josh. 5:14-15)
9. Once per day for 6 days, 7 times on the seventh day. Order of procession: army; 7 priests with 7 rams' horns; priests carrying the ark; followed by the rest of the army (Josh. 6:13)
10. The priests were to blow the rams' horns with a loud blast and all the people were to shout with a great shout. (Josh. 6:5)
11. Everything made of silver, gold, bronze or iron to be kept for the treasury of the Lord. (Josh. 6:19)

12. Gibeon (Josh. 9:3-15)
13. Six (Josh. 20:1-3)
14. 110 (Josh. 24:29)

WHAT DO THEY HAVE IN COMMON?

1. Two women who were in disagreement (Phil. 4:2)
2. Two centurions mentioned in Acts (Acts 10:1; 27:1)
3. Two people in Acts raised from the dead (Acts 9:36-41; 20:7-12)
4. Two tax collectors (Luke 19: 1-9)
5. Two sisters of Lazarus (John 11:14-19)
6. A runaway slave and his master (Philemon)
7. Christian missionaries who travelled with Paul (Acts 15:37-40)
8. A husband-wife team that served with the apostle Paul (Acts 18:1, 18; Rom. 16:3)
9. Two members of the church at Rome to whom Paul sent personal greetings (Rom. 16:13, 15)
10. Both had their births foretold by angels (Luke 1:5-38)

11. Two sons of Abraham and both children by promise of God (Gen. 16:1-11; 17:1-19)
12. Both apostles of Jesus (Matt. 10:3)
13. Two men who were translated and did not die (2 Kings 2:11; Heb. 11:5)
14. Both prophets of God who received messages from God and spoke for God (Jer. 1:1-6; Zech. 1:1)
15. Both kings of Judah during the time of the prophet Isaiah (Isa. 1:1)
16. Husband and wife team, king and queen of Israel, who excelled in doing evil (1 Kings 16:30-31)
17. Both non-Israelites who served the true God (Ruth 1; Acts 10)
18. Both converts of the apostle Paul whom he called his sons-in-the-faith (1 Tim. 1:2; Titus 1:4)
19. Both appointed forerunners of Jesus, John the Baptist of Jesus' first advent, Elijah of Jesus' second advent (Isa. 40:3 - see quotation in Mark 1:2-7; Mal. 4:5 - see also Matt. 17:11).
20. Both judges of Israel (Judges 4:4-5; 1 Sam. 7:15)
21. Both high priests (Ex. 28:1; 2 Kings 22:8)
22. Both sons of Joseph (Gen. 46:20)



Weeds, Weeds, Weeds!

Weeds thrive on simple neglect.

SPOKEN WEEDS

When we hear the word “weed” we think of those common plants that volunteer to grow in our gardens. Most weeds are highly prolific and produce an enormous number of seeds. A single chickweed is said to produce 15,000 seeds; a single shepherd’s purse, 40,000 seeds per plant; a single lamb’s quarter weed, about 70,000 seeds. With no effort at all, the gardener can have an enormous crop of weeds—and little else.

But there is another type of weed with even more far-reaching consequences. That weed is the thoughtless, critical, unkind or malicious words we speak. Jesus warned, *“You must give an account on judgment day of every idle word you speak. The words you say now reflect your fate then; either you will be justified by them or you will be condemned”* (Matt. 12:36-37 NLT).

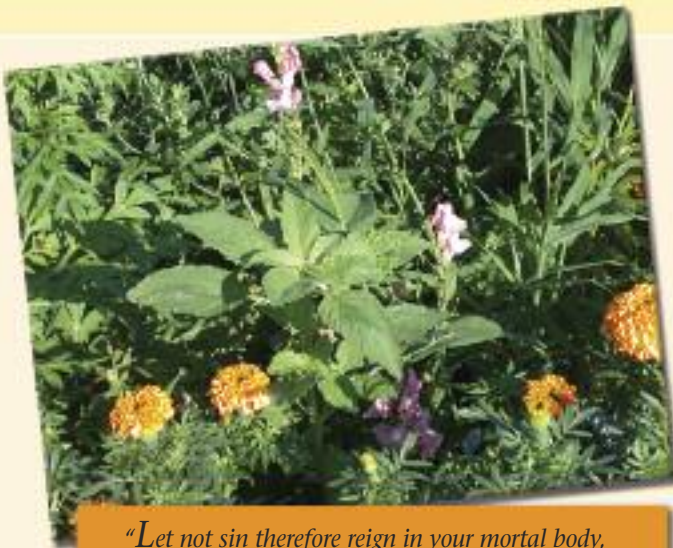
Senator Byrd delivered a speech to Congress entitled “The Spoken Weed.” He realized most people use a lot of unnecessary words, but he failed to mention the slang, vulgar and swear words that blight the world of TV, theatre, drama, music, art, common conversation, and even school literature

books today. We are surrounded by people who show little or no reverence for God, and who give little or no thought to taking His name in vain. The serious professing Christian must guard warily against using the God-dishonoring language so prevalent today.

How do we get rid of all idle, degrading words (weeds)?

We read in Jeremiah 4:3: *“Thus saith the Lord...Break up your fallow ground, and sow not among thorns.”* Fallow ground is ground that has been plowed but left unseeded during a growing season, and becomes a natural and undisturbed seedbed for all kinds of weeds. Our minds are like fallow ground. If left alone, they will soon be full of weeds. That is why we must keep wholesome, healthful thoughts in our minds, and being careful of the seed-thoughts we allow to sprout.

Do you want to keep your spiritual garden free of weeds? Then plant it so full of good seeds from the Word of God—seeds of love, kindness, patience, holiness, courage, and hope—that all the thousands of weed seeds that blow by won’t find any room to grow. ♦



“Let not sin therefore reign in your mortal body, that ye should obey it in its lusts.” –Romans 6:12

PULL THOSE WEEDS!

Pulling weeds can be a struggle. Whether you are unearthing the quack grass shoots or digging up dandelions, they are rooted deep and are highly resistant to being uprooted. Let a soaking rain come, and soften the soil, and they yield more easily. Also, haven’t you noticed that the youngest weeds are easiest to remove? The older, more established weeds are the most stubborn.

Aren’t bad habits like that? The longer they remain, the more difficult they are to remove. If we uproot them early, we have a better chance of success. But at any age or stage of life, it takes a lot of diligence and effort to get them out and keep them out.

Do you have some weeds in your life that need pulling, weeds of pride, lust, impatience, hatred, or envy? Start weeding today! You can’t get them any sooner. ♦



HOW TO GROW A “NO-CARE” LAWN

Ever tried it? It's easy!

A diligent lawn-care professional said his dream was to write a book someday about how to grow a no-care lawn.

“All the pages will be blank,” he said, “because that is what is required: nothing! Just leave it alone. In no time, dandelions will sprout, crabgrass will spread, weeds with all their long Latin names will thrive where the lawn used to be. The magic formula is: no water, no fertilizer, no weed killer, no care.”

The book, of course, would be immensely unpopular because who wants that kind of lawn? Yet they may end up with one simply through neglect.

The writer of Proverbs observed the same pattern long ago as he walked by the field of a lazy person. It was “all over-

grown with thorns. It was covered with weeds, and its walls were broken down”—a clear case of neglect. But he saw a deeper lesson. “As I looked and thought about it, I learned this lesson” (Prov. 24:30–32 NLT).

When I’m weeding my garden, I often ask myself if I’m putting as much time and effort into maintaining my spiritual life as I am my garden. Am I careful to dig every sprouting weed out of my mind? How easily weeds of anger and discouragement can take root in my heart. How quickly anxiety over some petty, temporal issue crowds out peace.

The formula for a no-care lawn and a no-care life are exactly the same. Do nothing.

In other words, let the weeds have it. ♦

How Much Tolerance?

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 2

They were being tolerant, trying to be neutral, but by their very decision on what not to report they were taking sides.

God’s thoughts are not man’s. We do not have a “religious preference” but a conviction, as Paul said, “I know whom I have believed...” (2 Tim. 1:12). When one religion teaches what another denies, both cannot be true. The issue is not tolerance, but truth; not preference, but reality.

Scripture is absolute in its demands, and has no tolerance for contrary ideas. What did Paul say? “If anyone teaches otherwise and does not consent to wholesome words, even the words of our Lord Jesus Christ, and to the doctrine which accords with godliness,” go along with “anyone,” agree with “anyone” because we are all God’s children and the same God loves all of us? No, read 1 Tim. 6:3–6 for the answer.

As Christians we are committed to the absolute truthfulness of Scripture. Only Scripture can teach and guide us in the right way (2 Tim. 3:15–17). Only Scripture is a “thorough furnisher unto all good works.” Our views of right and wrong must be defined by the Bible, not by opinion polls. God has one standard for all He accepts, and it is the perfect pattern left by our Lord, “the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ” (Eph. 4:13). Some will call this thinking narrow, but didn’t Jesus Himself say the way would be straight and narrow? (Matt. 7:13–14). The important point is the

destination of the way: it is the only way that leads to life.

This is why we need to be passionate about the “always” in our beliefs. It is not about tolerances but about absolutes, because only God can give life, and only God’s Word can show us the way to salvation and life everlasting.

Christianity is not a designer religion, custom-fitted to our tastes. We bear witness to God’s Word of truth. It is “the faith once delivered to the saints” (Jude 5)—delivered, not made to our specifications. As the apostle Paul said, “I neither received it from man, nor was I taught it, but it came through the revelation of Jesus Christ” (Gal. 1:12).

If we want what God is offering us, we must take Him at His word, let Him define our range of tolerance, and do as He commands—always (Deut. 12:32). What we approve must be only what He approves. “Happy is he who does not condemn himself in what he approves” (Rom. 14:22).

How tolerant should we be of anything in our own lives that God forbids? Our covenant with God sets the standard; to tolerate anything He forbids is self-defeating. Paul said it clearly: “Put off”—and he enumerated anger, wrath, malice, filthy language, deceit and all the works of the flesh (Col. 3:8–10). Then he said “Put on,” and added all the lovely virtues of patience, kindness, love, peace, and purity (Gal. 5:21–25).

If we follow His advice, there will be no place in our lives for the “new” tolerance. ♦

Answering the Critics about Jesus' Existence

"I have read of a number of authors and scholars who are saying Jesus never existed. Of course others are arguing for Jesus' existence. Part of the critics' reason is that they find striking parallels between pagan stories from the ancient world and the accounts of Jesus. Plus they say, if Jesus really existed, why don't we find reference to Him in the literature of that time? I would appreciate your comments."

It is very sad that scholars and even teachers of religion are turning away from the Bible and Christian teaching today—which makes it all the more important for us to understand the reasons why we believe Jesus lived.

Form criticism (often called Higher Criticism) of Jesus has been extant for upwards of two hundred years now, chiefly among scholars who look at the Bible as they would any other work of literature. In general, they assume that the New Testament is a written version of an oral tradition of Jesus' words and deeds that suffered from many additions, deletions and changes before it was finally recorded. They also think that the gospel writers borrowed heavily from other ancient literature. Underlying is the assumption that any event which cannot be duplicated in modern times did not happen—which does away with any possibility of the supernatural or miraculous. The result is the conclusion that the New Testament, particularly the Gospels, cannot be reliable historical narrative.

In recent years, a number of so-called "suppressed" gospels (e.g., the Gospel of Judas, the Gospel of Thomas, the Gospel of the Hebrews, the Gospel of Peter, etc.) have been publicized and accepted, while the canonical Gospels are viewed with skepticism. The obvious reason is the economic value of a "new" representation of Jesus, however bizarre, that the media can sell in the current culture.

It is not our purpose to review or comment on the multiplicity of ideas set forth by critics who believe that their knowledge and reasoning is superior to that contained in the Bible. We have to agree, however, with one scholar, Michael Green, when he says: "It is a matter of amazement to me that books constantly get published, and television programs produced,

which set out the most bizarre interpretations of Jesus of Nazareth on the most slender of evidence."

Sadly, many colleges and seminaries are proponents of critical scholarship (of a destructive nature) as regards the New Testament and the historical Jesus.

What about the similarity between some pagan rites or practices and beliefs of the Christian church? As we may observe, conclusions about similarities are often drawn by those who have minimal knowledge of the Bible. Sometimes there is similarity—not with the Bible itself but with teachings and practices adopted during the early centuries as the church modernized its teachings to appeal to the pagan community. Most often the parallel is with a doctrine which is not taught in the Bible—doctrines such as the trinity, the immortal soul, hell fire, a literal devil, or the atoning blood sacrifice of Jesus.

Other ideas are the result of what biblical scholars call eisegesis, which is the practice of reading into a text a thought which is not there! The result is a lot of so called "evidence" which is very, very slender—or missing altogether.

Extrabiblical Evidence for Jesus?

Now let us think about your second question: Why are there almost no credible sources outside the Bible that attest to the historical Jesus?

First of all, this question presupposes that Biblical evidence is discredited as having a "Christian bias"; likewise, the writings of the Early Church fathers and members of the Early Church. We have to ask, what is wrong with a Christian bias? Why disallow what Christian believers wrote to or about other Christians? These are the very statements that offer the strongest confirmation of evidence.

As for secular writings of the time which might mention Jesus, there are actually very few documents from the decade during which Jesus lived, or even during the years immediately following. A scholar named Blaiklock has catalogued the non-Christian writings of the Roman Empire which have survived from the first century, and they are few. Even if the works of the entire century are included, they are still few.

Can we really expect otherwise? When one considers the quantity and content of first century writings which have survived, one can readily understand why there is so little mention of Jesus in non-Christian references. In fact, it is surprising that any non-Christian references to Jesus from the first century have survived to this time. And what have survived indicate that the writers would not have known about or been interested in the person of Jesus. Most references to Jesus Christ in the early secular writings are in a negative context.

But the New Testament confirms that Jesus' life did not pass in total obscurity. Read Luke 23:8: *"Now when Herod saw Jesus, he was exceedingly glad; for he had desired for a long time to see Him, because he had heard many things about Him, and he hoped to see some miracle done by Him"*. But obviously, for Herod, Jesus was little more than a wandering magician. Despite the fact that word was getting around that Jesus was attracting a following, the Romans and their writers would not have paid much attention to Him. First of all, just as in our day, the first century secular press would not have wanted to talk about supernatural phenomena. They didn't believe in it, and would not have wanted to popularize it. Secondly, those who produced the secular literature of the first century were more concerned about major political events and personalities, not local religions. To them, Jesus would have been a nobody, an obscure preacher, who was crucified for a minor disturbance which only briefly involved the Roman governor. They would close their eyes to His miracles and underplay His popularity as much as possible. Jewish leaders would likewise have viewed Jesus negatively, as one from the back woods who was trying to attract attention by claiming to be the Messiah.

Then too, the Romans had bigger problems to be concerned about than the unarmed peasants who followed Jesus around the Sea of Galilee.

Journalists of the first century would also have been looking for major political and international events to talk about. One example is in Acts 25:19, where Festus, one of the political figures of the first century, came up against a dispute involving Jewish teaching. Festus' opinion was that the Jews and Paul simply had points of disagreement about their own religion, and about *"a certain dead man, Jesus, whom Paul asserted to be alive."* Festus was not concerned because in his viewpoint it was an issue without political consequence.

Was Christianity a "hot" news item in the first century? For Christians it was. But for those in the government and in the media, it was not. Read the Book of Acts, and you will see that the emphasis is on the activities of the Christians as they related to their own movement, not to political events in the nation at the time. Their only interaction with officials and political persons was brought about by the opposition of those who disagreed with their teaching. The Christians were not the type of people who caused uprisings or insurrections, hence were not often newsworthy.

Among all the discussion of whether or not Jesus is a historical figure, there is one point to notice: not even the bitterest critic denies that the Christian church existed in the first century.

When one thinks about it, what kind of reference to Jesus would a non-Christian need to "prove" Jesus' existence? And secondly, is it likely that such a reference would still survive today?

Any incontrovertible reference to Jesus would first of all have to have been from an eyewitness. Outside Christian testimony, no historical literature has survived which could even be expected to refer to Him from the standpoint of a direct eyewitness. Remember that He was only in the public eye for three and one half years. The most likely first-hand witness to have written about Him would be one of his followers, and this is what we have in the Bible. Second-hand reports lose credibility, and any first-hand reporter would have been Christian and therefore non-political.

Those who wish to deny Jesus' historical existence, if they avoid the Christian writings, are basing their assumptions on a minimal amount of information about Him, and one must always remember that the absence of evidence is not evidence of absence.

Jesus' life is one of the most mentioned and most substantiated of all lives in ancient times when all of the quality data is considered. But one must be open to consider Christian sources. Ruling out these sources is like ruling out the personal, first-hand, eyewitness reports of any historical event—which no honest historian would do.

But even if the Christian sources are set aside, there are still many non-New Testament sources, which provide much more historical data and facts than exist about many figures from ancient history, whose existence is never questioned or debated. ♦

Although only a few, non-Christian sources dating from the first century do supplement and confirm the Gospel accounts.

Sources such as Josephus, the Talmud, Tacitus, Pliny the Younger, and others inform us that:

- (1) Jesus was from Nazareth;
- (2) He lived a wise and virtuous life;
- (3) He was a Jewish teacher;
- (4) He was rejected by the Jewish leaders;
- (5) He was crucified under Pontius Pilate in the reign of Tiberius at Passover time, being considered the Jewish King;
- (6) He was believed by His disciples to have been raised from the dead three days later;
- (7) His enemies acknowledged that He performed unusual feats they called "sorcery";
- (8) Despite His shameful death, His small band of disciples multiplied rapidly, spreading even as far as Rome;
- (9) His disciples denied polytheism and lived moral lives.

Sources:

See F. F. Bruce, *Jesus and Christian Origins outside the New Testament*;

G. Habermas, *The Historical Jesus*;

Josh McDowell and Bill Wilson, *He Walked Among Us*



WHO ARMED THE PANGOLIN?

An incredible creature!

What has armor-plating and curls into a ball to protect itself like an armadillo, and eats ants and termites with its long sticky tongue like an anteater, but is not even distantly related to either? It is another of God's uniquely designed creatures, the **pangolin**. Though pangolins have some traits similar to other animals,

scientists find them to be genetically unique.

Eight different species of pangolins are found in tropical regions of Asia and Africa. Some are ground-dwellers and dig deep dens underground. Others are arboreal and have long tails to help them hang in trees. As adults, the different species range in size from about 3.5 pounds to 73 pounds.

The keratin scales overlap like scales on a fish. And they keep growing throughout the pangolin's life. The scales are very sharp along the edges, providing a ready deterrent to an animal looking for a meal. As the pangolin digs in the soil to make a burrow or to find food, the scales are continually filed down and kept sharp.



When danger threatens a pangolin it will curl into a tight ball with its head inside and its tail wrapped tightly over all. A mother pangolin will curl her baby inside the ball to protect it as well. Pangolins also protect themselves by excreting a very noxious odor, similar to that of a skunk.

A pangolin has large scales made of keratin covering all of its body, except the underside. (Keratin is the same material our hair and fingernails are made of.) When a pangolin is born, these scales are soft and supple, but within a short time the scales begin to harden to provide very effective protection against predators.



A female pangolin usually gives birth to a single baby. Ground-dwelling species usually leave their baby in a burrow for 2-4 weeks. When the mother does take the baby out with her, the young one clings to her tail as she moves about.

British wildlife guide Mark Sheridan-Johnson captured on film this inquisitive big cat which spent a long time trying to devour the odd looking creature (pangolin) in the Selous Game Reserve in Tanzania.



"The lion really didn't know what to do with it." She finally walked away. The pangolin's "armor" saved it.



The pangolin's amazing tongue is just right for reaching ants and termites in deep cavities. The tongue is attached near its pelvis and last pair of ribs. When fully extended it may be as long as 16 inches. When at rest the pangolin's tongue retracts into a sheath in its chest cavity. Large salivary glands coat the tongue with a gummy mucus to which the insects stick.



Pangolins' main food sources are ants and termites. Pangolins have poor eyesight, but their keen sense of smell works well in locating food. They use their long, powerful front claws to rip open the termite mounds and dig out ant nests. Then with a very long, very sticky tongue, which is perfect for the job, they lap them up. It is estimated that one adult pangolin can consume more than 70 million insects in a year.

Pangolin limbs are stout and well adapted for digging. Asian pangolins dig deep burrows for sleeping and nesting. Large chambers have been discovered in their burrows big enough for a human to crawl inside and stand up.



Once drawn in, special muscles in their toothless mouths prevent their dinner from escaping again. They also have special muscles that seal their nostrils and ears to protect them from insect attacks. Pangolins have gizzard like stomachs in which the insects' tough bodies are ground up by small stones and sand which the animal has ingested.

Pangolins use their tails for balance, and for climbing or hanging from tree branches.

Due to loss of habitat, alongside predation, Chinese and Sunda pangolins are now on the endangered species list.



The pangolin, not beautiful or graceful, is an incredible creature—awesomely designed by its great Creator! How could the blind processes of evolution combine so perfectly the pangolin's many unusual features and instincts to produce this unique animal? Evolution could not.

How grateful we are to know and honor the All-knowing, All-powerful God that created this creature and all of nature! But best of all, God says there is much, much more for all His faithful sons and daughters. *"Eye has not seen, nor ear heard, nor have entered into the heart of man the things which God has prepared for those who love Him"* (1 Cor. 2:9). We want to be part of that better, everlasting creation! ♦

http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/thumb/4/42/Pangolin_borneo.jpg/220px-Pangolin_borneo.jpg
http://1.bp.blogspot.com/_ilb7qjFxFxJgc/TR7Pqa2jG3I/AAAAAAAAAMuU/aZESr8Md6QI/s1600/A-Lion-Can-Not-Eat-A-Pangolin-003.jpg
http://animaldiversity.ummz.umich.edu/site/accounts/information/Manis_crassicaudata.html
<http://www.rhinoafrica.com/blog/wp-content/uploads/2012/02/pangolin4.jpg>
<http://t0.gstatic.com/images>

Read: Heb. 12:12-15

Memorize:

"See to it that no...bitter root grows up to cause trouble and defile many."

—Hebrews 12:15

How About You?

Are you feeling bitter toward somebody? Has someone been unfair to you?

Do you feel more and more angry as the days go by? Ask God to show you if there is anyone with whom you should "talk things out." If He brings someone to your mind, go to that person and discuss the problem. Ask God to help you pull bitterness out by the roots.

ROOTS OF BITTERNESS

"Get a move on, Josh," grumbled Jeff loudly. "You're just being lazy."

"Am not!"

"Are, too!"

Jeff and Josh were at it again. Mother reluctantly headed for the kitchen to try and solve the problem. "I'm tired of the constant bickering that goes on between you boys," she scolded. "You are brothers, and you ought to show love for one another."

"Love? Who could love him?" Jeff asked angrily. "Every time we do dishes, Josh just plays around, so I end up doing most of the work."

"Do not!" Josh shot back. "He's always picking on me!"

"That does it!" exclaimed Mother. "You boys apparently need to work off some extra steam. I'll help you finish the dishes," decided Mother. "Then we'll all go out to the garden and pull quackgrass."

"Oh no," exclaimed Josh.

"Quackgrass is impossible to pull," complained Jeff.

"Your Dad watered the strawberry patch last night so the quackgrass should be much easier to pull," replied Mother.

Soon they were at the garden.

"I'll give you each the same number of rows to do, so nobody needs to complain about doing the most. And if anybody 'drags his feet,'



it will just take him longer," said Mother.

The boys sighed at the sight of all the lush quackgrass growing up in their strawberry patch. Jeff grabbed a handful but just got the tops. "But Mom, it just breaks off," he complained.



"Try this tool," encouraged Mom as she dug under a big clump and pulled it up—roots and all.

"Look at those healthy roots!" exclaimed Josh.

"They're going in all directions," observed Jeff.

"This is one way quackgrass spreads," explained Mother. "Each one of these rhizomes will make another bunch of quack."

"That root must be two feet long!" exclaimed Josh.

"I'm going to find the longest root," declared Jeff as he grabbed one of the tools.

"I'll get the most!" Josh shot back as he grabbed his tool.

Mother smiled as she watched her two boys enthusiastically but carefully digging.

By the time she called a "lemonade break," each boy was hot and dirty, but proud of his big pile of weeds. Mother sat back on the dirt. "You know, boys, this makes me think of a verse in the Bible that talks about a 'root of bitterness' springing up," she said. "As each piece of quackgrass that is left will grow and spread, I see unChristian roots springing up between you boys. They make you unhappy and are destroying your friendship and care for each other much the way this quack grass is destroying our strawberry patch. We're tackling the quack grass."

"Now let's talk about the bad roots that are hindering your relationship and see if we can get rid of them. You will both be so much happier," concluded Mother.

The boys looked at each other and nodded. They could see that they were so much happier when they had a good attitude toward each other. They bowed their heads as Mother led them in prayer, asking God's guidance and help ♦.

DIG OUT THE ROOTS OF BITTERNESS

FORCING THE PIECE

Kara hung up the phone and went into the family room where her Grandmother was working on a puzzle with her little brother. "That was Cindy Larson," Kara announced glumly. "She called to tell me she got a job for the summer—babysitting the Tyler boys."

Grandma looked puzzled. "You don't sound very happy about it," she said. "Seems to me that it's a nice opportunity for Cindy. The Tyler children are well behaved, and I'm sure she can use the extra money."

"But I wanted that job," grumbled Kara. "I could use the money, too. Why does Cindy get all the breaks?"

"Are you a little jealous?" asked Grandma. "Cindy's your friend. You should be glad for her. Besides, I'm sure you'll find lots of other things to do this summer."

"Not that I like," Kara pouted. Then her face brightened. "I know—I'll call Cindy back and tell her how much I wanted the job, she'll let me have it," she said. "After all, I've done plenty of things for her."

"I think you ought to let the matter drop," said Grandma, "and just pray that you keep a right attitude toward Cindy."

"But I'm sure God wants me to have this job," whined Kara. Then she stopped and watched curiously as Grandma pulled a pair of scissors from her knitting bag and seemed to

consider cutting the piece of puzzle in her hand. "Grandma, what are you doing?" Kara asked.

"I want this puzzle piece to go into this empty spot," she explained. "If I cut off this little bump here and glue it onto the other side, maybe I can make it fit."

"Grandma!" protested Kara. "You know that won't work. Besides, you need that piece somewhere else in the puzzle."

Her brother sat up, wide eyed at the idea.

Grandma laughed when she saw the reaction of the children. "I know fixing up the puzzle piece wouldn't work. But Kara, that puzzle piece represents you."

"Me?" Kara looked puzzled.

Grandma continued. "Trying to jam this piece into a place where it doesn't fit is like you trying to get your own way about that job. Even if you succeeded, you would be missing an excellent opportunity of being unselfish. My dear, you want to be open to whatever God wants for you."

"Well, I..." Kara sighed. "I know you're right," she admitted. She grinned as she added, "I love the funny ways you use to teach us things." ♦

DON'T INSIST ON YOUR OWN WAY

The above stories are adapted from *KEYS FOR KIDS* 1999

Read: Psalm 25:1–5

Memorize:

"Every way of a man is right in his own eyes, but the Lord weighs the heart."
– Proverbs 21:2

"Jealousy is as cruel as the grave."
– Song of Solomon 8:6

HOW ABOUT YOU?

Do you get upset when things don't go the way you want?

Are you able to be happy when someone else gets something you really wanted for yourself?

Remember that God is in control, and He knows what is best for you.

Don't insist on your own way. Trust God and be patient.

HOW MIKE LEARNED HIS BIBLE VERSE

"I just can't learn this Bible verse," said Mike. Learning was hard for Mike. His sister Mary had no trouble at all, but Mike did.

"Mike, why don't you study the way Mary does?" suggested Mike's grandmother.

"No two people are alike," said his mother. "Book learning and memorizing comes easier for Mary, but when it comes to fixing or making things Mike loves it."

Then Mike tried to learn that verse again. "Which Bible verse is it?" his mother asked.

"Psalm 119:11," said Mike, and read, "*Your word I have hidden in my heart, that I might not sin against You.*"

"Let's see if I can make it easier for you," Mike's father said, who was listening. "This verse tells of a good thing in a good place for a good reason. What is the good thing? What is the good place and the good reason?"

Mike studied the verse. "'Your word' is God's Word—is that the good thing?"

"That's right! Go on," encouraged his father.

"'*Your word I have hidden in my heart,*'" he read. "My heart must be the good place."

"And what is the good reason for hiding the good thing in the good place?" his father asked.

"'*That I might not sin.*' That's a good reason," said Mike.

Now Mike knew the three parts: the good thing, in a good place, for a good reason. With that help Mike could easily say the verse from memory. What's more, he also learned what the verse teaches. He learned that God's Word in his heart could keep him from sinning. ♦

Your word I have hidden in my heart, that I might not sin against You. –Psalm 119:11



Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to those who hate you, pray for those who despitefully use you and persecute you.
—Matthew 5:44



A soldier was astonished when he heard General Robert E. Lee speak in complimentary terms about a fellow-officer.

“General,” he said, “do you know that the man you spoke so highly of is one of your worst enemies, and misses no opportunity to slander you?”

“Yes,” said the general, “but I was asked for my opinion of him, not his opinion of me.”

Lee’s kindness is an inspiring illustra-

tion of returning good for evil. Now that is not easy to do. That is why Jesus spoke about it in Matthew 5, in His first sermon. If we obey our Savior in this we have taken a long step toward virtuous living. It would be inconsistent—even unthinkable—to mistreat someone we have just remembered in prayer, and that is what Jesus says we should do: “*Pray for those who despitefully use you and persecute you.*”

Abraham Lincoln once said, “The best way to destroy an enemy is to make him your friend.”

Let’s be like our Lord and return good for evil. Returning good for good is natural; returning good for evil is Christ-like. ♦

*The currency of time can purchase for us the riches of eternity—
if we will only use it wisely.*

*If I do a little too much, I shall never regret it.
But, oh, the danger of coming short.*

*Happiness is not the greatest end of life;
it is character.*

To give thanks sincerely one must give more than thanks.

*You can’t get the worm out of the apple by polishing the apple;
you have to get inside.*

*Let us not sit down and wait for some
opportunity to knock at our door,
but make use of the one that is now knocking.*

The largest room in the world is room for improvement.

This One faith is a working faith. It will move us to action.

Every worthwhile accomplishment requires effort.

Commitment in the face of conflict produces character.

It is not the talented people who serve the Lord best, but the consecrated ones.

The road marked Tomorrow usually leads to the town called Never.

Precious things are often ruined by old grudges and resentments.

God can't use those who are fearful and double-minded, whose faith fluctuates according to the demands placed upon it. He wants those with great faith.

Disappointment should always be taken as a stimulant, and never viewed as discouragement.

Nothing in the whole world is so outspoken as the Word of God.

Getting on the right track usually involves getting out of a rut.

If you your lips would keep from slips, five things observe with care:
Of whom you speak, to whom you speak,
and how, and when, and where.

A groundless rumor often covers a lot of ground.



IT'S TIME TO COOK

I love the taste of T-bone steak,
Delicious every bite,
But there's nothing like the Word of God,
For my spiritual appetite.
The Word of God has milk and meat,
And even ice cream and cake.
Take a slice of the Bread of Life,
And ev'ry sin forsake.

Open your Bible and turn to Psalms
For David's famous buffet.
You can drink all the wine of the Word you want,
And still feel fine the next day.
There's enough of the Word for everyone,
And no one has to cheat.
The Word of God is a smorgasbord,
So take all you are able to eat.

Now try a dish of long-suffering,
Job gives the recipe:
Patience is the basic thing,
Along with integrity.
Wrap that up in self-control,
And good, sound common sense,
Cover that with contentment,
Then add some hope for strength.

You'll want a dish of love for dessert—
Jesus made this dish—
Cream together joy and peace,
Sift out all selfishness.
Then add some deeds, the loving kind,
Enough to make it sweet.
Humility is the frosting
That makes the dish complete.

Are you suffering from malnutrition,
And don't know what to do?
Your spiritual growth seems hindered?
Try First Peter 2, verse 2.
If when every time you battle,
The enemy always wins,
Try the Word's potent Protein,
And spiritual vitamins.

God's Word can feed many millions,
And still have plenty left
Because His Word is Soul Food,
And God Himself is the CHEF.

—Author Unknown.

YOUR SEEDS IN MY GARDEN

*Your seeds blow into my garden, Friend,
Whenever the wind is right.
They blow on the winds of the breeze by day,
And they ride on the gales by night.*

*Your seeds blow into my garden, Friend,
And nestle among my flowers,
In the soft sweet soil of my garden plot
They wait for the sun and the showers.*

*Whatever you grow in your garden, Friend,
If flower, or ugly weed,
The fall will come and the wind will blow
And over will come your seed.*

*Your life is a garden by mine, dear Friend,
And planted with living deeds;
So ever and over the wall they blow:
Will you give me flowers—or weeds?*

—Author Unknown.

