

Bible Basics: Essential Doctrines of the Bible

Part 6A

Peripateology

(also available on-line at ichthys.com)

by Dr. Robert D. Luginbill

The Christian Walk.

Proverbs 4:18

Contents of the Series: Bible Basics: Essential Doctrines of the Bible

Part 1: Theology

Part 2: Angelology (A); Eschatology (B)

Part 3: Anthropology (A); Hamartiology (B)

Part 4: Christology (A); Soteriology (B)

Part 5: Pneumatology

Part 6: Peripateology (A); Ecclesiology (B)

Part 7: Bibliology

Outline:

I. Principles and Practice

(1) Our Objective (Recruitment and Enlistment)

(2) Our Methodology (Training)

A. Spiritual Growth

1. The Water of the Word

2. The Centrality of the Word of God to the Christian Life

3. The Virtuous Circle of Spiritual Growth

4. Bible Teaching

5. Bible Teacher

6. The Holy Spirit and the Truth (epistemology and *epignosis*)

7. The Result of the Process: Spiritual Maturity

B. Spiritual Perspective

1. Peace and Joy

2. Alertness

3. Emotions

4. Clear Eyes

5. Virtue Thinking

6. Focusing on Christ

7. Transformation

C. Spiritual Discernment

1. The Process of Discernment
 2. Areas of Discernment
 - A. Self-Examination
 - B. Family
 - C. Job and Business
 - D. Great Matters
 - E. Ministry and Relations with Other Believers
 3. Impediments to Discernment
 4. Wisdom
 5. The Law of Love
- (3) Our Warfare
- A. Spirituality and Sin
 - B. Testing and Temptation
 - C. Personal Tribulation
 - D. Spiritual Warfare
 1. Our Objective
 2. Our Opposition
 3. Our S.O.P.
 - a. Growth progression
 - b. Testing of our control
 - c. Holding our position
 - d. The example of Christ
 4. Readiness for Spiritual Combat
 5. Meeting the Threat
 6. Calling for Support
 7. Intense Spiritual Combat
 - a. Comfort and Encouragement
 - b. Eternal Rewards
 - c. Team Spirit
 - d. Joy and Peace
 - e. Everything is Always Over
 - f. Fellowship with Jesus Christ in the Fiery Furnace
 - g. Anchored by Hope
 8. Recovering from Defeat
 9. Spiritual Victory
 - E. The Christian Walk
- II. Biblical Vocabulary, Analogies and Role Models for Spiritual Growth
- (1) Spiritual Growth Vocabulary
 - (2) Spiritual Growth Analogies
 - A. The Physical Body and Athletics Analogy
 - B. The Plant Analogy
 - C. The Building Analogy
 - D. The Military Analogy

E. The Pilgrimage Analogy

(3) Biblical Role Models

Introduction:

In our previous installment, Pneumatology, we studied both the spiritual mechanics of the believer's growth in the truth and also the different gifts which empower the several and individual ministries of believers, thus producing the edification of the Body of Christ. Our present study of the Christian walk, Peripateology, occupies a middle ground between these two, being based upon consistent growth in and through the Word of God and then flowing naturally into the believer's ministry to the Church. While growing in the Word, walking with Jesus Christ through the world, and serving Him through ministering to His Body are in many respects sequential events they are also contemporaneous in great part. Growing through the truth of the Word should never stop for a believer, no matter how advanced he or she becomes. Ministry is something a believer can do right from the point of salvation (e.g., we should begin praying for others as soon as we are saved), and walking in this world as a Christian is, obviously, unavoidable from the point of salvation to the end, whether or not we make any progress in growth or ever come into the ministry the Lord has for us. The *quality* of our walk, however, is something that will progress over time – or at least it should do so – as we truly come to believe what we have learned and apply that truth to our lives with greater commitment day by day.

As we do grow, our walk will also be tested, and, as it turns out (and as we shall have occasion to discuss in detail below), such testing is absolutely necessary in order to take that growth to an ever higher level and also to prepare us for the ministries our Lord would have us accomplish for the sake of His Church, our fellow believers in Jesus Christ. So while for instructional purposes we are compelled to study this aspect of the Christian life on its own, we do need to keep in mind that a good and increasingly better Christian walk is based upon a ever-growing foundation of growth in our knowledge and acceptance of the truths of scripture, and that it has as its natural result an ever more effective ministry to others. This will in turn help them to grow closer to Jesus Christ through the truth of the Word, to walk more closely with Him through the ever more effective application of the truth to their own life circumstances, and eventually to come into their own ministries as well so as to fulfill the "virtuous circle" of the Church in its "building itself up in love" (Eph.4:15-16).

Peripateology is derived from the Greek verb *peripateo* (περιπατέω), meaning "to walk" (cf. "peripatetic"), and the suffix *-ologia*, meaning "study of". In this study we will consider first the principles and practical aspects of the Christian walk as discussed and defined in the Bible; second, we will discuss the analogies scripture uses to teach this important field of doctrine, including a brief examination of a number of representative believers in the Bible whose lives are particularly illustrative of a close walk with the Lord – in order to improve our own walk with Him by following their good examples.

I. Principles and Practice

(1) **Our Objective** (Recruitment and Enlistment)

The Christian life is not over at salvation. Far from it. Although the Lord could easily remove every believer to heaven on the point of belief, we are instead left here on earth after we come to trust Him for life eternal – and left here for a very definite purpose. For this reason, salvation, while assured (as long as we remain believers in Christ – for only believers are saved), in addition to being described as something already accomplished for believers (Acts 15:11; Rom.8:24; Eph.2:5; 2:8-9; 2Tim.1:9; Tit.3:5) and solid and secure (Jn.10:28-29), is also portrayed in scripture as something future upon which we are to set our sights . . . and order our lives accordingly (Rom.5:9-10; 13:11; 1Cor.3:15; 5:5; 2Cor.1:6; 1Thes.5:8-9; 1Tim.4:16; 2Tim.4:18; Heb.1:14; 9:28; Jas.1:21; 1Pet.4:18; Jude 1:23):

For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are ***being saved*** it is the power of God.

1st Corinthians 1:18 NKJV

It is through this gospel that you are ***being saved***, if you hold firmly to the word I preached to you – otherwise you have believed in vain.

1st Corinthians 15:2

For we are to God the fragrance of Christ among those who are ***being saved*** and among those who are perishing.

2nd Corinthians 2:15 NKJV

So then, my brothers, just as you have always been obedient [to the truth], not just when I was present [with you] but even more so now in my absence, go to work on your ***salvation*** with fear and trembling.

Philippians 2:12

For this reason I endure all things for the sake of the elect, in order that they themselves too may lay [firm] hold of the ***salvation*** that is in Jesus Christ with eternal glory (i.e., resurrection).

2nd Timothy 2:10

(14) But you must continue in the things which you have learned and been assured of, knowing from whom you have learned them, (15) and that from childhood you have known the Holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise ***for salvation*** through faith which is in Christ Jesus.

2nd Timothy 3:14-15 NKJV

(10) So strive all that much more then, brothers, to make your calling and election secure through these good works. By devoting yourselves to these things (i.e., virtue, growth and the Christian production which springs from faith) you shall never be tripped up along your way. (11) For it is by such means that your path into the eternal Kingdom of

our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ will be smoothly and generously paved.
2nd Peter 1:10-11

(8) Though you have never laid eyes on Him, yet you love Him. And though you cannot see Him at this present time, yet you have faith in Him. For this reason you rejoice with an inexpressible joy that bespeaks the glorious future to come, (9) when you shall carry off in victory the ultimate prize – *the deliverance* (lit. "salvation") of your lives (i.e., experiential salvation at the resurrection) – which is the very purpose and objective of this faith of yours.¹

1st Peter 1:8-9

As this last passage in particular demonstrates, salvation, which belongs to us positionally as believers in Christ, is nonetheless described in scripture as a prize to be awarded in our glorious future to come. This is so for two reasons. First and foremost, we will not fully experience this salvation until the resurrection – we have it positionally from the point of being born again, but not experientially. Second, only believers are saved "in the end", which means that only those who persevere in faith firm unto the end receive this ultimate salvation. Those who "believe for a time" and then fall away (Lk.8:13) do not receive this prize of all prizes. And, speaking of prizes, even among those who do persevere in faith so as to be saved "in the end", all do not receive the same eternal rewards: the crowns of righteousness, life and glory are reserved for those who have won them on the battlefield of this world. Taken together, these factors ought to make us realize that there is a rather large gap between putting one's faith in Christ and receiving from Him a "well done, good and faithful servant!" on that great day to come. Whether or not we are even there depends upon our perseverance in faith throughout our lives until the end (e.g., 1Pet.1:5), and whether or not we are highly rewarded depends upon our exploitation of that faith throughout our lives until the end (e.g., Gal.6:9).

Since the Church is Christ's assembly (or army), called out for service in this world in the invisible conflict now raging, it is not out of place to speak of this gap (between potential at the point of being born again and a good evaluation at Christ's judgment seat) in military terms. Especially in times of crisis, there are many who are moved to consider military service through the various recruitment efforts brought to bear by the respective armed forces. Because of the need to be persuasive in these efforts, military recruiters are infamous for downplaying the hardships and dangers of service life while overemphasizing the advantages and potential glory. So anyone who has served and is called upon to advise a young person who is considering enlistment would certainly want to paint a more realistic picture of things than may be gleaned

¹ An expanded translation of this text, "the safe deliverance of our lives", may be explained as follows: "that is, our safe arrival in heaven to begin an eternal life with Christ in contrast with those who reject Christ and lose their lives". As one cannot really say in English "salvation of lives" and be understood, or say "salvation of souls" and not be misunderstood, "deliverance of lives" was the choice of translation here, referring to the consummation of salvation (either at death or resurrection when this goal is reached with faith intact).

from advertisements, even when we understand that service is largely a beneficial (if difficult) thing for the personal development of the individual in question just as it is very necessary for the nation as a whole.

Similarly, the Christian life is no picnic. Christians come in for all manner of opposition from the world that unbelievers will never face. And any Christian who desires to walk closely with the Lord and "do their part" in the great struggle in which we are engaged can expect a greater level of opposition and even persecution (2Tim.3:12). The proper conclusion to draw from these facts is that all Christian "recruiters" (believers engaged in evangelism) ought to be honest about what lies ahead. Our Lord certainly was (Lk.14:27-33). Paul certainly was (1Thes.3:4). We want as the Lord wants "all to be saved", but not under false pretenses. For if we paint too unrealistic and rosy a picture, we do have to ask ourselves whether or not the person with whom we are sharing the gospel may not be so surprised and unnerved when trouble comes that it may cause him/her to react and fall away.

And he who was sown on the rocky places, this is the one who hears the Word and immediately receives it with joy. He has no roots [to his faith], however, but lasts only a short time. So when tribulation or persecution occurs on account of the Word, he is immediately tripped up.

Matthew 13:20-21

And these [second types] who are sown on the rocky places are similar. Whenever they hear the Word they immediately receive it with joy, although they have no root [of faith] in themselves, but are only temporary [believers]. When tribulation or persecution because of the Word comes [their way], they are immediately tripped up.

Mark 4:16-17

And those [whose seed of faith fell] on the rock do receive the Word with joy when they hear it. However these [types] have no root [to their faith]. They believe for a while, but in time of testing they apostatize.

Luke 8:13

To continue our analogy, military history is replete with examples of individuals who had "buyer's remorse" almost immediately upon responding to a recruitment call, many of whom never made it far beyond initial processing and "washed out" in boot camp or basic training. Many others have gone AWOL in later stages of training or deserted in the face of the enemy when the experience of combat became too intense (or have found other ways to shirk their duty).

Similarly, the Christian life, for those who are actually intent on following Christ, is not one of glorious enjoyment of this world. Far from it. Christians may be blessed with all manner of worldly things, but not necessarily so. Anyone who promises a potential convert material prosperity as a result of giving his or her life to Christ is doing the person in question a great disservice. Our Commanding General is perfect in every way, and He will never leave us in the lurch without the proper level of material support to accomplish the mission He has given us

(though we can expect to be tested in this regard as well), but that does not mean we are called to a life of luxury.

Keep your lives free from the love of money and be content with what you have, because God has said, "Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you" (Deut.31:6).
Hebrews 13:5 NIV

So even if as Christians we are given substantial material prosperity, we have to understand that we are not here in this world after salvation for the purpose of "enjoying life" (though there is nothing wrong with being grateful for and enjoying whatever our Lord has blessed us with); rather, we continue here on earth after being saved in order to carry out a very specific mission which Jesus Christ has for us. That mission is uniquely tailored to us as individual Christians, but there are general principles which obtain for everyone in the assembly of the Lord of Hosts: the need to grow up to spiritual maturity, the challenge of passing the tests that come to the mature believer as we daily improve our walk with Jesus Christ, and the opportunity of helping our fellow Christians do the same through the proper functioning of the spiritual gifts we were given at salvation by engaging in a particular ministry designated for us by the Lord Himself.

All of the above is incredibly rewarding spiritually here and now and in every possible way in eternity for those who persevere unto eternal rewards. But none of it is easy. In fact, carrying out the mission requires great personal sacrifice, sacrifice far greater than most Christians in our lackadaisical and lukewarm Church era of Laodicea are willing to make. Even to make it to the finish line, moreover, surviving this life with faith in Christ still intact, is not a given. Perseverance in faith is difficult enough for many believers even in the best of times, but in the soon to come Tribulation, one third of the Church is prophesied to fall away from the faith under the severe pressures of that time in the Great Apostasy (Rev.12:4). All of this is indicative of the fact that those who are contemplating becoming Christians need to "count the cost" of such discipleship before the fact. Because there is no profit in enduring the trouble that comes the way of all Christians if a person is only going to give up in the end; in that case, "the end is worse than the beginning" (2Pet.2:20-22).

(11) Elisha sent a messenger to him, saying, "Go and wash in the Jordan seven times, and your flesh will be restored to you and you will be clean." (11) But Naaman was furious and went away and said, "Behold, I thought, 'He will surely come out to me and stand and call on the name of the Lord his God, and wave his hand over the place and cure the leper.' (12) "Are not Abanah and Pharpar, the rivers of Damascus, better than all the waters of Israel? Could I not wash in them and be clean?" So he turned and went away in a rage. (13) Then his servants came near and spoke to him and said, "My father, had the prophet told you to do some great thing, would you not have done it? How much more then, when he says to you, 'Wash, and be clean?'"
2nd Kings 5:10-13 NASB

(8) For you have been saved by [God's] grace through faith [in Christ]; and this did not come from you – it is God's gift. (9) Nor did it come from what you have done, lest

anyone should boast. (10) For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for [the purpose of accomplishing] good works, which [very works] God has prepared ahead of time for us, that we might walk in them (i.e., live our Christian lives in the accomplishment of them).

Ephesians 2:8-10

Salvation is a gift from God that comes entirely through grace based on the sacrifice our dear Savior. As the two passages above make very clear, it is not accomplished through works of any sort (2Tim.1:9; Tit.3:3-7); rather, the good works Christians are called to do, all of which, when genuine, have to do with the ministry of the Word of God or support thereof, are the result of God's work in Jesus Christ and are thus not meritorious in respect to us any more than faith in Christ is meritorious since all merit belongs to Him for what He has done for us. So while living the Christian life the way our Lord would have us to do it is a challenge and "difficult" in many respects, it is to be carefully distinguished from false works of the flesh in which most religions and even many putative Christian denominations are embroiled. Like Naaman, we are not being called on to do "some great thing", but rather to "walk in the good works" which God has prepared ahead of time for us to do.

(9) But he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me. (10) That is why, for Christ's sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong.

2nd Corinthians 12:9-10 NIV

(12) I know how to handle humiliation; I also know how to handle prosperity. I have learned by experience in each and every way how to handle being abundantly provided for and being impoverished, being in prosperity and being in a state of deprivation. (13) I have the strength to endure all [extremes] in the One who empowers me to do so.

Philippians 4:12-13

As the apostle Paul's testimony above makes abundantly clear, it is possible to meet successfully the extreme challenge of the Christian life only through the power which God supplies. Therefore the challenge is fundamentally different from any other sphere of human life. In any other field of human endeavor, the hard work and motivation without which worldly success is impossible are of the flesh in every way; to do what Christ would have us to do in growing, progressing and producing for Him after salvation is by way of the starkest contrast spiritual in every way. That is not to say that "blood, sweat and tears" are not necessary in both the physical and spiritual realms for those who want to be successful; but it is to say that in our combat the power comes from the Spirit not from the flesh and is accessed through faith in the Lord and in His truth – not faith in ourselves.

The fight of faith is still a fight, however, so that while we believers are most definitely not called upon to do works of supererogation (blasphemously assuming that we can "help God" in

any way), living as Christ would have us to live and carrying out all He would have us to do is still an undeniably challenging life's work. For that reason, scripture does emphasize the challenge so as to help us stay focused on the commitment we believers have taken on by enlisting in the Church of Jesus Christ.

(11) Now this is the [interpretation of] the parable. The seed is the Word of God. (12) "And the ones [who receive the seed] beside the road are those who have heard [the truth of the gospel], then the devil comes and removes the Word from their heart, so that they might not believe and be saved. (13) And those on the rock do receive the Word with joy when they hear it. However these [types] have no root [to their faith]. They believe for a while, but in time of testing they fall away [from the faith] (i.e., they apostatize). (14) And as to that [seed] which fell among the thorns, these are they who have heard the Word, but who are stunted [in their growth] by worries and by wealth and by the pleasures of this life with the result that they do not bear a full crop to harvest."
Luke 8:11-14

We who have enlisted in the army of Jesus Christ have not spurned the Word of salvation (as in the case of "hard-packed" person of verse twelve above who rejects the gospel). But for all those who have believed, especially in the case of new recruits, there are two further occupational hazards to be guarded against.

The first of these (described in verse thirteen above) is the need to persevere in our faith until the end. Only those who are genuinely believers are saved; those who allow their "faith plant", sprung from the seed of the Word, to die are no longer believers. Apostasy is therefore a real concern, and much the more so for this generation of Laodicea standing on the cusp of the Tribulation. For it is prophesied that one third of those who believe will fall away in the Great Apostasy under the exceptional pressures of those difficult years ahead (Rev.12:4).

The second concern (described in verse fourteen above) is the need to persevere in our faithfulness to the Lord all the way to the end without succumbing to the "weeds" of this world. Failure to continue in our spiritual growth, failure to continue in our spiritual forward progress in advancing with the Lord and passing the tests that come to the spiritually mature, and failure to enter into service to the Body for which our Lord has appointed us do not result in loss of salvation, but these failures do result in loss of eternal reward.

Taken together, the three negative categories in the parable quoted above demonstrate very clearly the gap between hearing the gospel and receiving a positive evaluation before the Judgment Seat of Christ. Some reject the gospel (i.e., refuse recruitment altogether); some have second thoughts and fall away from the faith (i.e., desert from the ranks under fire); and others prove themselves useless to the Body of Christ in this invisible but deadly-real conflict in which we are engaged (i.e., through a combination of malfeasance, malingering, cowardice, self-inflicted wounds, going AWOL and the like, so as to be more of a hindrance than a help to the mission at hand). Since we all desire – or certainly all *should* desire – to be of benefit to our fellow Christians, to be pleasing to our Lord, and to win a good reward for our time in this world,

every Christian ought to seriously consider before committing to Christ in the first place the nature of the commitment we are making and the importance of following through on it in an honorable and consistent way. Certainly, any Christian who by that precious name is now serving our Lord and Savior as part of the Church militant ought to consider at least from time to time whether or not he or she is living up to the commitment we have all made to Christ. Many Christians are very confused about how we are to fulfill our commitment, and we will have much to say about that (i.e., spiritual growth, progress and production) over the course of this study. But *that* we are to do so – rather than sitting out the fight by making ourselves as comfortable as we can in this world for as long as we are here – is something we all need to keep firmly in mind at all times.

Then He said to them all, "If anyone desires to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross daily, and follow Me."

Luke 9:23 NKJV

Christians are either friends of the world or friends of God (Jas.4:4; 1Jn.2:15-17). Following Jesus Christ means doing what He would have us do with our lives (in spiritual growth, progress and production); it requires putting His desires before our own and taking up the burden He has given us; it means following in His footsteps and following His example regardless of the cost. All this, therefore, requires daily dedication to the commitment we have made; failure to honor that commitment results in loss of reward in eternity and vulnerability of faith while here on earth.

At the end of His road our Lord was crucified and died spiritually in the darkness for all of our sins and for the sins of the entire world – the least part of which is greater than all creation. Our burden is nothing like His, not in the carrying and certainly not when we reach our own Calvary. Indeed, His yoke is easy and His burden is light (Matt.11:28-30). He has already died for us so that what we do for Him we do in the Spirit and through the power of God – but we still need to actually do it.

(57) As they were going along the road, someone said to Him, "I will follow You wherever You go." (58) And Jesus said to him, "The foxes have holes and the birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay His head."

Luke 9:57-58 NASB

Believers just like all other human beings need shelter to survive, and believers do not need to feel guilty or as if they are doing something wrong if God has blessed us with something more than a temporary refuge for the night. But as followers of Jesus Christ our first priority must be to carry out the mission He has for us in this life, a mission which begins with growing closer to Him through the truth of the Word of God. Anything which militates against that objective is a hindrance rather than a help and can impede our growth just as the worries of this world and concerns about wealth and worldly pleasures impair it (Matt.13:22; Mk.4:18-19; Lk.8:14). Following Jesus Christ in the proper way – which constitutes true discipleship (rather than what is often prescribed as such in legalistic churches nowadays) – is a serious matter; no one should

undertake this solemn commitment without being willing to do whatever the Lord may call upon us to do to carry it out effectively (Lk.14:33).

(59) And He said to another, "Follow Me." But he said, "Lord, permit me first to go and bury my father." (60) But He said to him, "Allow the dead to bury their own dead; but as for you, go and proclaim everywhere the kingdom of God."
Luke 9:59-60 NASB

Believers just like all other human beings have families and family responsibilities, duties to which it is right and proper for us to attend (1Tim.5:8). But no one who takes his or her commitment to Jesus Christ seriously can afford to put any conditions on that commitment, no matter how reasonable they may seem, nor put anyone or anything above Jesus Christ and our commitment to Him (Matt.10:37-38; Lk.14:26; cf. Matt.12:46-50; Mk.3:31-35; Lk.8:20-21). When the Lord calls us to walk with Him and to serve Him is not the time to demur, even out of what may seem to be reasonable concerns – for there will always be some "good reason" to adduce as to why we cannot yet give ourselves over to a course of spiritual growth or an aggressive walk with the Lord or, ultimately, to the ministry He is calling us to perform. "Not just yet, Lord" is *not* the answer Jesus Christ wants to hear from us.

(61) Another also said, "I will follow You, Lord; but first permit me to say good-bye to those at home." (62) But Jesus said to him, "No one, after putting his hand to the plow and looking back, is fit for the kingdom of God."
Luke 9:57-62 NASB

Believers just like all other human beings live in this world. Since we have to engage with this world in order to survive, and that includes working and being part of families, the world will always be tugging at our sleeves as long as we are in it. But regardless of the nature or number of our worldly concerns and commitments, that will never be a proper excuse for interrupting what for a believer is priority number one: growing spiritually, walking more closely with our Lord day by day in spiritual progress and passing the tests which come, and helping others do the same through engagement in the ministries our Lord has for us. At all three levels, no earthly success in this world will ever relieve us of our commitment and responsibility to keep on plowing forward.

(12) [It is] not that I have already gotten [what I am striving for], nor that I have already completed [my course]. Rather, I am continuing to pursue [the prize] in hopes of fully acquiring it – [this prize for whose acquisition] I was myself acquired by Christ Jesus. (13) Brethren, I do not consider that I have already acquired it. This one thing only [do I keep in mind]. Forgetting what lies behind me [on the course] and straining towards the [course] ahead, (14) I continue to drive straight for the tape, towards the prize to which God has called us from the beginning [of our race] in Christ Jesus. (15) So as many as are [spiritually] mature, let us have this attitude (i.e., of focusing on our spiritual advance and reward and not getting hung up on what lies behind: vv.13-14), and if in any matter your attitude is off-center, God will reveal that to you (i.e., assuming you are mature and

are advancing as you should). (16) But with respect to the progress you have made, keep on advancing in the same way!
Philippians 3:12-16

There is no finish line in this life. That will only be crossed after we have finished the course we have committed ourselves to run, when at last we see our dear Lord Jesus face to face.

(25) Now great multitudes went with Him. And He turned and said to them, (26) "If anyone comes to Me and does not hate his father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and his own life also, he cannot be My disciple. (27) And whoever does not bear his cross and come after Me cannot be My disciple."

Luke 14:25-27 NKJV

Our Lord puts the matter here in stark but necessary terms. Jesus Christ cannot be for us an afterthought, someone to consider only after we have done what we desire to do for ourselves and for those whom we love. If we are following Him in this correct way – putting Him and His kingdom first in our thoughts and actions with everything else in second place – no doubt it will seem to the world that we hate ourselves and may possibly seem to those we love in this world that we do not care for them as we should. But the reality is that we love Jesus Christ more than anything or anyone else in this temporary world, and the result of that godly love is something better both for ourselves and for all who are dear to us. The crowds following Jesus on the occasion cited above were impressed by His miracles and by His teaching, but unlike the teachers and leaders of this world who seek out as many followers as possible, our Lord's words, honest and true, strike straight to the heart of all that is lukewarm and weakly committed. To complete this course to our Lord's satisfaction, to run this race to the end in the right way, nothing short of a pure, total and complete commitment will do.

(28) "For which of you, intending to build a tower, does not sit down first and count the cost, whether he has enough to finish it – (29) lest, after he has laid the foundation, and is not able to finish, all who see it begin to mock him, (30) saying, 'This man began to build and was not able to finish.' "

Luke 14:28-30 NKJV

For those who become Christians then fall away "the end is worse than the beginning" (2Pet.2:20-22). The mockery of those who see and ridicule their effort wasted to no point is a perfect illustration of the folly of beginning if a person is not willing to follow through and finish. For these lukewarm followers – many of whom would in a very short time be calling for His crucifixion – nothing could be worse than beginning without finishing. Our Lord's analogy is given for their benefit and for the benefit of all who are not really willing to pay the price necessary to fight this fight all the way to the end.

(31) "Or what king, going to make war against another king, does not sit down first and consider whether he is able with ten thousand to meet him who comes against him with twenty thousand? (32) Or else, while the other is still a great way off, he sends a

delegation and asks conditions of peace."
Luke 14:31-32 NKJV

Seeking reconciliation with God – peace through Jesus Christ – while there is still time is the point of this part of the parable, but there is also an apt application here in regard to the issue of choosing for Christ on this battlefield of the world: the ruler of this world takes no prisoners. If a person commits to Christ but is unable – that is, is unwilling because of the resultant pressures – to persevere in faith in Him, it would have been better to make peace with the world to the extent that is possible and accept the consequences than to suffer defeat in this life along with the inevitable loss of everything in the next (which is the heritage of all unbelievers). That way, the person in question would at least have some comfort in this life (Eccl.9:8-10; Lk.16:25). As those committed to Jesus Christ, we recognize full well the folly of both propositions (i.e., either of failing to follow Christ in the first place or of failing to follow through on the commitment), and the clarity we receive from considering them both ought to predispose us to fight the fight all the way to victory (1Jn.5:4).

(33) "So likewise, whoever of you does not forsake all that he has cannot be My disciple.
(34) Salt is good; but if the salt has lost its flavor, how shall it be seasoned? (35) It is neither fit for the land nor for the dunghill, but men throw it out. He who has ears to hear, let him hear!"
Luke 14:33-35 NKJV

We believers are the salt of the earth (Matt.5:13). Turning away from Jesus Christ and losing faith is analogous to salt losing its savor. If it does, it has no further use whatsoever for those to whom it belongs. For all of us who have given our lives to the Lord, therefore, this is strong encouragement to fulfill the mission we have been given in this life to persevere faithfully until the end, come what may, picking up our cross daily and following Jesus Christ in spiritual growth, progress in our walk through storm with Him, and helping others advance with us through whatever ministry the Lord calls us to.

"His master replied, 'Well done, good and faithful servant! You have been faithful with a few things; I will put you in charge of many things. Come and share your master's happiness!'"
Matthew 25:21 NIV

"'Well done, my good servant!' his master replied. 'Because you have been trustworthy in a very small matter, take charge of ten cities.'"
Luke 19:17 NIV

It should be every Christian's top priority to receive a good report before the judgment seat of Christ. For while there are many things a Christian should do, many things we should not do, and many demands on our time and energy in this world, rightly understood these all resolve into the same objective: pleasing our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. It is very important to understand, moreover, that pleasing Him, which is of course an end in itself, also has indescribably

wonderful eternal benefits. Whatever we gain in this life, no matter how wonderful, will ultimately turn to dust. But whatever we earn by way of eternal reward will be ours forever, a glory to Christ and to His Church, and a blessing for us that will never fade away.

Now without faith, it is impossible to please [God]. For whoever wishes to draw nearer to God must believe that He exists, and that He will reward those who earnestly seek Him.

Hebrews 11:6

Mere acknowledgment of the existence of God is not faith – even the demons know that He exists and shudder as a result in anticipation of their coming judgment (Jas.2:19). Genuine faith always produces results (Jas.2:17), even if these are not sufficient enough to win one of the three crowns of eternal reward. So while appearing before the Lord empty-handed, as the final man being evaluated in the parable of the talents did (Matt.25:24-30; Lk.19:20-26), is never acceptable to Him (Ex.23:15b), genuine faith in Christ in which a believer perseveres to the end will be rewarded with resurrection and eternal life – and many more things besides for those who have truly loved Jesus Christ in this life more than anything else and have operated with the intent of pleasing Him so as to be rewarded by Him.

(6) In anticipation of this ultimate deliverance, your joy overflows, though at present it may be your lot to suffer for a time through various trials (7) to the end that your faith may be shown to be genuine. This validation of your faith is far more valuable than gold, for gold, though it too is assayed by fire, ultimately perishes. But your faith, when proven genuine in the crucible of life, will result in praise, glory and honor for you at the glorious return of Jesus Christ.

1st Peter 1:6-7

So while it is absolutely true that eternal life and a place in the kingdom of God is worth any sacrifice and that what we are called upon to do in this life is absolutely nothing compared to what Christ did for us, it is also true that the rewards we stand to earn by faithfully following our Lord's will for our lives and accomplishing the mission He has for us are marvelous beyond present understanding and constitute a legitimate and necessary means of motivation to spur us on to the goal ahead. We dearly want to have our work survive our Lord's evaluation and be found acceptable to Him, rather than having to watch it found unacceptable and burned up before our eyes.

(10) According to the grace of God given to me like a wise architect I have laid down a foundation, and another is building upon it. But let each one take care how he builds upon it. (11) For no one can lay another foundation except the One that has been laid down: Jesus Christ. (12) And if someone builds upon his foundation with gold, silver, and precious stones, [or] with wood, hay, and stubble, (13) [in either case] his work will be made manifest [as to its true quality], for the Day [of judgment] will make it clear [for what it truly is], because it will be revealed (lit., uncovered) with fire. And the fire will evaluate (lit., "assay") the work of each person as to what its [true] quality is. (14) If

anyone's work which he has built [on his foundation of faith in Christ] remains (i.e., is not burnt away by the fiery evaluation), he will receive a reward [for it]. (15) If anyone's work is burnt up, he will suffer the loss [of any potential reward for it], but he himself will be saved – but in this way [just described] as through fire [which evaluated his false works as worthless and burnt them up].

1st Corinthians 3:10-15

This being the case, every Christian should do what any competent soldier would do faced with an objective he has been ordered to seize, namely, think through the ways and means necessary to take that objective in the best possible way. Our present study is devoted to precisely this sort of reverse planning, considering just what we as Christians need to do to walk closely in our Lord's footsteps so as to carry out His marching orders for us in the hopes of pleasing Him and winning the great eternal rewards He wants all of us to win.

Pleasing the Lord results in eternal reward, and eternal reward is a result of pleasing the Lord. Therefore it is good and right that we as believers strive to please the Lord that we may win a good reward before Him on that day. The Lord has provided all the means necessary for us to please Him, "life and breath and all other things" (Acts 17:25; cf. Phil.2:13). Today, we even have His Holy Spirit to guide and empower us. The one thing we have to provide ourselves is the willingness to do it. That is why just as life for all human beings comes down to choice, exercising the image of God we have been given either to believe in Christ or not, so also once we have used that God-given faith to accept the gift of Jesus Christ our lives from that point unto eternity are likewise all about choice: how often, how consistently, how fully and aggressively will we give our will over to the Lord in the Spirit to do what Christ would have us to do here on earth?

(15) So be very careful how you are walking – not as those who are unwise but as those who are wise. (16) Redeem your time, for the days are evil.

Ephesians 5:15-16

(2) **Our Methodology** (Training)

All scripture is inspired by God and useful for teaching, for admonishing, for correcting, and for training in righteousness.

2nd Timothy 3:16

Training is an essential and critical activity for all military units, and it never ends, even when the members of said units are veterans of many conflicts and highly proficient. The same can be said of athletic teams, no matter how many championships they may have won. When it comes to individuals, this point is even more important, because no soldier, no athlete, becomes a seasoned veteran just by virtue of joining a highly decorated unit or successful team. We believers are members of the greatest organization which ever has or will exist in all of creation, the Church of Jesus Christ, and among her ranks are the greatest individuals who have ever lived – as far as God is concerned. We are blessed and should be gratified to the depths of our hearts

to be so honored to belong to this most elite of all groups in human history, and so we do belong forever because of the gracious sacrifice of our dear Lord Jesus Christ who died for us that we all might be one with Him together forever.

Just because we become believers and Christians, however, does not mean that we are immediately fit to carry out the particular mission that Jesus has for us in this life – and He most certainly does have a particular mission for each and every one of us (e.g., 1Cor.12:5). Just as untested troops assigned to a famous military unit or rookies who find themselves on a successful team, it is necessary for every believer to undergo serious training to get to the point of being useful to the Lord. This training will never end this side of heaven, but as in the military analogy there is a difference between basic training where the prospective soldier learns essential skills necessary to function on a rudimentary level and advanced training wherein soldierly skills are refined so as to integrate the individual into the team. Just so in our Christian experience there are basic things every Christian should know and firmly believe, but also more advanced teachings necessary to move beyond the initial point of salvation and progress in the Christian life.

(1) Therefore leaving the elementary teaching about the Christ, let us press on to maturity, not laying again a foundation of repentance from dead works and of faith toward God, (2) of instruction about washings and laying on of hands, and the resurrection of the dead and eternal judgment. (3) And this we will do, if God permits.

Hebrews 6:1-3 NASB

(11) We have much to say about this [subject of Christ's priesthood], but it is difficult to communicate [such advanced things to you] because your ears have become lazy. (12) And although by this time you ought to be [capable of] teaching [such things], you need someone to teach you what the basic principles of God's truth are again! You have turned [back] into [spiritual infants] who need milk and [can] not [yet tolerate] solid food! (13) For everyone who partakes of [such] milk is ignorant of the teaching of righteousness (i.e., how to live righteously), because he is a [spiritual] infant. (14) Solid [spiritual] food is for the [spiritually] mature, those who by [diligent] practice have trained their [moral] perceptive faculties to [properly] distinguish between good and evil.

Hebrews 5:11-14

Progress in every sphere is predicated on training, and our training as Christians consists of learning the truths of the Word of God from a reliable source, believing that truth, and applying it to the lives we live. That is the essence of spiritual growth. As the verses above make clear, however, all phases of our training are, for want of a better word, optional. Athletes who refuse to come to practice are quickly thrown off of the team. Soldiers who refuse to train or who go AWOL will find themselves facing severe penalties, so severe, in fact, that this is seldom an issue for most of the rank and file of any truly professional military organization. But for the Church of Jesus Christ, while there are certainly consequences for failing to do what we should be doing both here on earth (in the form of natural negative results of such sloth as well as divine discipline and also occasionally the sin unto death or even apostasy) and in eternity (in the form

of lost reward), for all the world to see, at least, a believer is absolutely free to refuse to train after salvation, to neglect spiritual growth entirely, and to live his or her life as if the truth of the Word of God were merely an incidental feature of the Christian experience, one only occasionally paid any heed and seen as entirely recreational. Sad to say, but in our final Church era of Laodicea, this lukewarm attitude is more the rule than the exception. And that is truly worrisome inasmuch as standing on the precipice of the Tribulation as we do, there has never been a more dangerous time to neglect the truth of the Word of God.

- (1) The Lord is my shepherd;
I shall not want.
 - (2) He makes me to lie down in green pastures;
He leads me beside the still waters.
 - (3) He restores my soul;
He leads me in the paths of righteousness
For His name's sake.
 - (4) Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death,
I will fear no evil;
For You are with me;
Your rod and Your staff, they comfort me.
 - (5) You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies;
You anoint my head with oil;
My cup runs over.
 - (6) Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me
All the days of my life;
And I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.
- Psalm 23:1-6 NKJV

This well-known and well-beloved Psalm contains many lessons and many important truths which may perhaps not be obvious in a cursory reading. What concerns us here is the fact that encapsulated within it is a description of the Christian life as a journey wherein the Lord is leading us faithfully (Ps.23:1a), providing for our every need (Ps.23:1b), both materially (Ps.23:2a) and spiritually (Ps.23:2b), refreshing us when we are tired and restoring us when we stray (Ps.23:3a), leading us in the right path on this journey (Ps.23:3b), protecting us in trouble (Ps.23:4), blessing us even while in this world (Ps.23:5-6a), and leading us finally to that blessed place where we shall be with Him forevermore (Ps.23:6b).

How it is that we are to walk this "path of righteousness" (Ps.23:3b) is the subject of our current study, and as this Psalm illustrates, the notion of our lives in Christ being a journey from salvation to our ultimate reunion with Him is ubiquitous in scripture. We are wayfarers, sojourners without any lasting place here in a world in which we do not belong, progressing day by day toward the kingdom upon which we have set our hearts (Lev.25:23; 1Chron.29:15; Ps.39:12; 119:19; Heb.11:13-16; 1Pet.1:1; 2:11). But although we have no lasting place on this earth and are outcasts in the world's eyes (e.g., Jn.15:18-19; 1Pet.1:1), we believers in Christ are not wandering purposelessly. We are walking through this world on a mission given to us by the

Lord Himself, one whose objective will not be fully met until we stand before Him face to face.

(5) Happy is everyone whose strength is in You. Their hearts are set on the highways [of pilgrimage to Zion]. (6) As they pass through the [dry] valley of Bachah (i.e., the wilderness of life), they make it a place of springs. Even the early rains enwrap it with [their] blessings. (7) They go from strength to strength, until they appear before God in Zion.

Psalm 84:5-7

This road we travel is steep and it is narrow (Matt.7:13-14). We have no time or energy to turn aside, no time to rest. But if we walk it hand in hand with the Lord, He will renew our strength, and bring us safely through to the end.

(30) Even young men grow faint and weary, and even youths can stumble badly, (31) but those who wait upon the Lord will put on new strength. They will rise up on the wing like eagles. They will run and not become weary. They will walk and not become faint.

Isaiah 40:30-31

Each day the journey begins anew. Each day we face a choice: to make progress on our journey or not, and how far and how well we will choose to walk today. On this path we should make it our endeavor to "walk with Him" every step of the way. We accomplish this by living our lives God's way, namely, by growing in His truth, progressing in our relationship with Christ through following that truth, and helping others along "the way" by ministering to them so they may also do the same. Christ Himself is "the Way, the truth and the life" (Jn.14:6), and when we do grow as we should we find ourselves walking ever closer to Him as we progress through this life on the path He has set out for us, the high road to Zion and life eternal.

The path of the righteous is like the first gleam of dawn, shining ever brighter till the first light of day.

Proverbs 4:18 NIV

Whoever heeds discipline shows the **way** to life, but whoever ignores correction leads others astray.

Proverbs 10:17 NIV

In the **way** of righteousness there is life; along that path is immortality.

Proverbs 12:28 NIV

(5) Commit your **way** to the Lord; trust in Him and He will do this: (6) He will make your righteous reward shine like the dawn, your vindication like the noonday sun.

Psalm 37:5-6 NIV

Hope in the Lord and keep His **way**. He will exalt you to inherit the land; when the wicked are destroyed, you will see it.

Psalm 37:34

See if there is any offensive **way** in me, and lead me in the **way** everlasting.

Psalm 139:24

"Furthermore, tell the people, 'This is what the Lord says: See, I am setting before you the **way** of life and the **way** of death.'"

Jeremiah 21:8 NIV

My feet have closely followed his steps; I have kept to his **way** without turning aside.

Job 23:11 NIV

And the key to finding the path, walking the path and staying on the path is knowledge of and belief in the truth of the Word of God:

(1) Blessed is the man who does not walk in the counsel of the wicked, or stand in the **way** of sinners, or sit in the seat of mockers, (2) but in the Law of the Lord is his delight, and in His teaching he meditates day and night.

Psalm 1:1-2

You have made known to me the path of life; you will fill me with joy in your presence, with eternal pleasures at your right hand.

Psalm 16:11 NIV

Show me your ways, Lord, teach me your paths.

Psalm 25:4 NIV

I will instruct you and teach you in the **way** you should go; I will counsel you with my loving eye on you.

Psalm 32:8 NIV

How can a young person stay on the path of purity? By living according to your word.

Psalm 119:9 NIV

Direct me in the path of your commands, for there I find delight.

Psalm 119:35 NIV

Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path.

Psalm 119:105 NKJV

(7) The path of the righteous is level; you, the Upright One, make the **way** of the righteous smooth. (8) Yes, Lord, walking in the **way** of your laws, we wait for you; your name and renown are the desire of our hearts.

Isaiah 26:6-7 NIV

This is what the Lord says – your Redeemer, the Holy One of Israel: "I am the Lord your God, who teaches you what is best for you, who directs you in the **way** you should go.
Isaiah 48:17 NIV

On the other hand, the surest way toward spiritual regression and apostasy is getting off the proper path:

Will you keep to the old path that the wicked have trod?
Job 22:15 NIV

But the **way** of the wicked is like deep darkness; they do not know what makes them stumble.
Proverbs 4:19 NIV

"Leave this **way**, get off this path, and stop confronting us with the Holy One of Israel!"
Isaiah 30:11 NIV

Have you not brought this on yourselves by forsaking the Lord your God when he led you in the **way**?
Jeremiah 2:17 NIV

This is what the Lord says: "Stand at the crossroads and look; ask for the ancient paths, ask where the good **way** is, and walk in it, and you will find rest for your souls. But you said, 'We will not walk in it.'
Jeremiah 6:16 NIV

"For John came to you to show you the **way** of righteousness, and you did not believe him, but the tax collectors and the prostitutes did. And even after you saw this, you did not repent and believe him."
Matthew 21:32 NIV

It would have been better for them not to have known the **way** of righteousness, than to have known it and then to turn their backs on the sacred command that was passed on to them.
2nd Peter 2:21 NIV

Every aspect of spiritual growth, progress and production is, naturally enough, interrelated. So while there is a progression of sorts (i.e., one cannot produce a full crop without prior progress in one's walk with Christ and without having one's faith tempered by trial, nor are such testing and spiritual advance possible without prior growth in the Word), it is better to think of these three areas and the other aspects of spiritual growth being considered in this section more as intermingled layers than as strictly sequential developments. No believer will ever get to the point in this life of no longer requiring the sustenance of the Word of God – just the same as any newly-minted born again spiritual babe in Christ. Every believer is required to keep moving forward on the path and will continue to be tested along the way of righteousness, even if the

level of difficulty proves to be variable depending upon one's current spiritual status. And even new believers will be given opportunities to serve the Body of Christ right from the start – through prayer, witnessing and mutual encouragement in the Lord, for example. Even so, consistency in spiritual growth, progress and production, effectiveness in maintaining the proper spiritual perspective in our walk with Christ, and an increasing capability for spiritual discernment should all be growing noticeably with each forward step on the road to Zion. We are following in the footsteps our dear Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, seeking to be pleasing to Him in all we think and say and do, imitating Him even as we carry our crosses forward towards the goal in emulation of Him.

(24) Then Jesus said to His disciples, "If anyone wants to follow Me, let him [first] abandon his own aspirations, [then] pick up his cross and follow Me. (25) For whoever makes it his purpose to preserve his life will end up losing it, but whoever forfeits his life for My sake will find that he has preserved it."

Matthew 16:24-25 (cf. Mk.8:34; Lk.9:23)

Many in Israel were beneficiaries of our Lord's miracles during His first advent. We don't know how many, exactly, but the number must have run into the tens of thousands at least, and probably many more than that. Yet by the time of the eve of the birth of the Church Age, a few short weeks after our Lord's victory at the cross, His resurrection and ascension, there were only 120 who gathered with Peter in the upper room (Acts 1:15). Just as many are called but few are chosen – because only a few believe (Matt.20:16; 22:14), so also many are saved and experience the greatest of miracles, spiritual rebirth, but few enough exploit their blessed status as sons and daughters of God and members of the Church of Jesus Christ.

(51) So Jesus answered and said to him, "What do you want Me to do for you?" The blind man said to Him, "Rabboni, that I may receive my sight." (52) Then Jesus said to him, "Go your way; your faith has made you well." And immediately he received his sight ***and followed Jesus on the road.***

Mark 10:51-52 NKJV

Having been blessed with life eternal through faith in the person and work of Jesus Christ, let us not be forgetful hearers (Jas.1:25), but, like Bartimaeus in the verses above, let us set ourselves to following the Lamb wherever He leads (Rev.14:4). That is the way to pleasing Him and to winning an eternal reward that glorifies Him.

A. Spiritual Growth

Therefore cast aside all [moral] filthiness and effluence of evil, and ***in humility*** [continue to] receive the Word implanted in you, for [once "implanted", that is, received and believed] it is able to save your [eternal] lives.

James 1:21

Reverence and respect for the Lord is the beginning of all wisdom (Ps.111:10; Prov.1:7; 4:7;

9:10), so that, as in the verse above, no one can make any serious progress in spiritual growth without humility. As we became Christians through a positive faith-response to the truth of the gospel, so also the only way forward in the Christian life is by advancing the same way we came to this wonderful status as children of God (Phil.3:16). Knowledge is not enough. Knowledge by itself merely "puffs up" (1Cor.8:1). True knowledge, biblical truth, must be accepted in humility, in faith, in order to become useful and produce growth – and that is true both in the receiving of it and in the application of it. The principle of humility, therefore, is an absolute essential for growth. Just as in all military training, recruits who are not properly humble and accepting of the new authority they now find themselves under will soon find themselves at odds with their drill sergeants. Continued resistance toward adopting a properly humble and respectful attitude will result in increasingly severe discipline and in some cases in being thrown out of the service altogether. Without accepting the fact that those in charge know more about the business at hand than oneself, the training will be ineffective, but a proper attitude will yield success, and the better the attitude, the greater the success.

What is true of military training is true in principle of the Christian life as well. For Christians, however, things are both easier and at the same time much more difficult. On the one hand a new Christian is not awakened by bright lights, shouts and garbage cans being thrown into his/her bedroom at three o'clock in the morning the day following salvation, and there are of course many other trying and harrowing things new recruits must endure – for obvious reasons, since the military is a deadly dangerous occupation and the training has to be equally serious and severely taxing both physically and emotionally to match. On the other hand, what makes "Christian basic training" less difficult also makes it much more challenging in many and sometimes subtle ways. There is no D.I. screaming in our ear to get out of bed and start reading our Bible, no platoon movement to the "prayer area", no mandatory attendance at Bible study class (which is what "church" should be, of course), and above all no one at all and nothing at all telling us to believe and to put into practice the truth we do deign to expose ourselves to – except the Holy Spirit. This, of course, is a dramatic exception. But the Spirit's voice is "small and still" and He never forces us. He tells us what is right, but, unlike a D.I., it is very easy to ignore Him. God has set things up like this for a very good reason too, namely, so that what we accomplish in this life for Him will genuinely be coming from our own free will and individual motivation. To put it a bit more simply, once in the military, the system itself resolves the issue of choice to a great degree (but not entirely since even there how and how well we do our jobs is critical); by contrast, the Christian life is *all* about choice . . . at every turn, every day, every hour and every moment: do we love the Lord enough to do what He wants us to do *right now*?

"Whoever does not take up their cross and follow me is not worthy of me."
Matthew 10:38 NIV

Then Jesus said to his disciples, "Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me."
Matthew 16:24

It is important to point out right from the start of this our study which examines the Christian

walk with Christ that none of us is perfect. Being born again does fill the new Christian with a sense of enthusiasm to follow Christ, and believers of every longevity should take pains to rekindle this enthusiasm (through response to the truth) at all points along the high road to Zion. But none of us will ever be perfect in our execution. We do not start out knowing enough about the truth to walk a perfect walk, we do not, even in a very long Christian life, learn perfectly everything there is to know about the truth, and we will never, so long as we live in these sin-infested bodies, be able at all times and in all situations to apply the truth in a perfect fashion. The spirit may be willing to do so, but the flesh fights against our good and godly disposition at every turn and is aided in the fight by the evil one (Matt.26:41; Mk.14:38; Gal.5:16-25).

This is not an excuse for imperfection, but it is very important to recognize that the Christian walk more resembles a disorganized and bloody brawl than it does a classical symphony flawlessly performed. If we fail to appreciate this distinction, it is not at all unprecedented to become demoralized by our failures and lack of a perfect walk so that we completely stop trying to fight this fight. Make no mistake. We will often have to struggle "to the point of blood" in order to make progress (Heb.12:4). That is true both in resistance to sin (spiritual defense) and in developing consistency in the taking in and in the effective application of the truth of the Word of God (spiritual offense). Both activities are essential to "denying ourselves" and "following Jesus Christ" instead. Picking up our crosses to walk in the Lord's footsteps means by definition a challenging and often difficult road ahead – one which no believer will ever negotiate without stumbling and, occasionally, flagging enthusiasm. But we cannot allow these facts, that of our own weakness with its resultant failures and that of the often messy and difficult nature of the task before us, to dissuade us from engaging in the fight. Christians have to understand that spiritual growth, progress and production is never a straight line forward, is never entirely easy, will always be challenged by the evil one, and will often be less than automatically enjoyable. But for all who do persevere in this struggle consistently, there will be progress, there will be the joy of victory, there will be the delight that comes with experiencing the Lord's good pleasure, and there will be great eternal rewards.

And indeed there really is no other way to proceed in the Christian life other than *forward*. Going backward will endanger all we have so far accomplished and all we have committed ourselves to do (2Jn.1:8). Sitting idle is dangerous too, and provides no true happiness – merely the temporary and deceptive respite provided by putting down the load of the cross. Our Lord is calling us forward. He knows very well that the road is steep and narrow, that there are plenty of rough spots along the way, that we will become weary at times, be tempted at times, flag and fail and be deceived at times, but "the one who has endured to the end will be delivered" (Matt.10:22) and will reap great eternal reward – not to mention having the satisfaction here and now of actually being in the Lord's will and pleasing Him, even if the suffering and the cost of truly picking up one's cross and following in His footsteps seems onerous and too great to the eyes of the world. We who have come to know Him know better because we trust Him.

(28) "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. (29)
Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you

will find rest for your souls. (30) For my yoke is easy and my burden is light."
Matthew 11:28-30 NIV

Seeing then that forward progress is our goal, and being determined to keep pushing forward regardless of opposition, disappointment, failure, setbacks, wasting of time or any prior poor decisions on our part or external resistance leveled against us (over which we have no direct control), all believers must come to recognize that in practical terms we who have committed ourselves to doing what Christ would have us to do must take all necessary pains to adopt, develop and learn how to build, implement and maintain the right *priorities* for our Christian life. Life is all about choice, and this is doubly true for the Christian life in particular since our choices always have important consequences. We find at every turn that good decisions reinforce and support further good ones, and that the opposite is also the case. In order to get to the point of *consistently* running a good race for Christ, therefore, prioritizing what is important to Him is an absolutely essential feature of the Christian walk.

(16) All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, (17) that the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work.
2nd Timothy 3:16-17 NKJV

The word "instruction" in the passage above can also be translated "training", and it does indeed entail more than mere classroom "instruction". To return to our military analogy, every service's basic training does of course include the imparting of knowledge in classroom situations, but this knowledge is then quickly put to the test in practical exercises in the field. And it may not be long before the new recruit who has learned to use his rifle in theory and has been put through his paces in practical application on the rifle range will be making use of those skills to save his own life and those of others in real-life combat situations, and may even be called upon soon thereafter to train others the same way he himself was trained. The learning curve in the military is, of necessity, very steep: "see one, do one, teach one", as it is sometimes said. But the learning curve for the Christian walk is even steeper. For no sooner is a believer saved than the evil one and his minions take notice. While the Lord may allow a short "honeymoon" period of respite for the new believer to experience the "joy of his salvation" (Ps.51:12), every Christian experiences "incoming" very shortly after committing to following Christ. Every good decision we make will be tested in order to demonstrate the depth of our commitment (or lack thereof). Since the fight will never cease this side of heaven, in practical terms the training, both in terms of classroom instruction and in terms of field exercises to develop practical application, should also never stop – not if the Christian in question is wise. When a sufficient level of knowledge and seasoning is possessed, exposure to "real combat" is usually not far behind, moreover, so that once blooded the veteran Christian can then help others through this same process. But none of the above is possible without training.

(32) A crowd was sitting around [Jesus], and they told him, "Your mother and brothers are outside looking for you." (33) "Who are my mother and my brothers?" he asked. (34) Then he looked at those seated in a circle around him and said, "Here are my mother and

my brothers! (35) Whoever does God's will is my brother and sister and mother."
Mark 3:32-35 NIV

(38) As Jesus and his disciples were on their way, he came to a village where a woman named Martha opened her home to him. (39) She had a sister called Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet listening to what he said. (40) But Martha was distracted by all the preparations that had to be made. She came to him and asked, "Lord, don't you care that my sister has left me to do the work by myself? Tell her to help me!" (41) "Martha, Martha," the Lord answered, "you are worried and upset about many things, (42) but few things are needed—or indeed only one. Mary has chosen what is better, and it will not be taken away from her."

Luke 10:38-42 NIV

According to our Lord in the first passage above, listening to the teaching of the Word is "the will of God" and makes us more "family" with Him than any natural tie could do. According to the second passage above, listening to the Word is really the only thing that is important, even when there are many other things that "need to be done" – as there *always* are. Getting anywhere in the Christian life requires us to first accept that our number one priority has to be building our relationship with the Lord, and that in turn requires that we learn His truth – for the truth of the Word is the *only* way to get to know Him, to get to know in detail precisely what He wishes us to think and say and do. In other words, having the essential humility necessary to accept that His Word is the truth, to search it out, to sit patiently and receive it, to believe it and rejoice in it – this is "the better part", this is "the Will of God", this is the only way forward to a good reward and a life which glorifies Jesus Christ. Learning the truth does require "homework" (reading our Bibles for ourselves, studying and rehearsing the principles of truth we are taught, making a habit of meditating on the truth as much as we can: Ps.1:1-2), but first and foremost learning the truth requires *consistent* attendance under a Bible teaching ministry where sufficient truth is taught in a detailed, orthodox way so that spiritual growth is possible – and even so there can be no growth without believing that truth (Phil.3:16; directly analogous to salvation where there is no salvation, regardless of how well a person understands the gospel, unless and until it is believed).

Once we are determined to follow the Lord the way He would have us to do, implementation of that noble aspiration of spiritual growth requires just such consistency. We will have to fight day by day to maintain our good priorities in the midst of the distractions, all the "shot and shell" of the devil's world. We will need to strive daily to maintain an attitude of humility in all we do so as to get maximum benefit out of the truth we are learning and beginning to apply to our lives. We will need to have courage in fighting through all the resistance to doing what is right in learning, believing, and applying the truth, and especially in being consistent in all this when we are tired, or emotionally upset, or experience pain, setbacks, and resistance – for the devil and his forces will surely resist: "all who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will suffer persecution" (2Tim.3:12 NKJV). And we will have to make a habit of seizing the opportunities we have and making the most of the time and energy we have to make our determination to grow spiritually more than a one day or one week or one month phenomenon.

Unfortunately, most Christians do not show up for such "training" in the first place precisely because it is hard. Being consistent about prayer, about Bible reading, about applying the truth to our lives, and especially about learning and believing the truth from a good source is difficult, is tiring, and can seem quite onerous at times – at precisely the times when it will do us the most good. And, unlike the military in our analogy, all such "training" is optional. No one will (ostensibly) care if we are not taking pains to pray, if we are not reading our Bibles daily and doing so in an attentive way, if we are not trying to see the spiritual side of everything we experience, and most especially if we are not watching or listening to or reading good Bible teaching in a consistent way. But the Lord knows, and the Lord cares, and we will come to find that truth out if we persist in being AWOL, both on account of the fact that little will go right for us if we are going the wrong way (or refusing to go the right way), and also because of the resultant sour spiritual taste in our mouths, since only through growth in the truth can we truly experience the joy of our salvation (Jn.17:13; Rom.14:17; Gal.5:22; Phil.1:25; 1Pet.1:8) and the peace of our rest of faith in the Lord (Is.26:3; 57:2; Jn.14:27; Rom.5:1; Eph.2:14; Phil.4:7; Col.3:15; 2Thes.3:16; 1Pet.1:2).

The way forward is challenging and often difficult, but therein lies true happiness in the Lord and the satisfaction of doing a good job for Him. Those who successfully complete boot camp always experience a great measure of pride and personal satisfaction, whereas those who "wash out" will always regret it. Happily for believers, as long as we are still alive on this earth the Lord always takes us back, and is always ready to have us get back into the training regime (even if we have to spend a little bit of time in the "brig" in the process).

(20) And [so the prodigal son] got up and returned to his father. But while he was still some distance away, his father caught sight of him and was filled with compassion. And he ran toward him and fell upon his neck and kissed him. (21) And his son said to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son. Make me as one of your hired servants." (22) But his father said to his servants, "Quick! Bring a fine suit of clothes and put it on him, and put a signet ring on his hand and shoes on his feet. (23) And bring the fatted calf. Butcher it so that we may eat and celebrate. (24) For this son of mine was dead and has [now] come back to life. He was lost, but he has been found." And they began to celebrate.
Luke 15:20-24

So, you have been born again and you are now (finally) serious about carrying through on your commitment to please Jesus Christ, your commanding officer (2Tim.2:4). What next? First, it must be emphasized that it is impossible to please Him without faith (Heb.11:6). Faith is the counterpart of truth, and these two are the essentials of the Christian life. Just as we needed the truth of the gospel – and needed to believe it – to be saved, so we need all manner of biblical truth to grow spiritually, not only seeking it out and learning it, but believing it as well. Spiritual progress in passing the tests of life along the high road to Zion likewise requires truth, truth in our hearts put there by the Spirit through our faith in its veracity, and now aggressively applied to the circumstance of life we face in complete faith that this truth *is* true, and is more real than anything we may see with these fleshly eyes or hear from the devil's world. Once we have made

putting the truth first both in learning it and applying it in faith habitual, we will be called upon by the Lord to help others do the same – by directly providing truth to them in one fashion or another (in evangelism, or teaching, or encouragement, or standing up for the truth, e.g.) or indirectly through our support of a ministry which is doing so (through giving, or helping, or administering, or otherwise aiding, e.g.). These three functions overlap, as we have said already several times, but this progression is the essential Christian life lived as it should be lived – in order to be rewarded at the judgment seat of Christ.

Now without faith, it is impossible to please [God]. For whoever wishes to draw nearer to God must believe that He exists, and that He will reward those who earnestly seek Him.

Hebrews 11:6

(24) By faith, Moses, when he grew up, refused to be called the son of Pharaoh's daughter, (25) and chose instead to suffer maltreatment with the people of God rather than to enjoy the transitory pleasures of sin, because he considered the reproach [suffered on behalf] of Christ greater riches than the treasure vaults of Egypt. (26) For he was looking to his reward.

Hebrews 11:24-26

Given that the level of our eternal reward rides on the issue of spiritual growth – since there can be no production without spiritual progress and no progress without growth – studying the process here in some detail will not be out of place.

1. The Water of the Word

(5) Jesus responded, "Truly, truly I tell you, that unless a person is born from water and Spirit, he is not able to enter into the kingdom of God.

John 3:5

Without literal water, physical life is impossible. Likewise, without the truth, there can be no spiritual life. For that reason, as in the passage above, scripture often compares the Word of God and the truth thereof to water on account of its life-giving and life-sustaining properties. In the passage above, salvation requires the person hearing the gospel – the truth or "water of the Word" made understandable by the Holy Spirit – to receive said truth through faith. When he/she does, the person in question is born again by the life-giving water of truth and the ministry of the Spirit in effecting the new birth wherein the believer becomes spiritually alive.

(5) Other seed fell on rocky ground, where it did not have much soil, and immediately it sprang up, since it had no depth of soil. (6) And when the sun rose, it was scorched, and since it had no root, it withered away (lit., "dried out").

Mark 4:5-6 ESV

As at salvation, so in spiritual growth, the life-giving power of the truth, the water of the Word, is

essential. In cases where the "faith plant" is not nourished with the water of the Word, faith cannot withstand the pressures of life and will be scorched by tribulation and wither away, dried out from lack of any truth held fast in the heart by faith – just as a seedling will quickly wither without sufficient watering. Apostasy, the situation depicted in this part of the parable of the Sower, is the complete loss of faith . . . in the truth. And the fundamental truth is the gospel by which we are saved. Losing faith in all truth, including the truth of Jesus Christ, His Person and His work in dying for us on the cross, results in the believer reverting to the status of an unbeliever: i.e., apostasy. Conversely, drinking in the water of the Word results in the growth of the plant of faith when planted in "good soil", that is, believers with a receptive heart. For growth, the soil must be good (willingness to receive the truth), but the truth, the water of the Word, must also actually be received. For this reason, receptiveness (or lack thereof) is usually the issue when this water-metaphor is used in scripture: in order to benefit from all of the wonderful truth God has made available to us in the Bible, we have to be willing to seek out and accept "the water of the Word" in a humble and receptive way (Jas.1:21; cf. Ps.19:2 [Heb.]; 42:3; 68:26; 84:6; 87:7; 107:35; 110:7; Is.8:6; 11:9b; 35:6-7; 41:17-18; 44:3-4; Jer.2:13; 17:13; Ezek.47:8-12; Zech.13:1; Eph.5:26; Tit.3:5; Heb.6:7-8; 1Pet.3:21 [Gk.]).

(8) They are abundantly satisfied with the fullness of Your house, and You give them drink from the river of Your pleasures. (9) For with You is the fountain of life; In Your light we see light.

Psalm 36:8-9 NKJV

You, God, are my God, earnestly I seek you; I thirst for you, my whole being longs for you, in a dry and parched land where there is no water.

Psalm 63:1 NIV

You will joyously draw water from the fountains of salvation.

Isaiah 12:3

Ho, everyone who thirsts, let him come to the waters!

Isaiah 55:1

(13) Jesus answered and said to her, "Whoever drinks of this water will thirst again, (14) but whoever drinks of the water that I shall give him will never thirst. But the water that I shall give him will become in him a fountain of water springing up into everlasting life."

John 4:13-14 NKJV

And Jesus said to them, "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 NKJV

(38) "The one who believes in Me as the scripture has said [to do], out of his belly will flow streams of living water". (39) [Jesus] said this about the [Holy] Spirit (i.e., the One who illuminates the life-giving "water of truth") which those who believe in Him were

destined to receive: [at that point, however,] the Spirit had not yet [being poured out in Spirit baptism], because Jesus had not yet been glorified.

John 7:38-39

I planted the seed, Apollos watered it, but God has been making it grow.

1st Corinthians 3:6 NIV

And all of them (i.e., the Exodus generation) drank the same spiritual drink (i.e., divinely provided water symbolizing the truth in which one believes). For all of them drank from the spiritual[ly significant] Rock which followed them – for that Rock was Christ.

1st Corinthians 10:4

(16) They will neither hunger nor thirst again, nor will the sun beat down upon them nor any burning [heat], (17) because the Lamb who is in the midst of the throne will shepherd them and will lead them to fountains of living water (lit., "fountains of waters of life"), and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes".

Revelation 7:16-17

And the Spirit and the bride say "Come!" And let the one who hears say, "Come!" And let the one who is thirsty come; let the one who wishes take the water of life without cost.

Revelation 22:17

On the other hand, a drought of this quintessential, life-giving substance, the water of the Word, occasioned by a corresponding lack of willingness to receive it, results in spiritual dryness, withering, and, in extreme cases (as in the case of the seed planted on the resistant, stony ground in the parable of the Sower) spiritual death.

(10) "Your mother was like a vine in your bloodline, planted by the waters, fruitful and full of branches because of many waters. (11) She had strong branches for scepters of rulers. She towered in stature above the thick branches, and was seen in her height amid the dense foliage. (12) But she was plucked up in fury, she was cast down to the ground, and the east wind dried her fruit. Her strong branches were broken and withered; the fire consumed them. (13) And now she is planted in the wilderness, in a dry and thirsty land. (14) Fire has come out from a rod of her branches and devoured her fruit, so that she has no strong branch— a scepter for ruling." This is a lamentation, and has become a lamentation.

Ezekiel 19:10-14 NKJV

But for those who not only receive the seed of the gospel with joy but also eagerly nourish it with the water of truth, what starts out small may eventually become enormous, filling the entire heart of the person in question with all the wonders of the hidden treasures of the truth of the Word of God (cf. Prov.2:1-5; Sng.7:13; Is.33:6; Matt.13:52; 1Cor.2:9-10).

Then He said, "What is the kingdom of God like? And to what shall I compare it? (19) It

is like a mustard seed, which a man took and put in his garden; and it grew and became a large tree, and the birds of the air nested in its branches."

Luke 8:18-19 NKJV (cf. Matt.13:31-32; Mk.4:30-32)

2. The Centrality of the Word of God to the Christian Life

I will worship toward Your holy temple, And praise Your name For Your lovingkindness and Your truth; For You have magnified Your word above all Your name.

Psalms 138:2 NKJV (cf. Mk.9:7)

It should really come as no surprise that the Father has "magnified" the Word above even His hallowed Name, because it is only through that Word that a person may come to Him (Jn.14:26), that is, through Jesus Christ who is the Word: the living Word, the Word of life (Jn.1:1-3; 1:14; 1Jn.1:1).

And He was clothed in a cloak splattered with blood, and His Name stands [forever]:
"The Word of God".

Revelation 19:13

Scripture is thus about Jesus Christ in an absolutely intrinsic and integrated way (Jn.5:39; Heb.1:1-4); scripture is the very "thinking" of Christ, of Him who is the Word of God.

For who has known the mind of the Lord, that he might instruct Him? But we possess the very mind of Christ (i.e. the Holy Spirit illuminating the scriptures which are Christ's very thinking).

1st Corinthians 2:16

For this reason, that is, the oneness of Jesus Christ, the truth, and the Word, the importance of the Bible and the truth it contains cannot possibly be emphasized enough.

"This book of the law shall not depart from your mouth, but you shall meditate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to do according to all that is written in it; for then you will make your way prosperous, and then you will have success."

Joshua 1:8 NASB

Thy Word is a lamp unto my feet, and a light unto my path.

Psalms 119:105 KJV

Search the scriptures (since you assume by how you read them that you have eternal life)!
These are the very scriptures that bear testimony about Me.

John 5:39

All scripture is inspired by God and useful for teaching, for admonishing, for correcting, and for training in righteousness.

2nd Timothy 3:16

For the Word of God is living and powerful; it is sharper than any two-edged sword, penetrating even to the point of being able to divide the spirit from its earthly life and the marrow from its bones; [for] it (i.e., the Word when resident in our conscience empowered by the Spirit) acts as a judge of our heart's intentions and emotions.

Hebrews 4:12

(18) And these words I myself heard as they were delivered from heaven, for I was with Him on the holy mountain (i.e., the Transfiguration; cf. Matt.17:1-8). (19) Yet I consider the prophetically inspired Word (i.e. the Bible) even more reliable (i.e., than what I saw with my own eyes). You too would do well to pay the closest attention to this [prophetically inspired Word], just as to a lamp shining in a dark place (cf. Ps.119:105), until the day dawns, and the Morning Star rises (i.e. the Living Word, Jesus Christ, returns).

2nd Peter 1:18-19

Therefore, every believer needs to maintain a deep respect and appreciation for scriptures and all of the truth which the Bible contains, for it is only through the Bible and its truth that we may know anything whatsoever about the Lord we love and remain here on earth to serve. Walking with Christ requires knowing about Him, His holy thoughts; and everything we are meant to know while in this world is contained in His holy Word.

The unfolding of your words gives light; it gives understanding to the simple.

Psalms 119:130 NIV

For the precepts [of your Word] are a lamp, and your teaching is a light.

And the corrections [provided by your] instruction are the way of life.

Proverbs 6:23

"I entrust you to God and to the Word of His grace which is able to build you up and give you your inheritance among all those who have been sanctified."

Acts 20:32

And because of this we also give thanks to God continually, because, when you received the word of hearing from us, you received it not as the word of men, but as it really is, **the Word of God** – the very Word which is at work inside of you **as you believe it**.

1st Thessalonians 2:13

Therefore cast aside all [moral] filthiness and effluence of evil, and in humility [continue to] **receive the Word** implanted in you, for it is able to save your [eternal] lives.

James 1:21

What we have seen from the beginning, what we have heard and seen with our eyes, what we have observed and touched with our hands – this is about the Word of life[, Jesus Christ].

1st John 1:1 (cf. Jn.1:1-4; 1:14)

For the Bible is "the perfect" through which – that is, through attention to the truth it contains – the entire plan of God for every believer is being accomplished in this world. It is through this perfect provision of God's truth that believers are perfected in maturity (see section 7 below).

But when what is complete shall have come on the scene (i.e., the completed Bible available to a mature Church), all partial measures shall be done away with.
1st Corinthians 13:10

3. The Virtuous Circle of Spiritual Growth

Rather than being a straight line progression, the Christian life properly lived resembles more a cycle of virtuous behavior wherein each believer is ever learning more truth, ever developing a greater and deeper faith, ever walking closer with the Lord day by day, becoming wiser, more consistent in the correct application of the truth, and, finally, ever more productive for the Lord in the carrying out of whatever ministry He has in store (and our Lord Jesus does have one in store for all who are willing to engage with it: 1Cor.12:5; cf. Jn.15:8; Gal.6:9; Eph.2:10). Naturally – all too "naturally" – as possessors of a sin nature not even the most enthusiastic and dedicated believers manage such progress without their share of bumps and lumps, and of twists and turns. But if we do persevere in this process in this correct way, we will make good progress and accomplish the purpose the Lord has for our lives. Therefore, all believers should . . .

1) Seek out sound and solid Bible teaching and persistently drink in the truth provided thereby.

(11) Christ Himself appointed some of us apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers (12) in order to prepare all of His holy people for their own ministry work, that the entire body of Christ might thus be built up, (13) until we all reach that unifying [goal] of belief in and full-knowledge of the Son of God, that each of us might be a perfect person, that is, that we might attain to that standard of maturity of the fullness of Christ; (14) that we may no longer be immature, swept off-course and carried headlong by every breeze of so-called teaching that emanates from the trickery of men in their readiness to do anything to cunningly work their deceit, (15) but rather that we may, **by embracing the truth in love**, grow up in all respects with Christ, who is the head of the Church, as our model. (16) In this way, the entire body of the Church, fit and joined together by Him through the sinews He powerfully supplies to each and every part, works out its own growth for the building up of itself in love.
Ephesians 4:11-16

2) Read our Bibles aggressively.

Now the [Bereans] were more honorable in character than the people of Thessalonika, for they received the Word with great enthusiasm, while examining the scriptures for verification of what [they were being taught].
Acts 17:11

3) Pray consistently.

I exhort therefore, that, first of all, supplications, prayers, intercessions, and giving of thanks, be made for all men.

1st Timothy 2:1 KJV

Let us therefore come boldly to the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy and find grace to help in time of need.

Hebrews 4:16 NKJV

4) Walk righteously.

He leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for his name's sake.

Psalms 23:3b KJV

He Himself bore our sins in His body on the tree, in order that we might die to sins and live to righteousness. By His wound you are healed.

1st Peter 2:24

5) Serve faithfully.

(10) For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for [the purpose of accomplishing] good works, which [very works] God has prepared ahead of time for us, that we might walk in them (i.e., live our Christian lives in the accomplishment of them).
Ephesians 2:10

For those who have served well as deacons (i.e., "servants") obtain for themselves a good standing and great boldness in the faith which is in Christ Jesus.

1st Timothy 3:13 NKJV

In doing these things consistently "you will never stumble" (2Pet.1:10).

4. Bible Teaching

(11) Christ Himself appointed some of us apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers (12) in order to prepare all of His holy people for their own ministry work, that the entire body of Christ might thus be built up, (13) until we all reach that unifying [goal] of belief in and full-knowledge of the Son of God, that each of us might be a perfect person, that is, that we might attain to that standard of maturity of the fullness of Christ; (14) that we may no longer be immature, swept off-course and carried headlong by every breeze of so-called teaching that emanates from the trickery of men in their readiness to do anything to cunningly work their deceit, (15) but rather that we may, by embracing the truth in love, grow up in all respects with Christ, who is the head of the Church, as our model. (16) In this way, the entire body of the Church, fit and joined

together by Him through the sinews He powerfully supplies to each and every part, works out its own growth for the building up of itself in love.
Ephesians 4:11-16

In order not to be "swept off-course and carried headlong" by the false teaching that has always been ubiquitous in the Church Age as the devil resists might and main all serious spiritual advance (Eph.4:14), "the truth" must be embraced (Eph.4:15). Christ has for this reason assigned various teaching ministries in His Church and has appointed qualified men to carry them out (Eph.4:11), to the end that every believer might be "perfect" (Eph.4:13), that is, rise to the standard of "maturity" that accords with His own example accomplished as a true human being here on earth, for He is "our model" in this as in all things (Eph.4:15). That absolutely essential "truth" is contained in scripture, but can only be extracted past a certain basic point by those who are gifted, prepared and appointed so as to be able to do so. And it is only by giving heed to such ministries that His "holy people" can become "prepared" for "their own ministry work" (Eph.4:12); it is only in this way that "the entire body of Christ might thus be built up" (Eph.4:12; 4:16) and that all might "reach that unifying [goal] of belief in and full-knowledge of the Son of God" (Eph.4:13).

The truth is the key to all this – the truth, that is, properly understood and taught in depth by those gifted, prepared and appointed to do so. For while there are many who willing in their "trickery" to disseminate "so-called teaching" which is in fact false out of a desire "to do anything to cunningly work their deceit" (Eph.4:14), gaining disciples, money, fame, power, and worldly glory thereby, the mature believer who clings to the truth truly taught will not fall victim to such guile, but will, through attention to the Bible as it is explained and explicated by a good teaching ministry, contribute to the virtuous cycle of the corporate Body of Christ wherein we all, being "fit and joined together by Him" and empowered by Him to as to supply what is needed "to each and every part" aid in the process whereby the Church "works out its own growth for the building up of itself in love" (Eph.4:16).

In addition the fundamental point of the need for the truth and its substantive teaching for growth to occur, the passage above, Ephesians 4:11-16, also makes it quite clear that thinking about teaching ministries as somehow "independent" and those who give heed to them as "merely consumers" is entirely incorrect. The analogy inherent in the name "Body of Christ" necessitates – as the passage above clearly teaches – that we are all part of each other in this godly process. The teacher needs those who are taught as much as the other way around. Through prayer, through financial support, through administrative help, through evangelism for the ministry and from the ministry, through outreach, through mutual encouragement, and through a multifarious variety of ways that are as kaleidoscopically varied as the combination of spiritual gifts the Spirit gives we are all "fit and joined together by Him" so that we may collectively as a Body "work out our own growth for the building up of our collective selves in love". Entering into allegiance with a Bible teaching ministry is thus not a consumption choice but a serious decision which will have all manner of consequences going forward. To the extent that the ministry is good and given good heed, good consequences will result, but to the extent that it is not up to par or not paid proper attention even if it is, less so – and the ramifications affect the Body as a whole either

way.

Immediately many gathered together, so that there was no longer room to receive them, not even near the door. And He preached the Word to them.

Mark 2:2 NKJV

Then He went out again by the sea; and all the multitude came to Him, and He taught them.

Mark 2:13 NKJV

What would Jesus do? We know what He *did* do: He taught the Word of God to all who would listen, and He commended those who did:

(32) And a multitude was sitting around Him; and they said to Him, "Look, Your mother and Your brothers are outside seeking You." (33) But He answered them, saying, "Who is My mother, or My brothers?" (34) And He looked around in a circle at those who sat about Him, and said, "Here are My mother and My brothers! (35) For whoever does the will of God is My brother and My sister and mother."

Mark 3:32-35 NKJV

And what is the will of God as seem from this passage but responding as these individuals did to the teaching of the Son of God? Indeed, in order to follow, know, serve, and glorify the Living Word the teaching of the written Word is absolutely essential. If our Lord were present today, we would of course throng to His teaching. But He has left that duty in the hands of others until His return, those specifically gifted to teach, those who have prepared themselves to teach, those who have been placed into a ministry of teaching by the Lord Himself (1Cor.12:5; Eph.4:7; 4:11). And our Lord has done so in order that we may learn the truth so as to grow in the truth, follow the truth, and minister in support of the truth. For it is only through the truth we have actually learned and believed that such spiritual growth, progress and production is possible (Col.1:9-10; Heb.6:1).

And because of this we also give thanks to God continually, because, when you received the word of hearing from us, you received it not as the word of men, but as it really is, the Word of God – the very Word which is at work inside of you *as you believe it*.

1st Thessalonians 2:13

Before we were saved, we needed to hear the gospel, the truth of the kingdom and the promise of life eternal in Jesus Christ, in order to be saved. We did hear it, we did respond in faith, and we were born again as a result. The same process, the same procedure obtains now that we are saved:

But with respect to the progress you have made, keep on advancing in the same way!

Philippians 3:16

(6) So then, exactly as you [originally] received Christ Jesus as [your] Lord, be walking in Him [in the very same way], (7) rooted and built up in him, established in the faith just as you were taught, overflowing with thanksgiving.

Colossians 2:6-7

The question is not whether we are responsible as Christians after salvation to find a good teaching minister so that we may grow – indeed we are. But since our Lord is not presently on earth doing the teaching Himself, the problem for Christians today, especially in our era of Laodicea where genuine, orthodox, substantive Bible teaching is short supply and little demand, is how to discern the good from the bad? In actual practice, the "fruit test" our Lord gave us will quickly distinguish – for any believer who is really interested in the truth – genuinely good ministries from truly insufficient or bad ones. But there are certain characteristics to keep in mind which will make this task easier. These may not be determinative in all cases, but they are worth considering:

1) Money. Does the ministry/teacher obsess over money and contributions? If so, that is a negative sign as it gives an indication that the true priority is not the spiritual growth of the congregation.

2) The Cross. Does the ministry/teacher put the sacrifice of Jesus Christ at the heart of the teaching? If not, that is a troubling sign, because everything – the entire plan of God – is based upon what Jesus did for us in dying for our sins.

3) The Bible. Does the ministry/teacher emphasize the scriptures over traditional "doctrines" or "theology"? A good Bible teaching ministry will start with scripture and will strive to show that the Bible actually supports all positions taught, whether great or small, and will also attempt to demonstrate how it does so in ways that any Christian ought to be able to understand – and only move to principles from the clear statements of scripture. If the ministry only gives lip-service to scripture, it will not be of any help in growing up spiritually.

4) Responsiveness. Does the ministry/teacher entertain questions? No genuine Bible ministry/teacher ought to back away from anything truly believed because of questions from the congregation (exactly the opposite in fact), but it is the case that those who are in the process of committing to or have already committed to a given ministry have a right to expect an explanation in cases where they may be worried about errors or mistakes or have other legitimate concerns. Honest questions have a right to a hearing.

5) Independence of Conscience. When it comes to applying the truth to life, it is often the case of taking principles of truth and applying them to complicated situations. Therefore the Christian life needs to be inflexible about the truth but flexible in the application of truth to non-critical issues. This is because in large part "the right thing to do" often has as much to do with where the individual Christian is "at" spiritually at any given time as it does about the details of doctrinal application (cf. Rom.14:1-23). In ancient Israel, God gave the Israelites the Urim and Thummim as "the means of making decisions" (Ex.28:30). From this we may conclude that

there are many "judgment calls" to be made in life. Instead of Levitical priests, all believers are now priests with direct access to the Father because of our position in the ultimate High Priest, Jesus Christ. Instead of Urim and Thummim, we have the Holy Spirit who guides us through the truth of the Word of God which we have placed not over but directly into our hearts, and it is our responsibility before the Lord to navigate the difficult circumstances of our lives through that truth as the Spirit uses it to guide us. What this all means is that a genuine ministry/teacher will give the Christian learning under its/his teaching the means to grow (truth then believed and applied in the Spirit), but will never seek to micro-manage individual decisions. Any ministry/teacher, therefore, which/who seeks to intrude into the lives of its congregants so as to make the believer in question "accountable" to that ministry/teacher instead of directly to the Lord is to be avoided at all costs. For we believer priests are accountable to the Lord (Rom.14:4). Demanding accountability to other people is cult behavior.

6) Substance. The proof, as ever, is in the pudding. If a ministry/teacher really is providing good, solid teaching in sufficient quantity and depth, that will be apparent early on – as will the lack thereof. In our late day, such ministries are in fact very rare and to be treasured when discovered. If no true teaching is being done, or if it is so narrow in scope or small in volume that growth is unlikely, that is the most negative indication of all. But if a place is found where the teaching is, if not enjoyable, demonstrably beneficial, that is precisely what a person who wants to grow ought to seek out.

"And now I entrust you to God and to *the Word* of His grace, *which Word has the ability to build you up* (i.e., edify you spiritually) and give you your inheritance among all those who are sanctified."

Acts 20:32

5. Bible Teacher

While the gift of pastor-teacher has already been discussed (in BB 5: Pneumatology), and the proper functioning of that gift and office in support of the edification of the Body of Christ will be discussed in the next part of this series (BB 6B: Ecclesiology), it is appropriate here to say a few words about and examine a few scriptures which speak to the role of the man doing the Bible teaching in any fellowship, congregation, organization or "church" (which is, biblically speaking, any assembly of believers in Jesus Christ).

We have made the point in earlier studies that God's truth has always been and always will be the same. The *form* it comes in may be different, depending on the means He has chosen to "dispense" it at any given time in the historical plan of God (the true biblical meaning of "dispensations"). So, for example, before the cross there was no New Testament available precisely because Christ had not yet been revealed in person and the cross had not yet become a historical reality, though His Person and His work were foreshadowed in every divinely ordained animal sacrifice (e.g., the lamb without spot or blemish being slaughtered and burned representing the Lamb of God rising in the flames of spiritual death to wash away our sins with His "blood", the death He died in the darkness to propitiate every single sin of all mankind).

Likewise, the *manner* in which truth has been dispensed has not always been the same. In the Millennium, we are told that "the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea" (Is.11:9 NIV; cf. Hab.2:14). We can only imagine that this will mean no dearth or lack of the truth which will flow forth from a variety of sources, perhaps even with resurrected Church Age believers participating as teachers in the Kingdom of the Messiah (cf. also Joel 2:28-29). And before the establishment of the Levitical priesthood, whose role was to teach the truth through the Law and the temple rite, the Lord inspired the patriarchs of believing families, even speaking to them audibly and personally (e.g., to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob . . . and even to the unbeliever Cain: Gen.4:26). After our Lord's personal ministry (wherein the Word Himself provided God's truth: Heb.1:1-2a), during the transition from Age of Israel to Age of the Church, apostles (in conjunction with the dispensation of sign gifts such as prophecy and tongues) were the primary means God used to dispense His truth to the world, and through them the Spirit wrote the New Testament. In that brief period, there were also evangelists and pastor-teachers, as there are today, but today we no longer have apostles (nor any such special gifts which provide the Word directly). The gift of evangelism today continues to empower men so gifted in their role of spreading the gospel to unbelievers. For the Church itself, however, the teaching of the Word of God today is primarily the province of the pastor-teacher. What that means is that there can be no effective Bible teaching ministry without a man possessing this gift, and it also means that no believer can make any serious spiritual headway without giving heed to a ministry so constituted. Without a pastor-teacher, the progress in spiritual growth a believer can make is necessarily limited. If this were not the case, the gift and the scriptural injunctions to honor it would not be so pronounced.

And as to those whom God has appointed [as officers] in the Church, [He appointed] apostles first [in rank], second prophets, third teachers . . .
1st Corinthians 12:28a

. . . God has composed the human body in such a way as to give greater honor to the parts that are in short supply (analogous to teaching gifts).
1st Corinthians 12:24b

(11) Christ Himself appointed some of us apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers (12) in order to prepare all of His holy people for their own ministry work, that the entire body of Christ might thus be built up.
Ephesians 4:11-12

(12) Now we ask you, brothers and sisters, to acknowledge those who work hard among you, who care for you in the Lord and who admonish you. (13) Hold them in the highest regard in love because of their work.
1st Thessalonians 5:12-13a NIV

Let those elders who lead well be held worthy of double honor, especially those who labor in the Word and in teaching.
1st Timothy 5:17

Obey those who rule over you, and be submissive, for they watch out for your souls, as those who must give account. Let them do so with joy and not with grief, for that would be unprofitable for you.

Hebrews 13:17 NKJV

Unlike many religions, cults, and questionable "Christian" churches, it is not being suggested here that allegiance be granted to any Bible teacher or ministry without proper vetting, nor is it being suggested that respect and loyalty are not things which have to be earned – for scripture certainly indicates that they must be. Properly appreciated, the job of pastor teacher is a great responsibility which needs to be prepared for and carried out with all due diligence and humility (1Cor.4:1; Gal.2:7; 1Thes.2:4; 1Tim.1:11; 6:20; Tit.1:3).

(16) For if I proclaim the gospel (i.e., the whole realm of kingdom truth), that is no basis for boasting since the necessity of doing so lies upon me – and woe to me if I do not proclaim it! (17) Now if I do this willingly, I do have a reward [to look forward to], but [even] if unwillingly, I still have a duty which has been entrusted to me to dispense [the truth].

1st Corinthians 9:16-17

It is critical to understand, therefore, that pastor-teachers are not "specially privileged people", rather they are specially *responsible* to the Lord:

(25) Jesus called them together and said, "You know that the rulers of the Gentiles Lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. (26) Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, (27) and whoever wants to be first must be your slave – (28) just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many."

Matthew 20:25-28 NIV

Pastor-teachers are the "good stewards" of the truth of the Word of God – or should be – bringing forth from the Bible and from the truths entrusted to them "things old and new" for the edification of Christ's Body (Matt.13:52). This is an awesome responsibility, as Paul certainly knew:

(1) Let [every] man evaluate us this way, namely, as servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God. (2) Now what you are looking for in stewards, moreover, is that one be found who is faithful [to the Lord] (i.e., and therefore worthy of one's trust).

1st Corinthians 4:1-2

(10) For we must all stand before Christ's tribunal, so that each of us may receive recompense for what he has accomplished through this body, whether it be good or worthless. (11) Therefore since we know the fear of the Lord, while we attempt to persuade men, God sees us entirely for what we [truly] are – and I trust that what we [truly] are is equally clear to your consciences.

2nd Corinthians 5:10-11

For this reason, the scriptures which delineate the parameters of the pastor-teacher's job emphasize most heavily the *responsibility* he bears toward the Lord to do it right:

(13) Until I come, devote yourself to [public] reading [of the scriptures], to encouragement [through the Word], to the teaching [of the Word]. (14) Do not neglect the [spiritual] gift [of pastor-teacher] which belongs to you and which was given to you [by the Spirit], [and which was proclaimed] through prophecy [and recognized] by the laying on of the hands of the elders. (15) Be diligent in these things (i.e., studying and teaching the Word). Make them your primary concern so that your spiritual progress may be evident to all. (16) Apply them (i.e., the truths you learn) to yourself and to your teaching. Stick [faithfully] to them. For in so doing you will bring yourself and those who heed you safely home.

1st Timothy 4:13-16

Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a worker who does not need to be ashamed and who correctly handles the Word of truth.

2Ti 2:15 NIV

But as for you – model yourself on my teaching, my methodology, my plan of action, my faith, my endurance, my love, my perseverance . . .

2nd Timothy 3:10

Proclaim the Word! Keep at it, whether circumstances are favorable or not! Reprove, rebuke, [and] encourage with all patience [in your] teaching!

2nd Timothy 4:2

(7) In everything set them an example by doing what is good. In your teaching show integrity, seriousness (8) and soundness of speech that cannot be condemned, so that those who oppose you may be ashamed because they have nothing bad to say about us.

Titus 2:7-8 NIV

(10) As each one has received a [particular spiritual] gift, [so let us be] ministering it to each other as good stewards of the multi-faceted grace of God. (11) If anyone communicates, let him do so as if he were speaking words directly from God.

1st Peter 4:10-11a

In short, a truly good pastor-teacher will be one who is eager to fulfill our Lord's thrice-given command to Peter to "feed My sheep" (Jn.21:15-17), providing them day by day with the spiritual nutrition necessary to grow, progress and produce for the Lord. More than credentials (which are important), more than experience (which is also important), and certainly more than personality, that consistency is the key quality and essential characteristic which someone really wanting to grow in Jesus Christ should search out when looking for a prospective pastor-teacher: love for the Lord manifest in love for His flock demonstrated by providing for their true spiritual

needs.

(36) When he saw the crowds, he had compassion on them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. (37) Then he said to his disciples, "The harvest is plentiful but the workers are few. (38) Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest field."

Matthew 9:36-38 NIV

(42) Jesus called them together and said, "You know that those who are regarded as rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them.

(43) Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, (44) and whoever wants to be first must be slave of all. (45) For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many."

Mark 10:42-45 NIV (cf. Matt.9:33-37)

He said to him the third time, "Simon, son of Jonah, do you love Me?" Peter was grieved because He said to him the third time, "Do you love Me?" And he said to Him, "Lord, You know all things; You know that I love You." Jesus said to him, "Feed My sheep".

John 21:17 NKJV

(6) We were not looking for praise from people, not from you or anyone else, even though as apostles of Christ we could have asserted our authority. (7) Instead, we were like young children among you. Just as a nursing mother cares for her children, (8) so we cared for you. Because we loved you so much, we were delighted to share with you not only the gospel of God but our lives as well. (9) Surely you remember, brothers and sisters, our toil and hardship; we worked night and day in order not to be a burden to anyone while we preached the gospel of God to you.

1st Thessalonians 2:6-9 NIV

(1) To the elders among you, I appeal as a fellow elder and a witness of Christ's sufferings who also will share in the glory to be revealed: (2) Be shepherds of God's flock that is under your care, watching over them—not because you must, but because you are willing, as God wants you to be; not pursuing dishonest gain, but eager to serve; (3) not lording it over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock.

1st Peter 5:1-3 NIV

6. The Holy Spirit and the Truth (epistemology and *epignosis*)

Just as the ministry of the Holy Spirit is essential to be saved – He is the One who makes the truth of the gospel understandable in the heart of the unbeliever – so also His ministry is essential for spiritual growth (Phil.3:16; Col.2:6-7): believers have need not only to hear the truth but also to have it converted in their hearts by the Spirit when they believe it from mere information that means little in spiritual terms into "full knowledge" (*epignosis*), truth that has been appropriated by faith in the heart and is thereafter usable to us in how we think and act and speak – and it is

the Spirit who does the converting *when we believe what we hear when it actually is true.*

(28) Then they asked him, "What must we do to do the works God requires?" (29) Jesus answered, "The work of God is this: to believe in the One He has sent."

John 6:28-29 NIV

True faith is the "work" God requires for salvation, that is, an acceptance and commitment of heart to the truth of Jesus Christ as the way of salvation. It is this change of heart that leads to the new birth by the Spirit of God wherein our spirit is given by Him to see the truth unimpeded by the sin nature (whereas by way of contrast "hardness of heart" is the complete subordination of the spirit to the flesh). As at salvation, so in our Christian lives thereafter. Truth cannot be understood or appreciated by unbelievers (1Cor.2:14); but we believers have the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit, and it is through His ministry that the truth we hear *when we believe it* is converted to usable information in our hearts, *epignosis* or "full knowledge" which is not merely intellectually appreciated but fully digested by our spirits through the Spirit so as to be able to act upon that truth in a godly way.

Thus the Christian life after salvation is not an intellectual struggle but a moral one. Even the least mentally gifted believer can learn the truth through the Spirit's ministry, whereas even the most gifted intellectual unbeliever cannot truly "understand" anything of God's truth – because such things are "foolish to him" (1Cor.2:14), not being made perspicuous to his spirit by the Spirit. The only category of truth the Spirit ministers to the unbeliever is the gospel – because of course that is the entrepôt into the Christian life. But believers are assisted by the Spirit in learning and understanding the entire realm of biblical truth. All that is needed is the willingness to expose oneself to that truth and the willingness to believe it when heard and understood through the Spirit. That is the true process of Christian "learning", a supernatural one which short-circuits all the philosophical problems of epistemology and every hindrance of the sin nature. For while unbelievers may have as much *gnosis* as they are gifted to receive and determined to learn, only the believer in Jesus Christ can possess *epignosis* in the heart, a genuine understanding of God's truth made real and vital through the ministry of the Holy Spirit.²

7. The Result of the Process: Spiritual Maturity

Not all who are "in Christ" are spiritually mature. Just as following physical birth human beings need to grow up before being fit to do all the things an adult needs to do, so following our spiritual re-birth we are not instantaneously ready to bear the testing that the Christian life brings nor help others in the Body of Christ through the proper implementation of our spiritual gifts. But by consistently applying ourselves to the Word of truth, reading it, hearing it taught, believing the truth and applying it more and more consistently to our lives day by day so as to do

² For more details on this process, please see part 5 of the *Bible Basics* series, "Pneumatology" (particularly section II.B.3.b, "The Teaching Ministry of the Spirit"); and section I.7, "The Judgment and Reward of the Church", in part 6 of the *Coming Tribulation* series.

all the things we are instructed to do, all believers can and are certainly meant to grow to spiritual maturity.

Now grow up through the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.
2nd Peter 3:18

While physical maturity is a natural process, even here growth will be stunted without proper nutrition, proper physical exercise, and an education which is moral as well as factual. Spiritual maturity is not something that happens as a matter of course. It too requires nutrition (the truth of the Word of God), exercise (experience in applying truth to one's daily life in a correct way, passing small tests at first to build up to the larger challenges of the Christian life which follow), and training (the discipline which God provides as a loving Father to help us keep moving in the right direction). If we respond to the Lord's desire for us to grow in the correct way, moreover, spiritual maturity can be attained much more rapidly than physical maturity; but if we fail to respond, we may never become spiritually mature, not even if we spend decades "in the faith".³ Sadly, in our present era of Laodicea, the latter situation is much more common than the former.³ But make no mistake: the attainment of spiritual maturity is what our Lord expects from each and everyone of us as the first and necessary stage in the running of our Christian race.

(12) [It is] not that I have already gotten [what I am striving for], nor that I have already completed [my course]. Rather, I am continuing to pursue [the prize] in hopes of fully acquiring it – [this prize for whose acquisition] I was myself acquired by Christ Jesus. (13) Brethren, I do not consider that I have already acquired it. This one thing only [do I keep in mind]. Forgetting what lies behind me [on the course] and straining towards the [course] ahead, (14) I continue to drive straight for the tape, towards the prize to which God has called us from the beginning [of our race] in Christ Jesus. (15) ***So as many as are [spiritually] mature***, let us have this attitude (i.e., of focusing on our spiritual advance and reward and not getting hung up on what lies behind: vv.13-14), and if in any matter your attitude is off-center, God will reveal that to you (i.e., assuming you are mature and are advancing as you should). (16) But with respect to the progress you have made, keep on advancing in the same way!
Philippians 3:12-16

As this passage makes clear, running the race that pleases Jesus Christ and leads to the highest eternal rewards requires first that we become spiritually mature. Indeed, it is only those who have grown up in Christ who are able to receive the deeper truths of the Word of God.

Yet among the mature we do impart wisdom, although it is not a wisdom of this age or of the rulers of this age, who are doomed to pass away.
1st Corinthians 2:6 ESV

³ See part 2A of the *Coming Tribulation* series, section 7, "Laodicea".

And as in parable of the Sower, spiritual maturity begets spiritual progress the sort of growth that leads to the production of a good crop (Matt.13:1-23; Mk4:1-20; Lk.8:1-15):

"You did not choose Me but I chose you (salvation) and have established you (spiritual growth and maturity from being taught the truth), in order that you may progress (Greek *hypagete*; a reference to spiritual progress – the disciples still had some work to do here) and bear fruit (spiritual production) and that your fruit may remain (fulfillment of earthly ministry for the highest possible eternal rewards), so that whatever you ask the Father in My Name, He will give it to you (highest possible level of functioning in ministry while yet on earth)."

John 15:16

As mentioned above, just as the "Christian job description" as it is related throughout the epistles is one of living a sanctified and sin-free life, even though none of us will ever be completely without sin in this life (1Jn.1:8-10) and few enough of contemporary Christians are walking in a truly holy way, so also just being a Christian is no guarantee of spiritual maturity, regardless of how long a believer has been "in the faith".

But, brothers [and sisters], I could not speak to you as spiritual [people] but as carnal [ones], as if you were [still but] infants in Christ.

1st Corinthians 3:1

As the palpable exasperation in the apostle Paul's tone here makes very clear, spiritual maturity is something which is *expected* of us as believers, despite the fact that it is a rare enough phenomenon in our present lukewarm Church era of Laodicea. This expectation of the "normal" status of believer being "grown up" can be seen from the use above of the word spiritual (*pneumatikos*). A spiritual believer is not just one who has the Spirit as we all do (Rom.8:9), but one who is responding to the leading of the Spirit, something no believer can be effective and consistent in doing before reaching spiritual maturity.

(14) Now the unspiritual man does not receive the [deeper] things of the Spirit of God. For they are foolishness to him and he is not able to understand them because they are appreciated [only] through spiritual means. (15) But the spiritual man does appreciate them all, though he himself is not appreciated [in this regard] by anyone. (16) For [as it says] "Who has known the mind of the Lord? Who will instruct Him?" But we do have the very thinking (lit., "mind") of Christ (i.e., His truth from the Spirit).

1st Corinthians 2:14-16

If anyone thinks himself to be a prophet or spiritual, let him acknowledge that the things which I write to you are the commandments of the Lord.

1st Corinthians 14:37 NKJV

Brothers, if a man is caught in any transgression, you who are spiritual restore such a one with a spirit of humility, watching out for yourselves, lest you too be tempted.

This difference between potential and reality is also to be seen in the most common Greek morpheme used in scripture for spiritual maturity, *tel-* (cf. "teleology"). Words containing this root have to do with completion and are often translated with variations of the English word "perfect", but that should not be taken to mean that any of us is yet perfectly "complete" in our growth. However, given the fact that the Lord Jesus Christ is our role model (1Cor.11:1; Eph.4:13; 1Pet.2:21-25; cf. Matt.16:24; Jn.13:15; Rom.13:14; Phil.2:5), the One whom we are to emulate in our Christian life, pursuing spiritual growth until "Christ is formed in you" (Gal.4:19) and "dwells in your hearts" (Eph.3:17), perfection is certainly the goal.⁴

(28) After [all] this (i.e., our Lord's physical suffering and His spiritual death for the sins of the world), when Jesus knew that everything had now been accomplished (*tetelestai*) in order for the [prophecy of salvation found in] scripture to be fulfilled, He said, "I am thirsty". (29) Now a jar of wine-vinegar lay there, so they placed a sponge full of the wine-vinegar on a hyssop [stalk] and brought it to His mouth. (30) So when He had taken the wine-vinegar, Jesus said, "It (i.e., salvation) has [now] been accomplished!" (*tetelestai*), and having thrown back His head, He gave up His spirit.
John 19:28-30

While we all fall far short of our Lord's perfect accomplishment of His mission – and while ours is but a complement of His – our Lord's final words from the cross serve as the ultimate challenge to complete the task which all believers have been entrusted at salvation, namely, to grow to the point of spiritual maturity as an honor and a proper response to our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

Be perfect (*teleioi*), therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.
Matthew 5:48 NKJV

Jesus answered, "If you want to be perfect (*teleios*), go, sell your possessions and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me."
Matthew 19:21 NKJV

It should go without saying that, try as we should, none of us this side of heaven are going to become perfect as the Father is perfect – but that is the standard, perfection (cf. 1Jn.3:6-9). Likewise, none of us would even be able to survive in this present world without some basic possessions (nor is that the message of the second passage above; cf. Lk.22:36), but the perfect standard is indeed to "follow Christ" with our eyes on our heavenly prize, counting as naught the things of this world (Phil.3:8). And a truly mature believer, though not in fact perfect, will be

⁴ *N.b.*, many versions translate this morpheme, *tel-*, as "mature" rather than "perfect" in order to avoid the obvious disparity between the perfect standard to which we are called and the imperfect reality of our performance, even in the case of spiritually mature believers.

striving with some success to follow the teachings of Christ which precede Matthew 5:48, living in love rather than in selfishness; and a truly mature believer, though not entirely bereft of the things of this world, will be doing his/her best to make use of the resources God has given for the benefit of the Church of Jesus Christ, precisely so as to earn a "well done" from our dear Lord and Master on that great day of days. Though not perfect, the result of spiritual growth is a degree of "perfection" or maturity which distinguishes the believer who has committed him/herself to learning, believing and living the truth from those who have not. We who are mature are clearly not "perfect" in every way, but we press on toward that goal in the love of Jesus Christ and in anticipation, once we have been ultimately "perfected" (Heb.12:23), of being rewarded by Him.

(12) [It is] not that I have already gotten [what I am striving for], nor that I have already completed [my course] (*teteleiomai*). Rather, I am continuing to pursue [the prize] in hopes of fully acquiring it – [this prize for whose acquisition] I was myself acquired by Christ Jesus. (13) Brethren, I do not consider that I have already acquired it. This one thing only [do I keep in mind]. Forgetting what lies behind me [on the course] and straining towards the [course] ahead, (14) I continue to drive straight for the tape, towards the prize to which God has called us from the beginning [of our race] in Christ Jesus. (15) So as many as are [spiritually] **mature** (*teleioi*), let us have this attitude . . .
Philippians 3:12-15a

Since our Lord Jesus Christ perfectly completed His mission of salvation, we who belong to Him have now been given every perfect [spiritual] gift (through the Spirit) and the perfect complete Bible, the Word of truth, so that we may grow to a mature status which reflects the perfection and perfect work of the One who gave His life for us:

(2) Brothers, when you are being beset with all manner of trials, take pains to be joyful. (3) For you should keep in mind that this testing of your faith develops perseverance. (4) So let your perseverance develop fully (*teleion*), that you may become fully mature (*teleioi*) and entitled to a full reward, having been found lacking in no respect.
James 1:2-4 (cf. 1:17: "every perfect gift"; 1:25 "perfect law of liberty")

Do you see that faith was working together with his works, and by works faith was made perfect (*eteleiothe*)?
James 2:22 NKJV

For we all make many [sinful] mistakes (lit., "stumble much", i.e., sin somewhat inadvertently). If anyone avoids [sinful] mistakes in what he says, this person is perfect (*teleios*) [in behavior and thus] able to bridle his whole body.
James 3:2

For it is those who are mature, "perfect" in the sense of having grown to the point of proper functionality in the Christian life (cf. Col.3:14), who can persevere under testing and trials (Jas.1:2-4), who can respond to the tests of life in a courageous and godly way as Abraham and

Rahab did (Jas.2:22), and who are capable of behaving in a sanctified way in this world in spite of the pressures to do otherwise (Jas.3:2).

I in them and You in Me, that they may become perfectly (*teteleiomeno*) one, so that the world may know that You sent Me and loved them even as You loved Me.

John 17:23 ESV

However, we speak wisdom among those who are mature (*teleioi*), yet not the wisdom of this age, nor of the rulers of this age, who are coming to nothing.

1st Corinthians 2:6 NKJV

Brethren, do not be children in understanding; however, in malice be babes, but in understanding be mature (*teleioi*).

1st Corinthians 14:20 NKJV

So as many as are [spiritually] mature (*teleioi*), let us have this attitude (i.e., of focusing on our spiritual advance and reward and not getting hung up on what lies behind: vv.13-14), and if in any matter your attitude is off-center, God will reveal that to you (i.e., assuming you are mature and are advancing as you should).

Philippians 3:15

(27) To them (i.e., believers) God has chosen to make known among the Gentiles the glorious riches of this mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory. (28) He is the one we proclaim, admonishing and teaching everyone with all wisdom, so that we may present everyone fully mature (*teleios*) in Christ.

Colossians 1:27-28 NIV

Epaphras, who is one of you and a servant of Christ Jesus, sends greetings. He is always wrestling in prayer for you, that you may stand firm in all the will of God, mature (*teleioi*) and fully assured.

Colossians 4:12 NIV

Solid [spiritual] food is for the [spiritually] mature (*teleioi*), those who by [diligent] practice have trained their [spiritual] perceptive faculties to [properly] distinguish between good and evil.

Hebrews 5:14

Let us then move on from the elementary teachings about Christ and press on to maturity (*teleiotes*).

Hebrews 6:1a

Therefore, gird up the loins of your mind in spiritually mature (*teleios*) alertness, and set your hope upon that grace which is coming your way when Jesus Christ is revealed.

1st Peter 1:13

There is no fear in love. But perfect (*teleia*) love drives out fear, because fear has to do with punishment. The one who fears is not made perfect (*teteleiotai*) in love.
1st John 4:18 NIV (cf. Col.3:14; 1Jn.4:12; 4:17)

There are many thorns and weeds which can grow up and impede our spiritual growth (i.e., things we allow to take priority over our true mission here in this world: Matt.13:7; 13:22; Mk.4:7; 4:18-19; Lk.8:7; 4:14). And there are many "little foxes" which can ruin the production of our vineyard as well (i.e., outside forces, disappointments and resistance to which we react in the wrong way: Song 2:15). But if we persevere along the well-marked road to Zion, harkening to the Spirit's still, small voice, the "natural" – or really "supernatural" – result of the process outlined in this section will be our growth to the point of spiritual maturity, a functional "perfection" in the sense of being complete and mature so as to do what the Lord would have us do in this world.

(11) Christ Himself appointed some of us apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers (12) in order to prepare all of His holy people for their own ministry work, that the entire body of Christ might thus be built up, (13) until we all reach that unifying [goal] of belief in and full-knowledge of the Son of God, that each of us might be a perfect person (*teleios*), that is, that we might attain to that standard of maturity of the fullness of Christ; (14) that we may no longer be immature, swept off-course and carried headlong by every breeze of so-called teaching that emanates from the trickery of men in their readiness to do anything to cunningly work their deceit, (15) but rather that we may, by embracing the truth in love, grow up in all respects with Christ, who is the head of the Church, as our model. (16) In this way, the entire body of the Church, fit and joined together by Him through the sinews He powerfully supplies to each and every part, works out its own growth for the building up of itself in love.
Ephesians 4:11-16

B. Spiritual Perspective

Once a believer has reached spiritual maturity, he/she now has the requisite understanding of the truth so as to be able to navigate the world in a godly manner, successfully passing all types of testing that the Lord allows to come our way. As with the effort to become spiritually mature in the first place however, this is also not a reflexive and absolutely certain process. Now, not only do we need to continue our good momentum in learning and believing the truth of the Word of God – indeed, that is now more important than ever – but we also need to become adept at applying God's truth to every aspect of our daily walk with Jesus Christ. That is something that we have without doubt already been doing to some degree, but to get to the point of being able to handle severe testing of the sort related in scripture, a consistent level of commitment to the application of truth at all times needs to be achieved, one comparable to our commitment to learning that truth which led to our spiritual maturity in the first place and which laid the groundwork for this next phase of our development, the spiritual progress in coping with the trials of this life, a hallmark characteristic of all the Bible's great believers – not just faith in receiving the truth but faith, trusting God, in applying the truth to our lives (Heb.11:1-40).

Just as truth is not particularly meaningful to us until we believe it (and it is then transformed into "full knowledge" or *epignosis* by the Spirit), so also the truth we hold in our hearts by faith is not meant to reside there to no purpose. For that reason, once we get to the point of possessing a critical mass of truth in our hearts, once, that is, we have grown up spiritually so as to be spiritual adults in God's eyes, we are then given increasingly difficult challenges and tests to help us become proficient in our Christian walk. Faith, like the human body, requires weight, pressure, and stress in order to become stronger. We believe in Christ and are saved. Then we grow in regard to the truth, believing it in depth and detail in order to become spiritually mature. From that point onward, the Lord brings us out into the world to witness for Him, and we are given many and multifarious opportunities to trust Him and to put the truth we have learned into practice, to see whether or not we really will hold fast to what we believe under pressure, and how well and to what degree (cf. Gen.22:1; Ex.15:24-25; 16:4; 20:20; Deut.8:2; 8:16; 33:8).

Passing such tests strengthens our faith as we experience with joy God's faithful provision and deliverance in all manner of challenging circumstances. While we will have much more to say about these matters below (in section I.3, "Our Warfare"), the purpose of this section is to examine what the Bible has to say about the correct perspective the mature believer needs to adopt as the basis for engaging in the spiritual warfare which swirls around us unseen. For it is that proper spiritual perspective – looking at things God's way rather than in the way the world looks at them – which constitutes the necessary prerequisite for the spiritual discernment required to be effective in our Christian walk and ministry (covered in section I.2.C immediately below), doing so consistently in spite of all such unseen opposition.

For as he thinks within himself, so he is.
Proverbs 23:7a NASB

The heart is deceitful above all things,
And desperately wicked;
Who can know it?
Jeremiah 17:9 NKJV

(16) But I tell you, walk in the Spirit and you will not carry out what the flesh lusts for.
(17) For what the flesh lusts for is contrary to the Spirit's will, and the Spirit is opposed to what the flesh lusts for. Since these are diametrically opposed to each other in this way, what you are doing is not what you yourself choose.
Galatians 5:16-17

Careful consideration of these three passages illuminates all of the basic principles we need to understand on the subject of spiritual perspective. First, we are in fact who we are inside, regardless of the words we speak or the deeds we do – indeed, it is necessary that, at least eventually, our true self will come out in speaking and acting. Second, inhabiting bodies infested with a sin nature as we do, our inside is not completely pure and will not produce a godly spiritual perspective left to its own devices – quite the opposite. Third, the Spirit is our ally in thinking as we should think just as the sin nature is our enemy in this regard – and the Spirit

works with us to think as we should through the truth which He has made real for us in our hearts when we attended to it and believed it in the first place. But it is a constant struggle to think what is right and a matter of constant choice (cf. Ps.13:1ff.) – not, as the last passage above affirms, a choice among many, but *the* fundamental choice of deciding to do things (in this case, "thinking") God's way . . . or not (just as was the case at salvation, and just as was the case in our effort to grow to the point of spiritual maturity).

(1) Now Ahab told Jezebel everything Elijah had done and how he had killed all the prophets with the sword. (2) So Jezebel sent a messenger to Elijah to say, "May the gods deal with me, be it ever so severely, if by this time tomorrow I do not make your life like that of one of them." (3) Elijah was afraid and ran for his life.

1st Kings 19:1-3a NIV

If one of the greatest believers of all time coming directly from one of the greatest spiritual victories of all time (the refutation of the prophets of Baal by the power of God and the end of the drought in response to prayer) was capable of allowing fear to overcome godly thinking, is there hope for any of us? There certainly is, but this episode does make it very clear that the world is a very distracting, confusing, and potentially terrifying place, and that for us as believers to maintain a correct spiritual perspective while walking through it is not an easy task – certainly not for those who are as yet spiritually immature; and for those who are, success in maintaining the spiritual "high ground" will require courage, skill, faith and practice. God has given us absolutely everything we need to win these day by day, moment by moment battles of retaining and holding onto the divine point of view, but we need to become practiced at doing so and, perhaps even more importantly, *consistent* in doing so. For as the example of Elijah makes clear, this is going to be a fight to very end wherein past successes will never be a guarantee of present victory. As in the military sphere, every hill must be properly defended from every attack at all times, since turning back ninety-nine enemy assaults does not guarantee victory in the hundredth attempt – if the guards are asleep. How many spiritual battles had Elijah won? But on this occasion – admittedly a surprise attack which caught him off-guard – he failed to apply basic truths he knew very well: no one was going to be able to do him any harm whatsoever if the Lord did not allow it, no matter how terrifying their words and reputation for evil.

The world can be an extremely distracting place for any believer who has made the commitment to spiritual progress. Threats to our spiritual peace of mind and godly perspective come at us from all directions all the time. And if we have not learned how to keep our spiritual balance and equilibrium, then as with Elijah it can sometimes be not the big and obvious attacks which throw us off but the smaller and more unexpected ones that may trip us up. Swirling around us in this world we see all manner of social, economic, and political uncertainty as threats to our personal peace, physical well-being and survival abound. Cultural distractions pulse through the sea of media in which our world is awash and are impossible to shut out completely without exiting from the world. We have jobs with all manner of stress therein; we have friends and families who, love them as we do, often tax our spiritual peace of mind and test us in multifarious ways; and we have problems: problems with our money, with our careers, with our possessions, with our relationships – and problems with our bodies and our reasonable efforts to maintain their

health. Every reader should be able to flesh out this list with many details so as to easily see that the nature of human life in this world alone is sufficiently distracting so as to test our spiritual perspective to the limits. But of course, that is not all. We also have an arch-enemy on the inside (our sin natures) and, as believers in Christ, an arch-enemy on the outside: Satan and his followers who are dedicated to destroying this very peace of mind in Christ we are trying to preserve. So the point needs to be made emphatically from the start that getting to the point of consistent victory in gaining and maintaining the habit of seeing things God's way is not without its challenges. Elijah was clearly one of the best in history at doing so – but he had a sin nature, and under the pressure of an expected attack, motivated by the evil one which in his heart threatened his life led him to fear and that led him to flee. If we are going to do better, if we are going to do as well, we will need to give careful attention to the techniques God has provided for us to fight this fight in a winning way.

You will keep him in perfect peace,
Whose mind is stayed on You,
Because he trusts in You.
Isaiah 26:3 NKJV

Believers progress through this world as those walking on the water hand in hand with the Lord, kept safe by Him in the eye of the storm – or should. Despite the raging of the wind and the waves, we see through the visible troubles and terrors to the more important truths hidden from human eyes – but seen clearly by us with the eyes of faith.

[Let us] not [then be] having [any] regard for what can be seen, but [instead] for what cannot be seen. For the things which can be seen are ephemeral. But the things which cannot be seen are eternal.
2nd Corinthians 4:18

For we walk by faith, not by sight.
2nd Corinthians 5:7 NKJV

(1) It is faith [in the Living and written Word], moreover, that substantiates what we hope for. [Faith] provides proof of things unseen. (2) For it is by this [very faith] that believers of old received their divine approval.
Hebrews 11:1-2

The goal here is in essence to commit oneself to seeing things from God's heavenly perspective. Keeping oneself attuned to, embracing and acting upon what Col. Thieme termed the "divine viewpoint" is the essence of a godly walk, because only when we take the Lord's perspective can we be fully inclined to behave in the way He wants us to, in what we are thinking, saying and doing. Accomplishing this correctly and consistently is clearly not for the spiritually immature. To see things "His way" requires knowing as much about "the mind of Christ", the truth of the Word of God, as possible (1Cor.2:16). Once we have amassed enough truth in our hearts through faith so as to be spiritually mature, then there is still the matter of developing the

techniques and the habit of applying that truth in the power of the Spirit so as to be able consistently to push away the viewpoint of the world – the viewpoint nearly everyone else in this world has (even, sadly, most believers) – and hold fast instead to God's perspective on things. No two believers will do this in precisely the same way – no two of us are exactly alike on the one hand and every verse and every principle of scripture is applicable to this struggle on the other – but it is hoped that what is offered below will provide some helpful insight into just how to go about this process.

1. Peace and Joy

Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, since as members of one body you were called to peace. And be thankful.

Colossians 3:15 NIV

Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice!

Philippians 4:4 NIV

These and many other verses make it clear that the "natural" state for the Christian should be one of peace (e.g., Is.26:3; 57:2; Jn.14:27; Rom.5:1; Eph.2:14; Phil.4:7; 2Thes.3:16; 1Pet.1:2) and one of joy (e.g., Jn.17:13; Rom.14:17; Gal.5:22; Phil.1:25; 1Pet.1:8). The word "rule" in Colossians 3:15 above (from the verb *brabeuo*) is a term often used for officials refereeing athletic competitions. That peace should be the emotion, sentiment, disposition which rules in our hearts – "calling the shots" and "refereeing the game" – is striking, for it is fair to say that even mature Christians may find it hard to be at peace in times of stress and trouble. Yet that is the perspective we are told to have: whatever else is going on around us, we mature believers have been given and should always be holding fast to the peace that is ours in Jesus Christ. Likewise, "rejoice" in Philippians 4:4 above is a command, and joy may at times seem even farther from us when the circumstances are difficult, but that attitude too is not only our right to but our duty to maintain. How to get to being joyful and having peace at all times, especially extremely difficult ones?

First, Philippians 4:4 certainly anticipates that there will be times when we will not be effervescent and bubbling with happiness for all to see – as in times of grief and bereavement, for example. And there are certainly many other tests and trials we are likely to face in this life when "putting on a happy face" is not at all a natural thing to do. But though we may mourn, we do not do so as the world does (1Thes.4:18), for we have hope. And though we find ourselves under fire from the evil one, we do not lose hope as those of this world often do when disaster strikes, for we trust in Jesus Christ (Heb.6:19). We have a transcendent hope and our focus is not on this world but on the one to come. For that reason we are indeed able to "count it all joy" in the midst of various trials and troubles (Jas.1:2). But that does not mean that we are happy about the trouble or not feeling the pain. It does mean that we retain – or at least that as mature believers we have the ability to retain – a residual joy in our status as believers in Jesus Christ whose salvation is on the way regardless of what we see, hear or feel in this temporary world. So while joy may lead us when times are good, resting on a solid foundation of peace, when the pressure is

on it is natural for peace, the other side of this spiritual twosome, to take the lead in our attitude towards the world and its troubles. But whether we are joyous and at peace, or resting in the Lord and treasuring the joy of Him in our hearts, this two-fold perspective is the quintessential outlook on the world that every believer should cultivate day by day, with both attitudes fixing their gaze on the Lord – who is both our peace and our joy – and our hope of being with Him soon enough in resurrection along with all the glorious promises that blessing entails.

This is the right way – the godly way – to look at our lives in this temporary world, after all. We are only here for a brief moment, and everything to come is so much better in every way – because of the cross. How can we not be joyful about the forgiveness of our sins and eternal life in Jesus Christ in place of the death, darkness and judgment that would otherwise obtain? How can we not be at peace as we concentrate on the One who redeemed us from our sins by dying in our place, comforted in all of our troubles by the sure and certain knowledge that we will soon be with Him forever. And oh the joy and peace we shall know on that great day! But in the meantime, holding onto that perspective takes effort, a continual struggle to keep our thoughts and inner focus on the Lord, the beauty of Him and all He has for us in times soon to come.

As mentioned before, all of these aspects of the proper Christian perspective on life are interrelated. And beyond that, everything we learn of the truth, and the better we learn the truth, and the more firmly and enthusiastically we embrace the truth through faith, contributes geometrically to getting "better" at holding onto this basic viewpoint of peace and joy anchored to the hope that is ours in Jesus Christ (Heb.6:19-20). Just as a basketball player may be naturally gifted but still needs to practice his patented shots over and over again to be truly effective, and just as everything else he learns about the game and everything he does to improve his physical conditioning plays into his ability to execute under pressure, so it is in the Christian walk. We are joyful and we are at peace under the Spirit's influence as we are responding to Him – but it does take knowledge of the truth, growth in every other area of the Christian life, and practice in executing under pressure to be able to sustain joy and hang onto the peace that is our heritage as sons and daughters of the living God when the pressure ramps up.

Restructuring the way we think about things is thus both an increasingly effective self-reinforcing process that results from our spiritual growth generally, and also a moment by moment challenge as we walk through this noisy and distracting world. Pressure and testing add a further dimension wherein the evil one will attempt to challenge the joy that should naturally be ours as born again believers in Jesus Christ and the peace that belongs to us as those whose names are written in the Book of Life (Rev.20:15), with the sure and certain hope of the resurrection and eternal rewards kept safe for us in heaven (1Pet.1:4).

One effective way of countering the negative emotions of doubt, fear, anger, despair, etc. which may fall upon us when things go wrong, when disappointment or disaster strikes, when our health is impaired, when we suffer loss or bereavement, is the habit of "counting our blessings". For it is certainly the case that, imperfect human beings that we are, we all have a tendency to let small and relatively unimportant things eclipse in our hearts that which truly is of utmost

importance. And when we are talking about the joy of being saved, is anything really more important in this temporary world? We shall live in the New Jerusalem forever with our dear Savior who died for us, in happiness, bliss and plenty beyond anything we can even now imagine, and in resurrection bodies which will never know pain or hardship again. Can anything compare to that? Our salvation is the bedrock of our peace, and once we have stabilized our thoughts and comforted our emotions with that truth, the joy of everything to come will be our stay even in the most difficult of circumstances – but we have to **remember** these truths, holding onto them, aggressively calling them to mind, and believing them more than what we see or hear or feel. So while in "counting our blessings" it is customary to think of all of the material blessings that the Lord has provided for us in this life – and that is important, especially considering that He is the Giver of all these Gifts – focusing on the Giver Himself is even more critical, along with the spiritual blessings which, while unseen, put any possible combination of material blessings in the shade. For what we have here and now does not last and can be taken away (Job 1:21), but what we have through faith in Jesus Christ is eternal and can never be lost (2Cor.4:18; 5:7).

Count your blessings: While this is not meant to be a comprehensive list⁵, as believers in Jesus Christ we can all exult in the wonderful truth that we have been . . .

a. Spiritually Reborn (Jn.1:13; 3:3-8; Gal.2:20; 4:29; Tit.3:5; Jas.1:18; 1Pet.1:3; 1:23; 1Jn.2:29; 3:9; 4:7; 5:1; 5:4; 5:18; cf. Matt.19:28; 1Cor.4:15; Heb.12:9).

b. Forgiven our Sins (Matt.26:28; Jn.3:18; 5:24; Acts 13:38; 26:18; Rom.6:11; 8:1-4; Eph.2:1-5; 4:32; Col.2:13; 1Jn.1:7-9).

c. Redeemed from Sin and Death (Matt.20:28; Lk.1:68; Jn.8:31-36; Rom.3:24; 1Cor.1:30; 6:20; 7:23; Gal.3:13; 4:4-5; Eph.1:7; 1:14; Col.1:14; 1Tim.2:6; Tit.2:14; Heb.9:12-15; 1Pet.1:18-19; Rev.5:9).

d. Reconciled to God (Romans 5:8-11; 2Cor.5:18; Eph.2:16; Col.1:20-21).

e. Adopted as Children of God (Jn.1:12-13; Rom.8:16-17; 8:23-24; Gal.3:21-4:7; Eph.3:14-15; Heb.12:4-11; 1Jn.3:1-2).

f. Espoused to Jesus Christ as His Bride (Matt.9:15; Matt.25:1-13; Mk.2:19; Lk.5:34; Jn.3:29; 2Cor.11:2-3; Eph.1:22-23; 5:22-33; Rev.19:7-14; 21:9ff.; 22:17).

g. Enrolled as Citizens in the New Jerusalem (Phil.3:20; Heb.12:22-24; cf. Eph.2:19; Heb.11:8-10; Rev.21:1ff.).

⁵ See *Bible Basics* 4B, "Soteriology", section III "What it Means to be Saved". See also L.S. Chafer, *Systematic Theology* (Dallas 1948) v.3, pp. 234-265; R.B. Thieme Jr., *The Plan of God* (Houston 1973) pp. 23-27.

h. Named as God's Heirs for an Eternal Inheritance (1Pet.1:3-5; cf. Matt.6:19-21; Acts 26:18; Rom.8:16-17; Eph.1:14; 1:18; Phil.1:21; Col.1:12; 2:3; Heb.9:15; 10:35; 2Jn.1:8; Rev.11:18; 22:12).

i. Justified by being given God's own Righteousness (Is.45:25; Jn.3:18; Rom.1:17; 3:21-24; 3:28; 4:4-7; 4:13; 4:24; 5:1; 5:8-9; 8:1; 9:30-31; 10:6; 2Cor.5:21; Gal.2:16; Eph.2:8-9; Phil.3:9; Heb.11:7).

j. Sanctified in Christ as being Holy to God (Acts 26:15-18; Rom.1:7; 8:27; 12:13; 1Cor.1:2; 6:11; 2Cor.1:1; Eph.1:1; Phil.1:1; Col.1:2; 1Thes.3:13; 2Thes.1:10; 1Tim.5:10; Philemon 1:5; Heb.3:1; 1Pet.1:15; Jude 1:3; Rev.8:3).

k. Sealed and under God's own Guarantee of Salvation by the Pledge of the Holy Spirit (Rom.8:9-10; 2Cor.1:21-22; 5:5; Eph.1:13-14; 4:30).

l. Under Grace and its Blessings and freed from the Curse of the Law (Rom.5:1-2; 6:14-15; Gal.3:10-13; 3:23-25; 4:1-7; 5:18; Eph.2:1-10; cf. 1Cor.9:20-21).

m. In Union with Christ and made one with the Father and Spirit (Matt.28:18-20; Jn.14:20; 15:1ff.; Rom.16:7; 2Cor.5:17; Eph.2:6; 2:10; Heb.3:14; 1Pet.5:14; 2Pet.1:4; cf. Eph.3:6; Heb.3:1; 3:14).

n. Given Access to God as Priests of Jesus Christ (Jn.14:13-14; Eph.2:18; 3:12; Heb.4:16; 1Pet.2:5; 2:9; Rev.1:6; 5:9-10; 20:6).

o. Blessed with Fellowship with the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit (Jn.14:17; 14:20; 14:23; Rom.8:9-10; 8:15; 1Cor.1:9; 12:13; 2Cor.13:5; Gal.4:6; Eph.3:17; 4:6; Phil.2:1; Col.1:27; 2Tim.1:14; Heb.6:4; 1Pet.1:8; 1Jn.1:3).

p. Given Spiritual Gifts to serve the Church and earn eternal Rewards (Is.53:12; 1Cor.12:7-10; Eph.4:8-16; Col.2:19).

q. Promised Resurrection (Dan.12:13; 1Cor.15:22-26; 2Cor.5:1; 1Thess.4:13-18; Rev.20:6).

r. Promised a Place in the New Jerusalem forever (Jn.14:1-4; Rev.21:1-7).

No one who has these truths pulsing consciously through his/her heart can fail to be happy about them (joy) and also confident that God is indeed working everything out for our good now and especially in the end (peace). Holding onto that perspective, that hope of what is sure to come, however, is not something that is entirely automatic. These truths – along with all other biblical truth – have to be constantly reinforced (through Bible reading and daily Bible study from a good source) and continually called to mind in a pro-active way for "peace and joy fixated on hope" to become the believer's normal state. That is true when things are going well in one's life. How

much more is that not the case when the believer finds him/herself under serious pressure or in the middle of a severe test?

Delight yourself also in the Lord,
And He shall give you the desires of your heart.
Psalm 37:4 NKJV

Do not be grieved, for the joy of the Lord is your strength.
Nehemiah 8:10c NASB

As these two verses demonstrate, taking joy in the Lord is indeed something "we do" ("delight yourself in the Lord" is a command) rather than something that passively happens; whereas conquering negative emotions by means of the truth in which we find joy likewise requires active engagement of the believer's mind and spirit guiding and directing his/her heart and emotions ("do not be grieved" is also a command) – so that engaging in this process effectively is where our true spiritual "strength" lies.

We are all unhappy from time to time. We all get down, out of sorts, depressed, etc. There can be many overt reasons for this, but any mature Christian with even a small amount of life-experience should be able to recognize that this unhappiness is not always a direct effect of some negative cause. There are times when we are indeed able to rise up and ride above adversity, whether momentary or chronic, light or severe. And there are times when our black moods have no discernible immediate cause. What every instance of unhappiness does have in common is an insufficient application of the truth on our part – at least if we allow them to continue after noting them without combating them by means of the truth we have believed.

Mind you, we are not expected to be delirious with joy when we are bereaved, when we are sorely disappointed about something or other, when we suffer some terrible loss or are stricken with some serious disease or fall afoul of some damaging accident. But we can – and as those who carry the witness of Jesus Christ we must – learn how to cope with anything and everything that comes our way, managing to be at peace in our hearts through the comfort of the Holy Spirit and the encouragement of the Word of God (Jn.14:16; 14:26; 15:26; 16:7; Rom.15:4; cf. 2Cor.3:1-7), remembering that the Lord is in control of everything (Rom.8:28; 1Thes.5:18), and that He is absolutely, totally, completely and perfectly faithful in every way (Deut.31:6; Heb.13:5).

Believers sometimes refer to this state of general unhappiness as being "spiritually dry", but that is an unfortunate and problematic phrase for two reasons: first, because unnecessary and spiritually dangerous unhappiness is not "spiritual" in any positive sense, and, second, because it comes as the result of a lack of spiritual effort on the believer's part. This is not at all to say that staying properly oriented to the blessings that we have in Jesus Christ, retaining and meditating on the joy of our salvation in good times and holding onto the peace we have in complete trust in His deliverance in bad times is an easy thing to master. It is not. It is the stuff of spiritual maturity, so that it takes a great deal of truth in the heart – completely believed – to even be

possible, a good deal of determination and will-power to accomplish, and some measure of experience in executing this part of the spiritual battle successfully in order to develop the confidence to defeat unhappiness consistently. That is especially the case when coping with sudden attacks. David, one of the most joyful believers who ever lived, made a point of pouring out his heart to the Lord whenever the pressure seemed as if it were going to overwhelm him (as is evident from a multiplicity of his psalms, e.g., Ps.3:1ff.). That great believer's practice was not to blame others nor lose hope but rather to commit the problem to the Lord and to remind himself of the Lord's complete faithfulness. As a result, when confronted with one of the most surprising and difficult challenges of his life, he had in this way been prepared to cope with it in a godly and effective manner:

David was greatly distressed because the men were talking of stoning him; each one was bitter in spirit because of his sons and daughters. But David found strength in the Lord his God.

1st Samuel 30:6 NIV

Thus should we all do. But in order to be ready for catastrophes, however large or however small, prior preparation is necessary. If we have grown up spiritually, if we have stored a great deal of truth in our hearts by faith through consistent attention to the scriptures and their orthodox teaching, and if we have made a practice of applying the truth to more and more aspects of our lives, we will, with experience, come to the same place as David – because David got to that very place through the exact same means. And we, of course, have advantages which David did not have: the universal indwelling of the Holy Spirit, spiritually gifted men to teach the Word of God, and the entire canon of scripture – including all of David's psalms.

In spite of progress over time in one's ability to effectively deploy the truth and rally one's heart in times of crisis, it is also true that even mature believers can have off days – and sometimes even off weeks and months where the Word of God, its intake and application, has not been the priority it should be (if there is slacking off much longer than this, even great believers have a tendency to revert). Whatever the reason, whether reacting to some disappointment, exulting in some success (the "prosperity test" is notoriously one of the most subtle and difficult to pass), or out of just plain laziness (life is complicated, busy and distracting, after all), lack of alertness on this matter can make even the most mature of believers vulnerable on any given day. To take the example of David again, a little time off to enjoy the success he had experienced in the Lord's establishment of his kingdom led to boredom, then to adultery, then to murder (2Sam.11:1-17), followed by fourteen years of the most intense discipline any believer has ever had to suffer through as a result (though not without being accompanied by amazing blessing at the same time).

Falling into a mood of unhappiness (of whatever origin) through failure to deploy the joy and peace which are our heritage as those who belong to Jesus Christ is more common and easier to fall into than one might suppose. That is true because even at the apex of spiritual maturity, believers are never free of their sin nature this side of heaven. And the more a believer grows, the more unwanted attention he/she is bound to receive from the evil one. For believers trying to

do things the Lord's way, this life is a constant fight, a constant struggle (2Tim.3:12). Like David, we will be tempted from time to time to "take a rest". Now in physical terms, of course, a certain amount of rest is needed. And it is also certainly true that the Lord does not begrudge us a reasonable amount of relaxation and distraction – certainly not. But there is a point at which reasonable rest becomes outright slacking, and that is always dangerous.

(9) How long will you lie there, you sluggard? When will you get up from your sleep?

(10) A little sleep, a little slumber, a little folding of the hands to rest—

(11) and poverty will come on you like a thief and scarcity like an armed man.

Proverbs 6:9-11 NIV

Solomon directs this principle to physical work, but the same thing applies to all areas of life, including the spiritual realm. The famous violinist Jascha Heifetz used to say, "If I don't practice one day, I know it; two days, the critics know it; three days, the public knows it". Believers who get into a pattern of not praying, not reading their Bibles, not paying attention to Bible teaching, and not making the requisite effort to apply the truth to the circumstances they face day by day will likewise find that in fairly short order they will have made themselves vulnerable.

The good news is that recovery to their former peak of maturity will not require starting over (it certainly did not in David's case; cf. Ps.51:1ff.); the bad news is that great damage can be done in a very short amount of time (it certainly was in David's case). And the mechanics are easy enough to diagnose: we become emotionally tired and through lack of attentive self-discipline "a little slumber" expands into outright slacking; rather than getting tough on ourselves and recovering, we sympathize with ourselves in our state of fatigue and even begin to pity ourselves; this leads to a posture of selfishness (which is by definition the handmaiden of unhappiness); before we know it, "one day" has become "three days" and more, and bad behavior of one sort or another is the inevitable result. Although in the vast majority of cases whatever failures, offenses or sins we commit as a result will not be – God helping us – as severe as David's were on that infamous occasion, it is nevertheless the case that said bad behavior is going to make us feel worse and not better for whatever indulgence we have engaged in. Unhappiness will thus grow and we will go from bad to worse on this score unless and until we break the viscous circle through confession, accepting whatever divine discipline we have coming, and re-engaging in the good pattern – prayer, Bible reading, accessing of Bible teaching, and disciplined application of the truth – which led us to spiritual maturity in the first place.

This being the case, part of our procedure when we are feeling "down" is to recognize that there is an emotional disconnect between what our spirit knows and what our emotions are telling us. The next step is to understand why we are unhappy, to confront the emotional reaction to the adverse circumstance head-on. A certain amount of "sanctified compartmentalization" is thus necessary for successfully navigating this world for Jesus Christ. It is easy for this world to take on a size and an importance in our hearts which we do understand intellectually it does not have in fact in God's eyes (the only perspective which matters). On the one hand, everything we see is temporary and destined to be destroyed by fire so as to be replaced by the New Heavens and New Earth. And on the other hand, nothing here in this corrupt and temporary world can truly "make

us happy". We enjoy the good things that the Lord has given us, but recognize that they are only good because He gave them and only even compatible with true happiness if we are using them in a godly way. The rest of the world is busying itself in the pursuit of myth-happiness. But we Christians understand that if a person is not happy in the Lord (or at least content with the godly things He provides for all human beings who are living honorable lives), then no amount of the things which the world prizes will ever be able to "make him happy". No amount of money, of pleasure, of fame, of possessions, of power – nothing whatsoever that can even be imagined in worldly terms – will ever change anyone on the inside (except for the worse). Only by appreciating the Giver and the true Gift can a person have peace and godly enjoyment of worldly things – precisely because they are not as important to us as our dear Lord Jesus Christ is to us. And if we were to lose everything, as long as we persevere in faith, we can never lose Jesus Christ. As long as Jesus Christ is our happiness – and we are focused on that truth – there is nothing in this world that can truly make us unhappy (even though we may be in pain, in mourning, or hard-pressed for any of a multiplicity of reasons).

If we are having trouble holding onto that perspective, it is good to remember that whatever it is we lack that is putting pressure on our happiness in Christ, nothing we might be able to acquire in this world would ever be able to make us truly happy absent our happiness in Christ. After all, there are many unbelievers in this world who have the things we may imagine would make us happy (or who lack the troubles whose absence we imagine would make us happy) – and have them in abundance – yet the world is certainly not filled to overflowing with "happy people". And more than that, in cases where unbelievers seem to be happy, or even in those very rare cases where they may truly be happy in the worldly sense on account of all the blessings God has allowed them to accumulate, it is good to remember that their happiness is as temporary as this world and as fragile as this world is unpredictable. And even if an unbeliever could be "truly happy" (in the limited worldly sense of the word) for all his or her days on this earth, we certainly know that in a blink of an eye this life will be over for them, and that what is on the other side will be truly terrible.

Conversely, whatever suffering and hardships we believers are called upon to endure in this very short life are by necessity equally short. We profess to have put our hope in better things to come – the resurrection, our eternal reward, a good report from our Savior whom we love more than anything in this world, and a place with Him and our heavenly Father in the New Jerusalem forever – so that anytime we are allowing ourselves to be "unhappy", we are clearly not applying the truth as we ought to. Now no one is perfect on this score. Moses became angry. Elijah became depressed. Sudden and unforeseen setbacks, losses, accidents, dangers, diseases, etc. will certainly put even the most mature believer's happiness-perspective to the test. But we need to understand that while our emotions are most likely going to react to trouble of any sort in a natural way, we are not required to follow them. And, with sufficient growth and experience in applying the truth we have believed, like David and other great believers of the Bible, we have been given all that we need to "encourage ourselves in the Lord" – we have been given His Holy Spirit. We know that the Lord is sufficient to bring us through any trial, tribulation or testing. And we know that if we are walking with Him, we need fear no loss – for He is the source of all

our good things, both now and in the life to come. So if instead of ruing loss and trouble in an attitude of self-pity and arrogant selfishness we instead keep our eyes on Jesus Christ and determine to be "strong and courageous" with a courage born of humility in the power of the Holy Spirit, then we will find that we can be happy in Christ regardless of worldly circumstances. That is true while under fire; it is doubly true after the testing comes to an end. For our Lord never allows us to fall into trouble without a good reason – and He is merciful to restore us on the other side of the trial in a bountiful, "double" way (Job 42:10-17; Joel 2:25; Zech.9:12).

Finally, brethren, rejoice! Be complete [in your spiritual growth]! Be encouraged! Keep thinking about the same [truth]. Be at peace – and the God of love and peace will be with you.

2nd Corinthians 13:11

Further, my brothers and sisters, rejoice in the Lord!

Philippians 3:1 NIV

Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice!

Philippians 4:4 NIV

Rejoice always.

1st Thessalonians 5:16 NIV

We will have more to say below about testing, trials, tribulation and spiritual warfare. At this juncture it is important to understand and keep in mind the nature of the spiritual "high ground" we wish as mature believers to hold against any and all worldly assaults. When outright joy seems impossible on account of the nature of the hardships we are suffering through, its corresponding attribute, the peace which comes from resting in Christ and trusting in Him, must come to the fore. As in any military campaign, we are moving from objective to objective, from hill to hill. We hit the next objective, then we hold it against all counter-attacks. We thrust forward in joy. We fend off all attempts to send us backward in peace, namely, by relying on the Lord instead of ourselves, resting in Him in the perfect peace that comes from resolute faith. The devil is an expert counter-puncher, with the result that it will be a rare occasion when any of our spiritual successes will not be met by counter-attack – sometimes of a furious nature. Rather than allowing ourselves to be panicked, mature believers need to understand what is going on and be resolute in maintaining the peace that is our heritage as believers who are safe in Jesus Christ. That is the essential mind-set required to "hold" when we are "hit" in return. We are joyous that we belong to Him and are saved; we are at peace – even under pressure – that our salvation is secure through our faith in Him (1Pet.1:5), and that He is faithful to bring us home to Himself no matter what happens on this earth. For that is the hope in which we have been saved (Rom.8:23-24).

"These things I have spoken to you, that in Me you may have peace. In the world you will have tribulation; but be of good cheer, I have overcome the world."

John 16:33 NKJV

"They are not of the world, just as I am not of the world."

John 17:16 NKJV

And the world is passing away, and the lust of it; but he who does the will of God abides forever.

1st John 2:17 NKJV

For whatever is born of God overcomes the world. And this is the victory that has overcome the world—our faith.

1st John 5:4 NKJV

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

Romans 15:13 NIV

2. Alertness

A critical part of the successful Christian life consists in maintaining a moment by moment orientation to the truth. This world can be incredibly distracting and temptations abound, obvious ones and subtle ones as well. The "noise level" in our modern high-tech world, moreover, is mind-numbingly loud to a historically unprecedented degree. It may be possible for believers to "unplug" in a place of quiet and solitude from time to time, but it has become virtually impossible to engage successfully in work, business or the needful things of life without being continually bombarded by music, advertising, politics, entertainment, etc., all mixed together in a continuous digital stream that issues forth from every speaker, screen, phone and device, and thus dominates much of the thinking and conversation of all of those around us. For the believer who is attempting to "live godly in Christ Jesus", modern life presents a constant challenge to maintenance of that godly perspective. But since we cannot go out of this world (and seeking to escape it physically in a monastic way is no solution, merely rendering us useless for the work the Lord has for us; cf. 1Cor.5:10), and since while we are in this world yet, we are not of this world (Jn.17:11; 17:16), a way must be found to walk through it without allowing its pernicious influence and ubiquitous pressure to distract us from keeping the truth in the forefront of our thoughts. For beyond all argument, if we are not aggressively engaging with the truth, the vacuum created by our lack of focus will naturally allow the cacophonous buzz of this world to intrude within our defenses and make common cause with our sin nature in subverting our emotions, aided and abetted by the servants of the evil one.

(17) So I tell you this, and insist on it in the Lord, that you must no longer live as the Gentiles do with their minds emptied [of the truth]. (18) They are darkened in their thinking, separated from the life of God because of this [willful] ignorance that is in them due to the hardening of their hearts [against the truth], (19) who, when once they have lost all sensitivity [for what is right – the truth], have given themselves over to sensuality

so as to indulge in every kind of impurity, with a continual lust for more. (20) This is not how you learned to follow Christ.
Ephesians 4:17-20

What we are discussing here is neither the pattern of hardened unbelievers nor a reversion to sin on the part of believers both of which are seen in the passage above, but rather the moment by moment equivalent process to which believers are all potentially vulnerable – for the principle is the same. Godly believers can and do fall into sin, and sin unchecked leads to hardening of the heart (Heb.3:13). One certainly hopes, dear reader, that with growth these lapses are becoming increasingly less frequent and less serious; but just as we can occasionally be deceived in terms of sinfulness (which is why the Lord has provided confession as the solution to that problem: 1Jn.1:9; cf. Ps.32:5), so even as mature believers we can be deceived in terms of what we are thinking and feeling at any given time, so potent and malignant is the toxic combination of worldly distraction, the sinful, the natural mind (Mk.7:20), and the unseen powers of darkness – especially in the world we walk through today. Just as emptiness of mind results in depravity in a chronic sense for the ungodly, so any time we allow our hearts to be open to the world's influence without pumping them full of the godly perspective of truth, the world will have a tendency to intrude. Simply put, keeping our thoughts directed towards godly ends and preventing them from straying into ungodly areas is no small challenge, but making a practice of doing so is a critical part of the proper Christian walk. And one key element to doing so is the habit of being spiritually alert.

We have discussed elsewhere the principle of biblical alertness as it relates to big-picture issues (such as maintaining faith in the crucible of the Tribulation).⁶ The first thing to be said about what we are discussing here, namely, step by step, moment by moment spiritual alertness, is that spiritual momentum plays a very large role. If we have been in the habit of reading our Bibles daily, of meditating on scripture and principles of truth throughout the day, and, most importantly, of accessing and paying heed to good Bible teaching daily, then keeping our thoughts focused on the truth will be a much easier and much more natural thing to do than if we have been slacking in these areas. Even if we have been running a good race, however, perfection, while an admirable goal, is not a reasonable expectation. Serious battles always produce casualties and are always messy, even in victory. Likewise, in this warfare in which we are engaged (see section I.3 below), the first thing to seek is effectiveness in the fight – but that will be difficult to achieve moment by moment if we are not doing the training that contributes to victory day by day.

The second thing to keep in mind is that we actually do have to engage in the fight. If we are making good spiritual progress there will be times when the enemy is napping and when we are not under any particular pressure; at such times it may be an easy matter, even a seemingly natural one, to keep our thoughts on "the things above" (Col.3:1-2; cf. Phil.4:8). But on many

⁶ See section I, "The Importance of Alertness: Revelation 22:6-21", in part 7 of the *Coming Tribulation* series.

occasions our godly peace of mind will be opposed, from without and from within. From without, the evil one's associates have a way of probing our weak points and doing things that rankle, upset or unnerve us. And the world bombards us with temptations and distractions from all quarters. From within, our fleshly minds are easily tempted, not only to sin, not just to worry (and other negative emotions) but also to the consideration and contemplation of all manner of worldly things (from the humdrum to the sensational, whether benign or spiritually dangerous) to the exclusion of biblical things. And it is the last part that is the problem, namely, the habit of how we think most of the time.

If we make a habit of thinking about worldly things most or *all* of the time – sports, relationships, politics, family matters, jobs, careers, problems, money, our next vacation, our interests, our dislikes, people, or any type of non-spiritual things at all – whether good, bad or indifferent – that focus and concentration will clearly not contribute to our spiritual growth and progress but it will lead to vulnerabilities for lack of spiritual alertness. Making a habit of thinking about "the things above" (Col.3:1-2; cf. Phil.4:8), on the other hand, pays many spiritual dividends.

Not that it is easy. It is certainly easier to let our natural mind slip into neutral and start thinking about something else, baseball, for example. Now there is nothing wrong with watching a baseball game, nor is it sinful to think about baseball. However, if we turn control of our thoughts over to our natural mind without restraint in the regard, in fairly short order baseball may be assuming an outsized importance in our lives, an importance which by its nature will war against the goal we are trying to achieve of spiritual growth, progress and production for a good eternal reward. For it is all too easy, especially given the nature of the external and internal opposition believers face, to become consumed by such interests to the point where the mind is preoccupied with them, fantasizing about them, and placing them above all other things.

The sin nature loves to indulge in fantasy, arrogance, speculation, daydreaming about tomorrow, or reliving of the past and looking backward instead of focusing on what is ahead (or projecting its ungodly desires forward and distracting us from what should be our true goals for Jesus Christ). Time and space do not permit a thorough, forensic audit of the human psyche, but the reader can easily see how his/her mind wanders when it is not absorbed in necessary tasks – and aimless mental wandering – drifting – may not be sinful, but it has never accomplished anything positive in the spiritual life. Furthermore, once we are wandering, once our thought pattern is "adrift", so to speak, then we become vulnerable to the waves, winds and storms that life and the evil one are wont to send against us. Believers who are spiritually mature and walking day by day as they should, dedicating time to prayer, reading their Bibles, listening to Bible teaching, will prove difficult to swamp even so, but a happier state of affairs obtains when such weather finds us with sails already reefed and hatches battened down.

Thirdly, when we do find ourselves under surprise attack, whatever our present mental state, it is important for us to react quickly and in an effective way. The devil is an ace counter-attacker, so that any time we feel we have secured our objective, we ought to think twice. But whether the next assault is large or small, and whether it finds us unalert or awaiting the attack, the proper

procedure is the same in any case, namely, an active rejection of the devil's lies and a correspondingly active offering up of the countervailing truth. In other words, we have to consciously reject the lie that the world is telling us in this attack ("you'll lose your job and starve and God won't help you", e.g.), even if the circumstances are screaming at us and our emotions are trying their best to get us to accept it, and instead actively and affirmatively focus on the truth we know to be true.

The Israelites said to Moses, "We will die! We are lost, we are all lost! Anyone who even comes near the tabernacle of the Lord will die. Are we all going to die?"
Numbers 17:12-13 NIV

No, they were not going to die immediately as a result of this latest act of unfaithfulness (striving with Aaron about the priesthood). A little remembrance of the Lord's past forgiveness of them on so many occasions would have helped. A little consideration of His great mercy and faithfulness might have headed off such nonsense. But when we fail to accept the truth in reacting to circumstances we are guilty of the same sort of lack of aggressive confrontation of the lie with the truth. Failing to accept God's promise of forgiveness when we sin (1Jn.1:9; cf. Ps.32:5), for example, would represent just such a case of not applying the truth positively and affirmatively when our emotions or what we see or hear tell us differently. The world is happy to lie to us, spun up by the evil one as it is. It is our responsibility to "go with what we know" of the truth by faith rather than to allow ourselves to "reel from what we feel" if emotionally distraught or under terrible pressure from our circumstances or when being bombarded by the forces of the evil one. God is faithful. Absolutely. He has never let us down. We should remember that. He will never ever let us down. That is the biblical truth. But are we willing to believe that? Are we willing to apply that truth when the heat of testing is on?

The eternal God is your refuge,
And underneath are the everlasting arms;
Deuteronomy 33:27a NKJV

Cast your burden on the Lord,
And He shall sustain you;
He shall never permit the righteous to be moved.
Psalm 55:22 NKJV

I have been young, and now am old;
Yet I have not seen the righteous forsaken,
Nor his descendants begging bread.
Psalm 37:25 NKJV

(31) What then shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us? (32) He who did not spare His own Son, but delivered Him up for us all, how shall He not with Him also freely give us all things?
Romans 8:31-32 NKJV

(5a) For He Himself has said, "I will never leave you nor forsake you" (Deut.31:6-8). (6) So we may boldly say: "The Lord is my helper; I will not fear. What can man do to me? (Ps.118:6)"
Hebrews 13:5a-6 NKJV

So whenever our emotions are telling us to fear or leading us to doubt the Lord, that is when we need to actively reject such lies by opposing them with the truth we know by faith – and that is what we must do even if not only our emotions but also our eyes and ears and everyone and everything else in this corrupt and temporary world agree. God is faithful. Absolutely. And that is the truth whether we choose to embrace it in total faith or not. So why not do so? That is the only way to spiritual growth and progress, and the only way to please Him.

Now without faith, it is impossible to please [God]. For whoever wishes to draw nearer to God must believe that He exists, and that He will reward those who earnestly seek Him.
Hebrews 11:6

This appearance of things in this world is entirely deceptive in that the apparent causes and effects are really masking the much more important and underlying spiritual realities as we all know by faith.

By faith we understand that the ages have been constructed by the Word of God, so that what we see (i.e., the material world) has not come into being from the things presently visible.
Hebrews 11:3

And believers know quite well – by faith – that what is coming is so much more important and so much more wonderful than anything we can presently even imagine that there is no worthy comparison to be made between anything we might desire or fear here on earth and the blessedness to come.

For I do not consider these present hardships in any way comparable to the glory destined to be revealed for us.
Romans 8:18

But as it is written: "What the eye has not seen and the ear has not heard, and [what] has not entered the heart of man, [these are the very] things which God has prepared for those who love Him".
1st Corinthians 2:9

(17) For this present light affliction of ours is working out for us an eternal weight of glory beyond any possible estimation. (18) [Let us] not [then be] having [any] regard for what can be seen, but [instead] for what cannot be seen. For the things which can be seen

are ephemeral. But the things which cannot be seen are eternal.
2nd Corinthians 4:17-18

. . . in order that in the coming ages he might show the incomparable riches of his grace,
expressed in his kindness to us in Christ Jesus.
Ephesians 2:7 NIV

Knowing – even in complete faith – is not the same thing as applying the truth under pressure, whether it be a case of a sudden surprise attack or a persistent and enduring test which is wearing us down emotionally. For such times, we need to develop a proper sense of spiritual proportion so as to be able to "flip" our physical and emotional estimate of the situation inside out and let the correct, spiritual reality dominate our hearts. God is big. Nothing is bigger (He made the entire universe without effort in the blink of an eye). But if we had the slightest idea just *how* big – and how much bigger He is than everything that "is" in this world, we would scarcely even be tempted to lose perspective. If we could see Him face to face in glory, we would not even be tempted to doubt. And so we must always keep Him in view – with the eyes of faith (Heb.11:27).

God is faithful. Absolutely so. He sacrificed His one and only Son on our behalf. And if we had even the slightest idea of the depth of His love for us, we would almost never even be tempted to doubt Him. Everything that is, everything that happens in this world, everything that could even be imagined is in reality the tiniest of bubbles in comparison with the infinity of God. And if that is true of the cosmos and all of history in toto (and it is), how much more is the disparity of magnitude not true in regard to our small personal problems? Creation was not difficult for God, nor was the planning of all of angelic and human history nor the carrying out of it in every precise detail. What was difficult was the sacrifice of Jesus Christ upon which everything else depends.

He who did not spare His own Son, but delivered Him up for us all, how shall He not
with Him also freely give us all things?
Romans 8:32 NKJV

So when our thinking has been captured by the visible, it is up to us to turn things inside out, so to speak, considering the truly big things big and the truly small things small, inverting in our hearts by faith in the truth we have believed the false perspective of the world, and subordinating the visible and temporary to the far more important invisible and eternal. This does take practice – and we will probably never become so adept at it that we can never be surprised by a counterattack or worn down by a trial whenever we fail to follow through – but in this world we are going to have plenty of opportunities to practice.

These things I have spoken to you, that in Me you may have peace. In the world you will
have tribulation; but be of good cheer, I have overcome the world.
John 16:33 NKJV

When we do perceive that the worldly perspective is gaining the upper hand, the proper response is to focus in on the joy of our salvation whereby we have been delivered once and for all from sin and death by our Lord's loving sacrifice, awaiting thereby the commencement of our eternal life, and on the peace we have in Jesus Christ that comes from knowing we have been saved and cannot be snatched out of His hands. Whether circumstances allow us to counterattack ourselves with joy for Him or hold our ground resting in His peace, the world, the flesh and devil ultimately only have the power over our hearts that *we* are willing to cede to them. Staying alert and maintaining awareness of the fact that we are on a mission in enemy territory will make it easier to deploy our faith when the pressure comes.

. . . in order that we may not be taken advantage of by Satan, for we are not ignorant of his schemes.

2nd Corinthians 2:11

The more we engage in these techniques, the more they will become somewhat second nature – and that is all to the good. The Christian life, properly lived, has a lot to do with "reprogramming" the way we look at the world, training ourselves to see things from God's point of view – the perspective of the truth – and not from the world's perspective – that of the devil's lies.

(6) When I remember You on my bed, I meditate on You in the night watches. (7)

Because You have been my help, therefore in the shadow of Your wings I will rejoice. (8)

My soul follows close behind You; Your right hand upholds me.

Psalms 63:6-8 NKJV

Progress in the application of the truth is not a quick or a simple one, but it is the only way to true and lasting happiness in this life, and through the rewards that our success in walking with Jesus Christ brings, has positive ramifications for the next one as well.

Behold, He is coming quickly. Happy is he who guards the words of the prophecy of this book [in his heart].

Revelation 22:7

As difficult as this life may be, it is important to remember that from the Lord's perspective – and therefore from the true perspective of faith – all of human history in its entirety is a mere blink of the eye (Ps.90:4; 2Pet.3:8). How much more is that not the case then for us who are here on earth for such a comparatively short time? This eternal perspective is likewise one we need to hold onto whenever we are growing faint under the load of some extended trial (Jer.31:25).

Even young men grow faint and weary, and even youths can stumble badly, but those who wait upon the Lord will put on new strength. They will rise up on the wing like eagles.

They will run and not become weary. They will walk and not become faint.

Isaiah 40:30-31

In a very short time, after a very short wait (Heb.10:35-39), our Lord will return – or we will be summoned to return to Him. We live for Him. Let us then be alert at all times to that truth and refuse to allow our hearts to be overwhelmed by what we see, hear and feel in this very temporary world.

(34) "Watch out for yourselves lest your hearts be burdened down in debauchery and drunkenness and earthly cares, and that day fall upon you suddenly like a trap [snapping shut]. (35) For it will come upon all those who dwell upon the face of the earth. (36) So be alert at all times, praying that you might have the strength to endure all these things which are going to happen, and to stand before the Son of Man."

Luke 21:34-36

Therefore, gird up the loins of your mind in spiritually mature alertness, and set your hope upon that grace which is coming your way when Jesus Christ is revealed.

1st Peter 1:13

3. Emotions versus Resting in Faith

Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by this renewal of your thinking, so that you may discern what God's will for you is, namely what it is good, well-pleasing, and correct [for you to do].

Romans 12:2

In this verse, Paul describes the alternatives, practically speaking, for every Christian as we walk through this world. Either we are going to be reprogramming our thinking and taking ever greater control of our hearts, or else it is inevitable that we will be "conformed to this world" in what we think and how we think, and that will of course affect what we say and what we do. For if we are not moving forward, fighting the fight, we will be confined to our bunker or even on the retreat. Just as nature abhors a vacuum, so the failure to occupy our minds with the truth will result in other things filling our thoughts. That is true on the moment by moment level, and also in terms of our spiritual momentum (or lack thereof) on a day over day basis. Failure to be actively "renewing our thinking" through reading scripture, listening to Bible teaching, believing the truth, and engaging with it in our hearts as part of our normal process will of necessity mean that the world and its lies will come to occupy an ever greater portion of our thoughts. This explains why so many Christians have very worldly attitudes and approaches to life, even if they may display a legalistic patina of religious Christianity. Indeed, it is no surprise that the spiritually immature have a difficult time in not "conforming" to the standards, the opinions, and the viewpoint of this world – because they do not possess sufficient truth in their hearts to mount a solid defense in the face of the fears, the temptations and the lies with which this world is awash. Only the spiritually mature possess the inner resources to do so consistently and effectively.

Then we will no longer be infants, tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here

and there by every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of people in their deceitful scheming.
Ephesians 4:14 NIV

As the verse above demonstrates, the contest in which we find ourselves embroiled is all the more challenging because much of what masquerades as the truth here in the devil's world is anything but. And that is just one of the obstacles to effectively resisting "conformity to the world" through "renewal of our thinking" (Rom.12:2). Once we have committed ourselves to the cause of spiritual growth and progress, victory is not necessarily assured, even when we have found a good place to learn the truth and have developed some consistency in taking it in and believing it. Application is the next redoubt we have to storm, and that assault will be resisted from without and from within. From without, the evil one and his forces are quick to notice true spiritual progress on the part of any member of the Church of Jesus Christ, and equally quick in attempting to oppose it. In this they have an ally within each and every one of us: the sin nature.

Our physical bodies naturally resist anything difficult, anything painful, anything unpleasant, even if it is good for us. Likewise, they are naturally attracted to anything pleasant in appearance, regardless of whether or not it is good for us. For this reason, much of the inner struggle we will have in "doing the right thing for Jesus Christ" will involve the interface between the spirit and the body, the place which in scripture is often called "the heart".⁷ For it is here, in our hearts, our souls, the true inner "us", that the key part of the battle to control our thinking must be fought. Our emotions are only partly under our control. We may think of them as if they were our children. Technically we are in complete authority over them, but, just as in the case of our children, we cannot always get them to do what we want them to do without forcefully exerting that authority. Left to their own devices, they will go too far down the road in pursuing "fun" to their own hurt, just as they will be reluctant to do anything "hard", even though it is necessary for all manner of good reasons.

The same is often true of our emotions. Occasionally they behave and positively support the good things we are trying to do while resisting the bad things we know are unhelpful. All too often, however, and perhaps even more so than our children, they resist us when we are trying to do what is right (as in devote time to Bible study when we are tired) and tempt us to do what is unhelpful (as in sleeping in when we have a great deal we really ought to get to). And unlike our children, whom, if we are even halfway decent parents, we are not going to let eat an entire gallon of ice cream, just because they want to, or skip school, just because they don't feel like going, when it comes to our own emotions it is much more difficult to exert the requisite self-discipline when they resist us. Most of us who have matured physically and socially do have

⁷ Or "soul", but it is very important to remember that the biblical "soul" (as opposed to the way the word is used by many in English generally) is not an organ or a third part; rather this word when used in English translations of the Bible expresses the inner us, just as the word heart does. See part 3A of the *Bible Basics* series: "Biblical Anthropology", section II.3, "The Human Spirit".

enough self-discipline not to over-eat dramatically the day before a major presentation on our jobs and not to let ourselves sleep in when our livelihoods are at stake (and the same is true, to a greater or lesser individual degree, in many other areas of our lives where there are serious consequences for questionable action or negligent inaction). When it comes to our spiritual lives, however, where the consequences are more important and eternal – but not absolutely obvious in the material here and now – developing the same level of self-discipline is obviously more difficult even as it is indisputably more valuable.

Emotions, like children, can become unruly, but while it is not always possible to control our children (at least in the way and to the degree we would sometimes wish to), if we are not masters of our emotions, then who is? Emotions respond to circumstances and to stimuli in our environment. But they also respond to what we tell them. Absent direction from us, they often become too enthusiastic or riled up or anxious or fearful or depressed about things that are truly unimportant when seen from the spiritual point of view, that is, from God's point of view. Mature believers come to understand this phenomenon well, learn how to "speak to our hearts" (Ps.4:4b; cf. Ps.199:36; 119:112) whenever they are reacting in an inappropriate way, and persevere in doing what needs to be done (or refraining from what ought not to be done) regardless of what our emotions may be telling us. If we do so by feeding them the truth, eventually they will come along as well. Eventually – if we persevere in fighting against any emotional tug that is dragging us in the wrong direction. Our emotions cannot be eliminated or repressed – no one ought to desire that (any more than we really want our children to be other than they actually are), but we can learn to live with them without them exercising an undue negative influence over our lives.

For anyone having trouble with the concept, scripture tells us how to control our emotions in certain situations. For example:

"In your anger do not sin": Do not let the sun go down while you are still angry,
Ephesians 4:26 NIV

Keep your lives free from the love of money and be content with what you have, because
God has said, "Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you."
Hebrews 13:5 NIV

In these and in every other situation where what we are feeling is impinging upon our better judgment, we have to remember that the key thing is what we *decide* to think, to say, and to do. That is true whether we respond to our emotions and follow their lead, or whether we take control of our heart and ignore the emotional pressures which are prompting us into unhelpful directions. In practical terms, it is often difficult to distinguish between our emotional state and our thoughts/decisions, especially if we are not really in control of ourselves or don't possess the necessary truth in our hearts to refute what our emotions are telling us.

What time I am afraid, I will trust in thee.
Psalm 56:3 KJV

This is a noble sentiment, one which we all wish would be completely true of ourselves as well and at all times. But it takes spiritual growth and some considerable experience in applying the truth under difficult circumstances to be able to control the emotion of fear. Any mature believer ought to be able to do so, theoretically. We know that God is so much bigger than the universe so as to make all that exists in this world completely insignificant in His sight. We know that He has planned every single event in the history of the world and that He has made perfect provision for us. We know that He loves us more than we can even imagine or understand, the undeniable proof being found in the sacrifice of His beloved Son our Lord Jesus Christ to die for our sins. And we know that He is absolutely faithful and that because of His perfect character He could never be otherwise. So we can confidently affirm with the Psalmist, "The Lord is on my side; I will not fear. What can man do to me?" (Ps.118:6). That is the (perfect) theory. But our emotions also have a say. And when some unexpected, sudden attack terrorizes us, our emotions are going to react in their accustomed, predictable way of fear. Learning how to combat fear and panic (and all other emotional reactions) requires truth in the heart believed and applied aggressively to the negative impulse, whatever it may be. And, clearly enough, the more we are concentrating on the truth in Bible reading, Bible study, prayer and meditating on principles of truth at any and all opportunities – and the more firmly and doggedly we really believe it – the more effective we will become at "holding the high ground" of our hearts when such counterattacks arise.

When anxiety was great within me
your consolation brought me joy.
Psalm 94:19 NIV

To return to our military analogy, not all counterattacks are sudden and short. Sometimes in the defense of a particular position we will be subjected to a long siege. What the devil cannot accomplish by main force (1Pet.5:8), he may try to do by wearing us down (2Cor.2:11). One of Satan's ace trumps in his effort to have us abandon our fortress of fellowship in peace and joy in Christ is guilt.

Guilt, an emotion and motivation often lacking in evil, sociopathic individuals, is very common among those who do possess a healthy conscience, particularly believers in Jesus Christ. But guilt is often misplaced. Just as it is possible to feel no particular guilt over genuine wrongs we have done in the past (having confessed and moved forward with the Lord, deliberately forgetting things done long ago), so it is also true that we can be made to "feel guilty" for things we have done and decisions we have made that were not sinful (as when a friend becomes upset with us and reproaches us for spending time in Bible study rather than in socializing with him/her). Even when we were at fault for some past action – and indeed particularly when our actions were not entirely pure – feeling guilty can be a spiritually incorrect response, and a potentially a very problematic one as well. There is a difference between morbid feelings of guilt on the one hand and the Holy Spirit prodding our consciences on the other. One major distinction between the two has to do with time. The Holy Spirit speaks to us regarding what we are doing here and now and what we purpose to do in the near future. Guilt motivated by the sin nature and stoked by the evil one looks backward to past mistakes, large or small, real or imagined, and tears us away from our peace and our joy in Jesus Christ.

If we have sinned – and all sin (e.g., Rom.3:23; Jas.3:2) – we were forgiven by the Lord when we confessed those sins and restored to fellowship with Him immediately (1Jn.1:9; cf. Ps.32:5). Our Lord was within His rights to do so because He paid the entire price for those very sins on the cross. There was nothing we could have done to atone for any of our sins, and now that He has died for them, and now that He has forgiven them, allowing ourselves to be racked with guilt over them is a subtle form of blasphemy: don't we believe that He told us the truth? Don't we understand what it took for Him to remove our guilt at the cross?

How blessed is he whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered!
How blessed is the man to whom the Lord does not impute iniquity,
Psalm 31:1-2a NASB

A further complication here is the issue of divine discipline. For those of us with consciences, whenever something goes wrong, whenever we experience an unexpected setback or difficulty, it is very tempting to associate this shock with divine punishment. Now God does discipline us for our sins, but He does so to help us, not to destroy us, and He does so as a loving Father for our good and for our spiritual healing in every way (Heb.12:5-11). And one more very important thing: just as any human father would make sure we understand why we are being disciplined, what are the chances that our heavenly Father is going to leave us in doubt on this score? If only we are really listening to the Spirit, the discipline we receive for sin will be made clear to us as such. For there is also testing in this life, there is suffering which comes the believer's way having nothing whatsoever to do with discipline – sharing the suffering of Christ (Rom.8:17; 2Cor.1:5; Phil.1:29-30; 3:10; Col.1:24; 2Tim.2:12; 1Pet.4:12-13). No believer ever advances far in the spiritual life without having to endure trials and tribulation, troubles that are allowed by the Lord to hone and strengthen our faith – troubles about which we should never feel guilty but rather encouraged because we are walking in the will of God – otherwise we would never be entrusted with the test.

(3) And not only this, but let us glory in our tribulations, knowing that tribulation produces patience, (4) and patience produces proven character, and proven character produces hope – (5) and this hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured out in our hearts through the Holy Spirit given to us.
Romans 5:3-5

(2) Brothers, when you are being beset with all manner of trials, take pains to be joyful.
(3) For you should keep in mind that this testing of your faith develops perseverance. (4) So let your perseverance develop fully, that you may become fully mature and entitled to a full reward, having been found lacking in no respect.
James 1:2-4

Things done long ago. Things for which we suffered and now regret. Things of the distant past are **not** "the reason" we are suffering whatever it is we are suffering **today**. That is what the devil wants us to think. That is what the sin nature urges us to think. That is precisely the type of misplaced guilt we are warning about here, dangerous indeed because if we pay it heed we are

soon going to forfeit the peace and joy of fellowship with Christ we have striven so hard to attain; we are going to get pushed off the hill. That is precisely the mistake Job made – although he had greater excuse than we have, being subjected to exceptional pressure and not having the benefit of reading the book of Job as we do:

For You write bitter things against me and make me to inherit the iniquities of my youth.
Job 13:26 NASB

A large part of coping with emotional turmoil in the heat of the spiritual battle that is the Christian life in this world, therefore, lies in developing the spiritual common sense to distinguish between feelings and the genuine guidance of the Spirit speaking to our consciences. For the Christian life is not about emotion, even though it can and should be emotional in the positive sense of the word. Simply put, the properly lived Christian life is not about how we "feel". For if we are doing what Christ would have us to do, there are going to be many occasions when we do not "feel" good for all manner of reasons.

Persevering in prayer, in Bible reading, in Bible study, and in our service to the Lord takes effort, takes time, takes the expenditure of resources, all of which things may make us "feel" tired, "feel" harried, "feel" poor or overburdened. Mind you, we have the right to "feel good" about anything and everything done correctly in the Spirit for the Name of Jesus Christ. But human beings that we are, it is often the case that our emotions will rebel against all such sacrifice, whether subtly in a small or obviously in a big way, out of laziness, fear, and jealousy for the "loss" of care we are devoting to ourselves. Selfishness and fear are the natural predispositions of our corrupt nature, with the result that gaining the upper hand over our emotions so as to come to a place of true courage and true humility is a life-long struggle. Only by embracing complete objectivity in our evaluation of what and how we "feel" at any given moment do we even stand a chance of preventing our emotions from running us instead of guiding them to match the true spiritual realities of our situation.

Solid [spiritual] food is for the [spiritually] mature, those who by [diligent] practice have trained their [moral] perceptive faculties (i.e., consciences) to [properly] distinguish between good and evil.
Hebrews 5:14

The conscience can only be calibrated properly by means of the truth, and can only be given proper guidance thereafter when it is being informed by the Spirit and guided by an objective application of the truth we have learned. Only then, for example, will the believer become adept at laying to rest unhelpful emotional reactions – such as inordinate and misplaced guilt about things done long ago and long ago confessed, things which, as discussed above, have absolutely no bearing on what is happening *now* in the believer's life . . . unless we allow that false emotion to careen out of control. Clearly, we expect our consciences to "smite us" when we genuinely do wrong (e.g., 1Sam.24:5; 2Sam.24:10), and that is all the more reason to make it our policy as much as is humanly possible to always avoid the wrong and choose the right.

The goal of this command is love, which comes from a pure heart and a good conscience and a sincere faith.

1st Timothy 1:5 NIV

The conscience, once its natural appreciation of the distinction between good and evil, between right and wrong, has been further informed and made more precise by the truth of the Word of God, will be in perfect accord with the cardinal virtues of faith, hope and love. If we are truly walking with Jesus Christ, resting in and reflecting His love, facing the world in faith, and moving resolutely towards the hope of resurrection and reward, our conscience will have little with which to reprove us – when it and the emotions it governs are properly subordinated to our will as we walk forward in the truth. Problems arise when our "feelings" rebel and the dictation begins to flow the other way, from our sin natures to our consciences, pressuring our will and our faith.

To the pure all things are pure, but to those who are defiled and unbelieving nothing is pure; but even their mind and conscience are defiled.

Titus 1:15 NKJV

The conscience is a godly "yard stick", which in humility and with knowledge serves us well, but in arrogance and with ignorance it does us little good. Recognizing the difference between our conscience reacting emotionally on the one hand or responding to the Spirit's guidance on the other would seem to be a basic affair, but in fact confusion on this key point is one of the more common failings of those who have not yet attained spiritual maturity – and will continue to be a threat which must be guarded against as long as we reside in these corrupt frames. In the power of the Spirit, relying on the truth in our hearts, it is entirely possible for all things to proceed in our hearts "decently and in order" (1Cor.14:40). Straying from the path disrupts this peaceful order in our hearts, and failure to be consistent in our pursuit of the truth and spiritual growth thereby makes us vulnerable (Prov.19:27).

Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by this renewal of your thinking, so that you may *discern* what God's will for you is, namely what it is good, well-pleasing, and correct [for you to do].

Romans 12:2

(9) And this is my prayer: that your love may abound more and more in full-knowledge (*epignosis*: truth believed) and in all *discernment*, (10) so that you may be able to evaluate the things that are good and appropriate [for you to do] to be sincere and without offense in regard to the day of Christ (i.e., to gain a maximum reward at Christ's judgment seat), (11) full of the righteous production Jesus Christ [commends] to the glory and praise of God.

Philippians 1:9-11

Battling to hold the spiritual high ground of our hearts against unseen enemies within and without is often a struggle – as can be seen in many of the Psalms (e.g., Ps.13:2; 42:1ff.) – but it

is one that can be won in the Spirit (Gal.5:22) and by holding fast to the truth (Ps.131:2).

(16) I will ask the Father, and He will give you another Encourager to be with you forever – (17) the Spirit of truth whom the world cannot receive, for it neither sees Him, nor knows Him. But you know Him, for He abides with you, and will be in you.
John 14:16-17

But the Encourager, the Holy Spirit whom the Father will send in My Name, that One will teach you all [the truth] and will remind you of all [the truth] which I spoke to you.
John 14:26

(3) Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the God of compassion and all encouragement, (4) the One who encourages us in all our tribulation so that we in turn may be able to encourage those in all types of tribulation by means of the very encouragement which we ourselves received from God. (5) Because as our sufferings for Christ multiplied in service to you, so through Christ did the encouragement we received multiply to the same degree. (6) So if we are experiencing tribulation, it is to provide you with encouragement and salvation. And if we are being encouraged it is for the sake of the encouragement you have received, which is now at work in your successful endurance of the same sufferings which we also experienced. (7) And so our hope for you is a solid one, since we know that as you have become partakers of suffering, in the same way will you also become partakers of encouragement.
2nd Corinthians 1:3-7

None of us will ever be perfect in our execution of this principle, so it is important not to be discouraged if we have difficulty keeping the truth in the forefront of our thoughts, especially in the early going of attempting to implement this important aspect of the Christian life, and most particularly when we are suffering some spiritual attack or temptation. In those circumstances, rapid recovery is the key, along with the habit of being able to batten down the hatches, so to speak, and ride out the storm in peace. All of God's truth is useful in thus maintaining our heavenly perspective on life, and the more we have been and are concentrating on the truth both day by day and at any particular moment, the more likely we are to be able to right the ship when the winds and waves hit us unexpectedly.

(24) "Therefore whoever hears these sayings of Mine, and does them, I will liken him to a wise man who built his house on the rock: (25) and the rain descended, the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house; and it did not fall, for it was founded on the rock. (26) But everyone who hears these sayings of Mine, and does not do them, will be like a foolish man who built his house on the sand: (27) and the rain descended, the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house; and it fell. And great was its fall."
Matthew 7:24-27

In our application of the passage above (which is talking about believers versus unbelievers), a

solid edifice of truth in the heart, built upon actual truth genuinely believed and held in our hearts by faith, is essential to keeping things together in all spiritual storms, whether they come up unexpectedly or can be seen approaching from a distance, whether they are short-lived or long-lasting. God is absolutely faithful, but fully digesting that truth and living according to it is something that takes a great deal of time and dedication to achieve. Our Lord found very few of His contemporaries with such "great faith" (cf. Matt.8:5-10), but with the help of the Holy Spirit and with sufficient commitment to learning and believing the truth of the Word, all believers today have the opportunity both to develop the capacity for meeting every test and trial with "great faith".

Please understand. The capacity to do so is one thing; doing so is another. There are times of trial when spiritually advanced believers fail (for whatever reason) to call to mind the necessary truths they have believed, and so they wilt – even if only momentarily – under the pressure (virtually all of the great believers of the Bible, it seems, had at least one such notable failure). And there are times when believers with little truth in their hearts nevertheless stand strong in the faith in the face of some harrowing trial. But while both things have been known to happen within scripture and without, the more usual situation is that believers with great capacity developed through attention to the truth do better under fire. Sometimes that is a natural or "instinctive" reaction conditioned by their daily attention to the scriptures and the truths they contain. Oftentimes, however, especially in cases of sudden disaster or unexpected threats, we find ourselves having to struggle with our emotions and "manually" apply the truth we know until our hearts have calmed down.

Surely I have calmed and quieted my soul (i.e., heart, emotions),
Like a weaned child with his mother;
Like a weaned child is my soul (i.e., heart, emotions) within me.
Psalm 131:2 NKJV

This "faith rest", the moment by moment Sabbath believers in Christ are meant to and have a right to enjoy at all times (Heb.4:9-12), becomes ever more resilient as we grow spiritually. As mentioned above, every scrap of truth we have learned and committed to our hearts by faith contributes to forming our inner fortress wherein we respond with ever greater trust to the absolute faithfulness of the Lord – He is worthy of perfect and absolute trust, of course, because He is perfectly and absolutely faithful, but attaining to that sort of faith requires the mustard seed to grow . . . from sprout to plant to mighty tree. And while all truth contributes to this process (so that being eclectic in the type of Bible lessons we are willing to learn is a huge mistake), one particular area of the truth which is very useful in combating sudden shocks to our faith is the collection of doctrines surrounding the Person and the work of our dear Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

Holding the high ground of the heart is impossible without resting in the Lord in a rest of faith. As mentioned earlier, our peace and joy in salvation are inextricably linked to our ability to focus on what is to come instead of being preoccupied with what is happening around us. In this focus on eternity, the best of the best is our coming fellowship in person with the Lord we love so

much, Jesus Christ our dear Savior. "Waiting for Jesus" to return for us all – or call us home to Himself personally – is the fundamental mind-set of the heavenly perspective. For being with Him in resurrection is the blessed hope in which we have been saved (cf. Rom.8:23-24; Gal.5:5; 1Thes.1:10; Heb.9:28; Jas.5:8; 2Pet.3:12-14; Jude 1:21).

Thy kingdom come!
Matthew 6:10a KJV

(7) Therefore you are not lacking in any spiritual gift, as you await the revelation of our Lord Jesus Christ. (8) God will also make you to stand firm without reproach until the end on that day of our Lord Jesus Christ (i.e., the 2nd Advent).

1st Corinthians 1:7-8

Marana Tha! ["Return to us, O thou our Lord!"]

1st Corinthians 16:22

(20) For our [true] citizenship has a heavenly existence, and it is from there that we expectantly await our Savior, Lord Jesus Christ, (21) who will transform this humble body of ours into one that matches His glorious body through His powerful ability to subordinate everything to Himself.

Philippians 3:20-21

Looking for the blessed hope and glorious appearing of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ . . .

Titus 2:13 NKJV

If we are really waiting for the Lord's to return (or our return to Him) as our first priority (Phil.1:23), then we will be concerned to be good witnesses for Him here and now, to men and angels both. If we are really waiting for Him, then on some level we must realize that it does not matter if we have the things of this world or not: fame, riches, possessions, pleasures, status and power in this world, all such things are destined to turn to dust, but we *will* stand before the Lord to give an account for what we have done with our lives (Rom.14:10; 2Cor.5:10), and we *will* be rewarded for the things truly done for Him – spiritual growth, progress and production – but not for the things we wasted time, energy and resources on which had nothing to do with the kingdom of God (1Cor.3:11-15).

For just this reason our Lord told us that it was possible to be happy even in the face of deprivation and persecution (Matt.5:3-16), precisely because – if we are truly waiting for Him in our hearts – keeping our minds directed towards Him will of necessity keep them turned away from the world and what the world values. The people of this world proceed and act as if they will live forever and all that may be seen will continue forever exactly as it is (2Pet.3:3-4). But we know the truth. We know that our time here is very limited, and that we are here for Jesus Christ whose return we breathlessly await. We are merely sojourning in this world, being in it, but not of it (Jn.17:11; 17:16). We care what Jesus Christ thinks, not what the world and the evil

one who rules it think. We want what He wants, not what the world and the flesh want. We are not interested in fixing or changing this world – our Master will do that when He returns; we are interested in fixing ourselves through spiritual growth and progress, and helping others grow and progress as well through the ministries our Savior has assigned us (1Cor.12:5). The invisible reality is that we are standing on the doorstep of eternity waiting for a Master who will soon return to us (Matt.24:45-51), and it is our deepest desire to be pleasing to Him in every way (Rom.12:1-2; 1Cor.7:32-34; Heb.13:20-21). If we are truly waiting on the Lord, abiding in Him until the time of His return to us or His call for us to return to Him (Jn.15:1ff.), then the verse is true in our cases as it was in the case of the apostle Paul, that for us to live is Jesus Christ, and to die is gain (Phil.1:21).

This two-sided perspective, of keeping our mind's eye focused on our Lord as we eagerly await being with Him on the one hand, and of turning away from the priorities of the world and the flesh, set ablaze by the evil one and his cohorts, on the other, is the spiritual stance required to truly have God's peace in this world. If we care about this world, it will turn on us. If we care more for the Lord than anything else, while we still have tribulation in this world (Jn.16:33), we will be able in the power and Spirit of God to ride out all storms and endure all trials as we wait on the return of the One we love more than life. That is true peace. That is true blessing. That is true spiritual wealth – without worldly compromise.

The blessing of the Lord brings wealth, and He adds no trouble to it.
Proverbs 10:22 NIV

This peace, this joy, this spiritual prosperity (Hebrew *shalom*) that comes from resting in Him is a heritage from the Lord Jesus Christ given to all believers and empowered by the Holy Spirit (Gal.5:22). If we are embracing these truths and if we are living our lives with this heavenly perspective solidly entrenched in the high ground of our hearts, then no sudden disaster nor any emotional turmoil will be able to dislodge our gaze from the person of Jesus Christ, the Lord and Savior to whom we owe absolutely everything.

Peace I leave for you; peace I give to you. Not as the world gives do I give it to you.
John 14:27

You will keep in perfect peace him whose mind is steadfast, because he trusts in you.
Isaiah 26:3 NIV

Now may the Lord of peace himself give you peace at all times and in every way. The Lord be with all of you.
2nd Thessalonians 3:16 NIV

And the peace of God which surpasses every thought will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.
Philippians 4:7

Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, since as members of one body you were called to peace. And be thankful.
Colossians 3:15 NIV

4. Clear Eyes

The Light shone in the darkness, but the darkness [chose] not [to] comprehend it.
John 1:5

I am the Light of the world. He who follows Me shall not walk in darkness, but will have the Light of life.
John 8:12b

When we were saved, unlike the world at large, we chose to accept by faith "the shining forth of the light of the gospel of Christ's glory" (2Cor.4:4). As we did so, in the miracle of spiritual rebirth, our hearts were cleansed from all that had gone before (1Cor.6:11), and we were thus then able to see the brilliant light of God's truth with pure hearts and with clear eyes. That was the case even though we had not yet learned very much about the Lord and all the other wonderful truths that have been stored up for His people in the holy scriptures. And, ideally, we then proceeded forward from that point onward, turning completely away from the world and drinking in the milk of the Word day by day.

In practice, however, very few (if any) believers have experienced a straight line trajectory of upward spiritual growth after salvation, especially here in our later day of Laodicea. Sooner or later, it seems, most if not all of us at least temporarily run afoul of the influences of this world empowered by the evil one and abetted by our sin natures.

(22) The eye is the lamp of the body. If your eyes are healthy, your whole body will be full of light. (23) But if your eyes are unhealthy, your whole body will be full of darkness. If then the light within you is darkness, how great is that darkness!
Matthew 6:22-23 NIV

(34) Your eye is the lamp of your body. When your eyes are healthy, your whole body also is full of light. But when they are unhealthy, your body also is full of darkness. (35) See to it, then, that the light within you is not darkness. (36) Therefore, if your whole body is full of light, and no part of it dark, it will be just as full of light as when a lamp shines its light on you."
Luke 11:34-36 NIV

The word translated "healthy" in both passages above is the Greek adjective *haplous* and really means "simple" in the sense of being uncomplicated and unsubtle – childlike and trusting, one might say, as opposed to being burdened down with the cynicism and jaundiced view so common among adults. Having a "clear eye" in biblical terms is being willing to accept the truth of the

Word without a double standard, without skepticism, without mental reservations or rationalization or over-intellectualizing. That is the only way to let the truth in, through child-like eyes which are not clouded by the world and its lies.

"Assuredly, I say to you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will by no means enter it."

Luke 18:17 NKJV

What is true of salvation as in the verse above is also true for believers in our lives thereafter. The world, of course, tells us that this is foolishness, but giving ourselves over to doubt as the world would have us do is actually the opposite of wisdom. Only by keeping our eyes clear, our hearts open and responsive to the truth, will we be able to apply the truth we have believed in faith, trusting God that He will do as He has promised; only by keeping our spiritual vision clear and our minds receptive to the Word will we be able to receive ever more biblical truth and move forward with our spiritual growth and progress.

The Word of God is our one true source of light in this world.

Thy word is a lamp unto my feet, and a light unto my path.

Psalms 119:105 KJV

All who oppose God reject the light He has shined into the world in Jesus Christ and reflect only on their own inner sinfulness.

Haughty eyes and a proud heart, the lamp of the wicked, are sin.

Proverbs 21:4 ESV

All who would grow in the truth must listen to the truth simply, letting the light in without a jaundiced eye.

Therefore consider carefully how you listen. Whoever has will be given more; whoever does not have, even what they think they have will be taken from them.

Luke 8:18 NIV

Just as when we were saved the darkness that blocked our vision was melted away by the light of the gospel of truth, so whenever we find our spiritual eyesight growing dim, turning back to the Lord and to His truth will reverse the process. Unlike salvation, spiritual recovery is not necessarily instantaneous, and for those who have strayed far from the Lord, it may take some time to recover the ground lost through inattention to the truth and embracing the world instead. And even for believers who have not gone off to some far country like the prodigal son did, but who have "merely" allowed themselves to become distracted in their Christian walk by the problems and troubles, the delights and attractions of this world, confession of sin, re-engagement with learning the truth (through Bible reading and attention to a serious Bible ministry), and recommencement of applying truth to their daily walk will bring recovery of

spiritual vision, light returning to the eyes.

Draw near to God and He will draw near to you. Cleanse your hands, you sinners; and purify your hearts, you double-minded.

James 4:8 NKJV

Keeping a close watch on our spiritual vision is therefore another important habit for all believers intent on growth, progress and production for Jesus Christ to have. If the windshield is getting splattered with mud, best to pull over and clean it up completely so as to be able to drive forward in the right direction. If the weeds are growing up and choking out the grain producing crop, best to take some time to root them up and cast them aside so as not to damage one's harvest. If the heart is becoming clogged with worldliness, best to clear it out before damage is done so that the truth may circulate freely and clearly throughout the spiritual body. And if the door has begun to close on Him to whom we owe everything, more than we can know, by all means open it up wide again that we may enjoy full fellowship in the light of truth at all times with Him who purchased us by His own blood.

Behold, I am standing at the door and knocking. If anyone will listen to my voice and open the door, I will go in to him and dine with him, and he with Me.

Revelation 3:20

5. Virtue Thinking

(5) And to this end, along with your faith zealously develop morality, and along with morality, knowledge, (6) and along with knowledge, self-control, and along with self-control, perseverance, and along with perseverance, godliness, (7) and along with godliness, love of the brethren, and along with love of the brethren, love. (8) For if these things be in your possession and increasing, they will render you neither unfit not fruitless in your confession of our Lord Jesus Christ.

2nd Peter 1:5-8

Scripture, in enumerating many such virtues in many such passages, provides for us positive examples of the type of persons we should be as followers of Jesus Christ and of the type of behavior which should exemplify our Christian conduct as we carry our crosses through this world following His path. What is often not understood in such discussions, however, is that truly virtuous conduct cannot be achieved by chipping away at our sinful outside – true transformation can only come from the inside out.

Finally, brothers and sisters, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things.

Philippians 4:8 NIV

As the verse above indicates, thinking about "good things", while something we as mature

Christians should obviously be doing, is not spontaneous – otherwise Paul would not be encouraging the Philippians to do so, spelling out the parameters of "good thoughts" beyond simple generalities. And we do need to keep being reminded to think the right way – ideally reminding ourselves throughout the day – because wrong thinking is as natural as the sin nature infesting the bodies in which we dwell, inasmuch as "every inclination of the human heart is evil from childhood" (Gen.8:21; cf. Eph.4:17-20; Phil.3:19).

The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked; Who can know it?
Jeremiah 17:9 NKJV

(18) But the things that come out of a person's mouth come from the heart, and these defile them. (19) For out of the heart come evil thoughts—murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false testimony, slander.
Matthew 15:18-19 NIV (cf. Mk.7:20-22)

(24) But Jesus did not commit Himself to them, because He knew all men, (25) and had no need that anyone should testify of man, for He knew what was in man.
John 2:24-25 NKJV

(5) Those who are oriented to the flesh think about the things of the flesh, but those who are orientated to the Spirit, the things of the Spirit. (6) For the thought-pattern of the flesh results in death, but the thought-pattern of the Spirit results in life and peace. (7) Now the thought-pattern of the flesh is [one of] enmity towards God, for it does not obey God's law, nor is it [even] able [to do so]. (8) And [so] those who are under the control of the flesh (i.e., unbelievers enslaved to the sin nature) are not able to please God. (9) But you are not under the control of the flesh, but under the control of the Spirit – if indeed the Spirit of God dwells in you. And if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, that person does not belong to Him.
Romans 8:5-9

As this last passage makes clear, reorienting our thinking is impossible without the Spirit – whose lead we will have to make a habit of obeying. That responsiveness in turn cannot be achieved without the truth of the Word resident in our hearts through having heard and believed it, for the truth is what the Spirit uses to guide us. Actively focusing on that truth, thinking about the virtues the Bible gives us as guideposts for our Christian walk, is what we are terming "virtue thinking" in this section. That is to say, to "live virtuously", to walk in faith and hope and love (and in all of the other virtues delineated in scripture) requires as a matter of our daily application to be thinking about them – what they truly mean – for only so can we act on them. We have to understand what "faith" means in order to keep that principle, that virtue in our hearts and in our minds eye as we walk through the world, and only then can we speak and act in a way that exemplifies faith (and the same thing is true for hope, for love, and for all other Christian virtues).

In fact, of course, faith, hope and love – and other Christian virtues as well – are concepts which

embrace many aspects of God's truth. Faith, for example, always has to have an object to be meaningful, and we believers have faith in God, faith in Jesus Christ, faith in all of the Bible's promises because it is God's Word, faith that the Lord is with us and loves us and will deliver us – faith embraces all of the truth we have learned and believed and relegates the here and now of the sensory world and all that is in it to a distant second place, and such faith glorifies God (Rom.4:20). Hope likewise has an object. We are looking forward to our Lord's return, to the resurrection, to our eternal reward, to the New Jerusalem. When hope characterizes our thoughts, we are seeing things from the more important future reality we know to be true rather than worrying about "the future" on earth as human beings are wont to do, and such hope anchors us to heaven where our Lord has preceded us (Heb.6:19). And love too has an object. We love God because He loved us first and gave up His one and only dear Son Jesus Christ to die in our place (1Jn.4:9-10; 4:19). We love Jesus Christ, more than life itself – because without Him we would be dead, spiritually, physically and eternally, rather than looking forward to the eternal life we have in Him because of what He did for us on the cross. We love His Word, because it tells us about Him. And we love our brothers and sisters in Christ, because along with them we are Christ's Body, His bride. We also love all others because Christ died for them too, and such love fulfills the Law (Rom.13:10).

So when we are thinking virtuously, if our attention is directed to the here and now, we do so through the prism of faith; and if we cast our gaze forward in time, we do so in confident hope of all the eternal wonders to come; and if we look backward, it is not to regret the past but to glory in the cross through which we have become one with our dear Savior Jesus Christ forevermore. In other words, whether we recognize we are doing so or not, "virtue thinking" is the process of setting our thoughts in godly channels of truth through the Holy Spirit, and the "virtues" which scripture enumerates are thus not meant to be confusing and unapproachable principles of perfection but signposts meant to help us, both to guide us into paths of good thinking and also to check our present progress and position in terms of how we are presently doing. Simply put, virtue is merely truth distilled into usable principles for application to our life circumstances.

But [until that future time of our Lord's return] there now remains faith, hope and love, these three [cardinal virtues] – and the greatest of these is love.

1st Corinthians 13:13

As mentioned above, being able to pick out the virtues named above on a multiple-choice quiz is one thing; truly understanding what they mean – and therefore what living in accordance with them demands of us – is quite another, and actually living in a biblically virtuous way something else altogether. But if we have set ourselves on the road to spiritual growth, progress and production, we will (or certainly should) begin to think, speak and act according Christian virtue at least to some degree as a matter of course. Fully understood, the virtues act as a sort of litmus test for us, standards against which to measure our conduct whenever, for example we are reading scripture and encounter them. All this can be seen from a brief examination of the three virtues in the citation above, faith, hope and love.

First, we should point out that actually knowing what these three virtues mean in biblical terms is

essential for there to be any genuine application of the truths they embody and represent. Corollary to that principle is the fact that misapprehension of the true scriptural significance of faith, hope and love can result in confusion and serious misapplication. One often hears "have faith!" and "my faith is important to me", but in Bible terms "faith" is trusting in Jesus Christ and in His truth. Hope is likewise often misunderstood. One often hears, "I sure hope so", but in the Bible the word "hope" is expressive of certainty about the blessed future though it cannot be seen – because one believes the biblical testimony about it. Our hope is not an uncertain wish but an absolute reality which has merely not yet been made manifest: the resurrection and our eternity with Jesus Christ. And there is perhaps no more misunderstood word than "love". In His final recorded conversation with the apostle Peter, Jesus tells him three times to "feed/pastor My sheep" – "if you love Me". As with faith and hope, love must have an object, and Jesus Christ must be the focus of the believer's love in appreciation and gratefulness of who He is (having become a man as well as being God in order to be able to die for us) and what He has done for us (paying for all of our sins on the cross) – Him and along with Him our fellow believers also in particular who are "His sheep". And like faith (which is trusting in the Lord regardless of what our eyes and ears and feelings tell us), and like hope (which is anticipating in total confidence the glories yet to be revealed), love is an act of will: determining to esteem our Lord beyond all else and to follow through on that love by esteeming our brothers and sisters for whom He died more than ourselves (Phil.2:3), impossible without a deep understanding of the truth of the Word. And just as the virtue of faith results (or should) in a life of faithfulness to the Lord in all that we do as Christians, and just as hope results (or should) in a life lived in joyous anticipation of all the wonderful things to come rather than focusing on this temporary world, so the virtue of love results (or should) in a truly loving Christian walk wherein we do our part to minister to the Church of Jesus Christ in support of the truth, avoiding meanwhile any offense which would cause our brothers and sisters to stumble. On an essential level, therefore, faith is the virtue most closely associated with spiritual growth, because it takes truth in which to put one's trust in order to grow our faith; hope is the virtue most closely associated with the tempering and seasoning of the believer as we make progress in our Christian walk, because it takes a deliberate concentration upon the resurrection and our coming reward from Jesus Christ in order to be able to pass the tests that come to the progressing mature believer; and love is the virtue most closely associated spiritual production, because in caring for the Church of Jesus Christ through the proper functioning of whatever gifts the Spirit has given us in carrying out the ministries that the Lord has assigned us that Christian love is most notably fulfilled.

Of course all three virtues are in truth inextricable, and capable of being contemplated and acted upon by believers at all stages of spiritual growth – as they should be. Moreover, faith, hope and love have their own unique applications to the Christian life synchronically (i.e., where we are this day) as well as diachronically as discussed above (i.e., being built up cumulatively as we move forward spiritually day by day). So while all three cardinal virtues are to be applied at all times, they are nevertheless anchored to a particular point of orientation in our Christian experience. Faith has a special focus on "today": we trust the Lord that He has as He told us already provided our daily bread (Matt.6:11; Lk.11:3; cf. Matt.6:25-33; Lk.12:22-32) on whatever day we may find ourselves "as long as it is called 'today' (i.e., as long as we are in this

world: Heb.3:13), for we only receive one day at a time (cf. Jas.4:14), and the days in this world are evil by nature (Matt.6:34), but redeemed by good efforts for Jesus Christ in growth, progress and production day by day (Eph.5:16; Col.4:5). Hope has a special focus on "tomorrow": we are looking forward to a kingdom not of this earth, to a body which will never be ill or experience pain, and to a reward that neither rust nor moth nor thievery can take away or destroy, that wonderful tomorrow when our Lord returns (Rom.8:23-24; Tit.2:13; Heb.11:10; 2Pet.3:12). And love has a special focus on yesterday, the only yesterday which matters, the glorious day when Christ died for us, the glorious day when we put our faith in Him and were born again to life eternal. Buttressed by Christ's love and empowered by the love we have for Him and for those who are His, confident in the hope of the deliverance that is coming no matter what may betide in this world, and absolutely sure in faith of His faithfulness in all that He has promised us, we will be well-fit and prepared to live our Christian life, to walk our Christian walk, in a manner pleasing to our Savior. As Peter says at the conclusion of his more expansive list of Christian virtues:

For if these things be in your possession and increasing, they will render you neither unfit nor fruitless in your confession of our Lord Jesus Christ.

2nd Peter 1:8

Our faith can be measured by just how big, how powerful, how capable God really appears to us in our heart of hearts – if we had only a mustard seed of genuine faith we would never worry at all, so great would He appear to us (even though of course He is greater by far than we could ever imagine this side of heaven). Our hope can be measured by how often and how intently we are looking to the eternal promises and rewards which are our heritage as believers in Jesus Christ – if we spent only a small amount of our time and energy doing so we would scarcely ever take this world and this life seriously enough to become upset by what we see, hear and feel. And our love can be measured by how important Jesus Christ really is to us in truth – if He really were our "all in all" as we proclaim, then we would be diligently carrying out His mandates to grow and progress and to help our brothers and sisters do so day by day – after all, He did for us more than we have any true idea:

(3) Do nothing from selfishness or empty conceit, but with humility of mind regard one another as more important than yourselves; (4) do not merely look out for your own personal interests, but also for the interests of others. (5) Have this attitude in yourselves which was also in Christ Jesus, (6) who, although He existed in the form of God, did not regard equality with God a thing to be grasped, (7) but emptied Himself, taking the form of a bond-servant, and being made in the likeness of men. (8) Being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.

Philippians 2:3-8 NASB

Naturally of course, all virtues, being distillations and focal points of principles of truth, are completely interrelated and often difficult to disaggregate. For that reason they should be seen as entirely inclusive of all other related truth and never exclusive of anything true.

Faith is energized by love (Gal.5:6), faith and love are based upon hope (Col.1:4-5), love builds faith (1Cor.13:7) while faith builds and is the basis for hope (Rom.15:4; Gal.5:5; Heb.11:1-2; 1Pet.1:21; cf. Rom.5:2), and love is only possible when built up by the same (1Pet.1:22). Thus the interconnectedness of these three primary virtues is amply attested to by scripture. Indeed, these three virtues are the mainstays of everything we are supposed to be doing in the Christian life precisely because they embody the correct way of thinking – virtue thinking – that every Christian should embrace in order to be properly motivated to live for Jesus Christ.

We remember before our God and Father your work produced by faith, your labor prompted by love, and your endurance inspired by hope in our Lord Jesus Christ.
1st Thessalonians 1:3 NIV

But since we belong to the day, let us be sober, putting on faith and love as a breastplate, and the hope of salvation as a helmet.
1st Thessalonians 5:8 NIV

6. Focusing on Christ

I have kept the Lord always before me. Because He is at my right hand, I will not be moved.
Psalm 16:8

For to me, to live is Christ, and to die is gain.
Philippians 1:21

Jesus Christ is our life in fact, our everything in this world (Ps.16:2; Ps.73:25), the Giver of the eternal life we confidently hope to have with Him forever (Col.3:4; Tit.2:13). We owe our dear Savior everything: creation, salvation, deliverance through this world, and life eternal in resurrection in the New Jerusalem with Him forever as part of His Bride forever. It is therefore fitting and appropriate in every way that He be the true focus of all our thoughts and gratitude during our short time in this world as we eagerly anticipate being with Him forever.

(8) Though you have never laid eyes on Him, yet you love Him. And though you cannot see Him at this present time, yet you have faith in Him. For this reason you rejoice with an inexpressible joy that bespeaks the glorious future to come, (9) when you shall carry off in victory the ultimate prize – the deliverance (lit. "salvation") of your lives (i.e., personal salvation) – which is the very purpose and objective of this faith of yours.
1st Peter 1:8-9

So while there are many important biblical truths on which we should be continually reflecting, the most important have to do with the One who made us and then saved us in the first place, having delivered us from this kingdom of darkness in which we temporarily reside so that positionally, that is, being "in Him", we already find ourselves in the kingdom of light (Col.1:12-13). Jesus Christ is our Rock (Gen.49:24; Ex.17:6; Deut.32:4; 1Sam.2:2; 2Sam.22:3; 22:47;

Ps.18:46; 19:14; 28:1; 31:2-3; Is.26:4; Dan.2:34-35; Rom.9:33; 1Cor.10:4; 1Pet.2:8), and apart from Him there is no other Foundation (Ps.118:22; Is.28:16; Matt.7:24-25; Lk.6:48; Acts 4:11; 1Cor.3:11; Eph.2:20; 1Pet.2:6-7). Keeping our thoughts and hopes directed towards Him, who He is, what He has done for us, and our gloriously anticipated eternal life with Him is therefore an important part of maintaining the proper spiritual perspective in our walk through this world.

For [Moses] grew strong by seeing the One who cannot be seen (i.e., by keeping his mind's eye on the invisible Jesus Christ).

Hebrews 11:27

We cannot see the Lord as yet with our physical eyes, but we do have available to us "the mind of Christ" (1Cor.2:16; cf. 1Pet.4:1), that is, the entire written Word of God which represents the truth and the thinking of the Living Word of God. Let us pay close attention to that truth in all of its glory, that Christ may be established in our hearts (Gal.4:19; Eph.3:17), and that we may have always before us the bright Morning Star to guide our steps (Num.24:17; Rev.2:28; 22:16; cf. 2Cor.4:6).

(16) For I did not follow concocted tales in making known to you the power and the coming return of our Lord, Jesus Christ, but was an eyewitness to His majesty. (17) For when He had received honor and glory from God the Father, these words sounded forth to Him from God's majestic glory: "This is my beloved Son with whom I am well-pleased." (18) And these words I myself heard as they were delivered from heaven, for I was with Him on the holy mountain (cf. Matt.17:1-8). (19) Yet I consider the prophetically inspired Word (i.e. the Bible) even more reliable (i.e., than what I saw with my own eyes). You too would do well to pay the closest attention to this [prophetically inspired Word], just as to a lamp shining in a dark place (cf. Ps.119:105), until the day dawns, and *the Morning Star rises* (i.e. the Living Word, Jesus Christ, returns), (20) pondering in your hearts this principle of prime importance: no single verse of prophetically inspired scripture has ever come into being as a result of personal reflection. (21) For true prophecy has never occurred by human will, but only when holy men of God have spoken under the direction and agency of the Holy Spirit.

2nd Peter 1:16-21

Even though we cannot see our dear Lord and Savior with our physical eyes here and now, like David, our inner eyes should be "ever on the Lord" (Ps.25:15; cf. Ps.37:4; 141:8). With the eyes of faith we know that He is our Shepherd, the One who is always looking after us and protecting us, even if we find ourselves walking through the valley of the death-shadow (Ps.23:1ff.). He bought us with His own blood, and we have no need to bind on phylacteries to remember Him, for we are bound around *Him* like a precious belt (Jer.13:1-14). The one who meditates on Him and His teaching day and night is blessed (Ps.1:2), so we need to guard against allowing Him, the One we love more than our lives, to slip from our thoughts, but rather we need to make every effort to look continually and intently at His reflection in the Word of God (Jas.1:22-25). If we really could see Him standing next to us, would we ever fear? Would we ever fail? And He *is* next to us – even in us – at all times (Jn.17:21; 17:23; 17:26; Col.1:27). It is when we keep

our eyes on Him and not the stormy waves rising around us that we are able to walk through this worldly sea and have no fear of sinking. For He is our all in all (Rom.13:14; Gal.4:19; Eph.3:17-18; Phil.3:10; Col.2:6-7; 3:1-2; Tit.1:1; 1Pet.1:8-9; 3:15).

Jesus said to him, "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed."

John 20:29 NIV

(1) Since then we too [like the believers of chapter 11] have such a large audience of witnesses surrounding us [both men and angels], let us put off every hindrance – especially whatever sins habitually affect us – and run with endurance the race set before us, (2) *turning our gaze unto Jesus*, the originator and completer of our faith (cf. "Alpha and Omega"), who, for the joy set before Him, endured the shame of the cross, treating it with despise, and took His seat at the right hand of the throne of God.

Hebrews 12:1-2

7. Transformation

(1) Therefore I entreat you by God's mercy, brothers, to dedicate your bodies as a living sacrifice, well-pleasing to God – [this is] your "priestly-service" spiritually performed. (2) Do not be conformed to this world, but be *transformed* by this renewal of your thinking, so that you may discern what God's will for you is, namely what it is good, well-pleasing, and correct [for you to do]. (3) Through the grace which has been given to me I tell everyone among you not to over-think [his role] beyond what he ought to think, but to direct his thinking towards sober thoughts [in this regard], inasmuch as God has allotted each [and every] one of us a measure of [our common] faith [in Jesus Christ] (cf. 2Pet.1:1).

Romans 12:1-3

Through continuing sanctification and persistence in spiritual growth along with all the things which contribute to it (while getting better at avoiding all things which are not conducive to it), the believer is transformed – in the same way that a mustard seed is transformed, sprouting, growing, and, with proper watering, eventually becoming a spreading tree which accomplishes the purpose for which it was planted. As the verse above makes clear, this is an internal process first and foremost, a change and transformation of heart which then branches out into every aspect of the believer's life. And just as it is impossible for us to actually see the growth of a seed into a mighty tree – and yet we know it does happen and observe the result years after the fact – so in the case of the transformation brought about by spiritual growth it is not a case of one day's effort or of obvious and dramatic breakthroughs; rather it is a case of persistence in effort over a lengthy period of time which gradually but, with patience, inexorably results in the believer becoming the kind of Christian the Lord Jesus wants him/her to be, ready to take on the challenges of the mature Christian life, to endure and to pass the testing that refines and proves the quality of our growth, and to engage in the ministry Christ has ordained for the betterment and building up of His beloved Church, our brothers and sisters in Jesus.

In terms of this section of our study, our perspective on the world also undergoes a transformation as we move forward in spiritual growth. We begin to see things more and more as the Lord sees them rather than as the world does, and this fundamental change of viewpoint and orientation to life becomes for us more and more "natural", as we might say, even though in fact it is entirely "supernatural".

(17) [My prayer for you is] that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the glorious Father, may give to you a spirit of wisdom (i.e., the ability to apply truth) and revelation (i.e., the unveiling of truth made clear by the Spirit) by means of the full-knowledge (*epignosis*) of Him (i.e., through believing that testimony), (18) so that, ***with the eyes of your heart thus enlightened***, you may understand what the hope of your calling [truly] is, what the riches of your glorious inheritance [truly are] in company with [all] the [other] saints, (19) and what the surpassing greatness of His power unto us who believe [truly is] – according to the very exercise of this powerful might of His (20) which He exercised in Christ by having raised Him from the dead.

Ephesians 1:17-20a

(14) For this reason I bow my knees to the Father, (15) from whom His entire family in heaven and on earth has received its name, (16) that He may grant you according to the riches of His glory ***to be powerfully strengthened in your inner person*** through His Spirit, (17) so that, rooted and grounded in love, Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith, (18) so that you may be able to comprehend with all saints what is the breadth and length and depth and height [of His love for you], (19) [that is], so that you may know the love of Christ which outstrips [human] understanding [in every way], and so that you may be filled up [to the brim] with the entire "fullness" of God.

Ephesians 3:14-19

(17) So I tell you this, and insist on it in the Lord, that you must no longer live as the Gentiles do with their minds emptied [of the truth]. (18) They are darkened in their thinking, separated from the life of God because of this [willful] ignorance that is in them due to the hardening of their hearts [against the truth], (19) who, when once they have lost all sensitivity [for what is right], have given themselves over to sensuality so as to indulge in every kind of impurity, with a continual lust for more. (20) This is not how you learned to follow Christ. (21) [For you have learned the truth] – if, at any rate, you have truly heard Him (i.e., Jesus) and have been instructed in Him according to what is [definitely] true in Jesus – (22) that in respect to your previous behavior you have put off the old Man, the one that is being destroyed by deceptive lusts, (23) and that instead ***you are being re-made in the spirit of your mind***, (24) and that you have put on the new Man, the one created in righteousness and sanctity of the truth according to God's standards.

Ephesians 4:21-24

All of the passages above, and especially this last one, make it clear that this enlightenment (Eph.1:18), this inner-strengthening (Eph.3:16), this renewal (Eph.4:23) – this transformation –

while it does happen imperceptibly (as in the growth of a seed to a tree) does not happen accidentally; it requires consistent and daily effort in seeking out, believing and applying the truth of the Word of God.

When You said, "Seek My face," My heart said to You, "Your face, Lord, I will seek."
Psalm 27:8 NKJV

C. Spiritual Discernment

"Behold, I send you out as sheep in the midst of wolves. Therefore be wise (*phronimoi*: lit. "discerning" or "shrewd") as serpents and harmless as doves."
Matthew 10:16 NKJV (cf. Rom.16:19; 1Cor.14:20; Prov.14:18)

Once we have grown up spiritually and have made sufficient spiritual progress so as to gain a good hold on the proper heavenly perspective with which to view our lives in this world, we now face the issue of correctly evaluating what we see, hear and feel. The world, after all, is a very complicated and noisy place – and so are our lives in it. In addition to our spiritual life – which is the most important part of our lives wherein we commune with the Lord, learn His truth, and minister to others – we all have other areas of obligation as well. We have jobs and livelihoods. We have families. We have friends and acquaintances. We have homes and possessions. We have bodies which need to be maintained as well with food, sleep, exercise, health care. And we do live in this world, which means that even if we are not obsessed with what is going on in it, we can hardly exempt ourselves from knowing anything about it, especially as political, social and economic events impact everything else to some degree. As we interact with this complex and convoluted world in which we live, we will, on almost a daily basis, bump into circumstances whose nature is much more gray than black and white, especially given the nature of most of the human beings who populate, individuals who are not saved and for whom our spiritual perspective is folly (1Cor.1:18-21). And when we find ourselves under the necessity of dealing with such situations, it will be incumbent upon us to apply the truth to them correctly in order to think, do and say what our Lord would have us to do.

(4) Do not answer a fool according to his folly, or you yourself will be just like him.

(5) Answer a fool according to his folly, or he will be wise in his own eyes.

Proverbs 26:4-5

The first verse above means that it is pointless to get into discussions with fools – and there is nothing more foolish than unbelief – when it is not necessary to do so and when it is obvious before the fact that you will only be wasting your breath. The second verse means that sometimes we may find ourselves in a position of having to give some sort of "answer" for whatever reason, and in those instances we should be very wise and wary about our replies, not actually answering with the unvarnished truth in an obvious way which will only cause the fool to react (and so be in the position of throwing pearls to swine with the risk of being trampled), but rather "according to his folly", i.e., in parable style, providing the hint of the truth

which might lead a wise person (or repentant fool) to seek more, but which will deflect the unwanted attentions of someone with no real interest in the truth. Knowing the difference – and recognizing how to parse the answer in the second case – requires discernment.

1. The Process of Discernment

Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding.
Proverbs 3:5

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

These two passages emphasize that God's role in directing the believer's path must be allowed to be paramount. Life is complex, and situations where decisions must be made on imperfect information and where scripture has something to say on both sides of an issue (or nothing precisely specific about the issue) will arise on a daily basis. Without the Lord's input, we would seldom discern the best course in general terms or the right things to think, say and do as required at the innumerable points along our course through this world where we are required to engage. Unlike the high priest of Israel, however, we do not have an ephod with "Urim and Thummim" so as to be able to ask God directly for specific yes or no answers. Nor are we able to consult some prophet who would be able to tell us to turn to the left or to the right (no one who claims to have such a gift at the present time is anything more than a dangerous charlatan). We can ask others for advice, but the decision is always ours. We can (and should) consult our Bibles, but in many cases – e.g., is this the right move, the right job, the right spouse to pick? – the guidance available from scripture will perforce be general in nature.

(1) There is a time for everything, and a season for every activity under the heavens: (2) a time to be born and a time to die, a time to plant and a time to uproot, (3) a time to kill and a time to heal, a time to tear down and a time to build, (4) a time to weep and a time to laugh, a time to mourn and a time to dance, (5) a time to scatter stones and a time to gather them, a time to embrace and a time to refrain from embracing, (6) a time to search and a time to give up, a time to keep and a time to throw away, (7) a time to tear and a time to mend, a time to be silent and a time to speak, (8) a time to love and a time to hate, a time for war and a time for peace.

Ecclesiastes 3:1-8 NIV

What is needed in every such case, whether of relatively great import or relatively small is the ability to see things from God's point of view and so to choose what pleases Him. So our first point of application needs to be a willingness to do it God's way, even if that is not the choice that we might otherwise prefer. All this, however, requires exercising the discernment and good judgment which are ours in principle through the new birth, but which are also very clearly skills which will grow as we grow and progress spiritually in the truth of the Word of God.

And we know that the Son of God has come and has *given us a heart for coming to*

know the truth (i.e., our invisible transformation leading to ever greater wisdom). And ***we are in*** [the One who is] the Truth, even in [God's] Son Jesus Christ (i.e., the former is predicated on our invisible positional change at salvation). This One is the true God and eternal life.

1st John 5:20

Once we have advanced spiritually in the truth to the point where we are able to weigh the good and the bad of most situations we encounter, and assuming that we are actually ***willing*** to choose what God would have us to choose (importantly remembering that just because we may want something does not mean that God does not want it for us as well, anymore than it means that He does want it for us), we need to remember that figuring out the correct path is something that cannot be done consistently without the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

(5) Those who are oriented to the flesh think about the things of the flesh, but those who are orientated to the Spirit, the things of the Spirit. (6) For the thought-pattern of the flesh results in death, but the thought-pattern of the Spirit results in life and peace. (7) Now the thought-pattern of the flesh is [one of] enmity towards God, for it does not obey God's law, nor is it [even] able [to do so]. (8) And [so] those who are under the control of the flesh (i.e., unbelievers enslaved to the sin nature) are not able to please God. (9) But you are not under the control of the flesh, but under the control of the Spirit – if indeed the Spirit of God dwells in you. And if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, that person does not belong to Him.

Romans 8:5-9

For as many as are being led by the Spirit of God, these are the [true] sons of God.

Romans 8:14

If we live because of the Spirit, let us also walk by means of the Spirit.

Galatians 5:25

For God [through His Spirit] is the One who is empowering you both to desire [what is right] and to put it into practice for the accomplishment of His good pleasure.

Philippians 2:13

In this regard it is very important to remember that the Spirit's guidance is not characterized by an overflow of emotions (as some groups mistakenly believe), nor in any overriding of our own free will – quite the opposite in fact the Spirit's voice is "still and small" (1Ki.19:12): He gives us advice but it is up to us both to listen carefully for it and then to accept it.⁸ A critical factor in the Spirit's guidance of us is His use of the truth, principles of the Word of God we have both learned and believed which the Spirit suggests to us at critical times.

⁸ For the details, see the previous installment of this series, BB 5: Pneumatology: the Study of the Holy Spirit.

For the Word of God is living and powerful; it is sharper than any two-edged sword, penetrating even to the point of being able to divide the spirit from its earthly life and the marrow from its bones; [for] it (i.e., the Word when resident in our conscience empowered by the Spirit) acts as a judge of our heart's intentions and emotions.

Hebrews 4:12

To guide us, the Spirit uses the truth resident in our hearts (*epignosis*: truth we have believed as opposed to mere knowledge), truth put there by diligent Bible study and attention to teaching, and rooted there by believing the truth we have heard. The truth abiding in our hearts is the Spirit's fulcrum, so to speak, and the more we understand of the truth, the more specific and crystal clear the Spirit can be with us in His leading of us. So if we wish to have good spiritual discernment and judgment in evaluating the difficult situations we will inevitably encounter in this confusing and hostile world, then we do have to commit ourselves to doing things God's way, we do have to listen attentively to what the Spirit is telling us, but our prior diligence in spiritual growth will be the decisive factor in giving the Spirit the necessary material to work with so as to make the path ahead brilliantly clear.

The path of the righteous is like the morning sun, shining ever brighter till the full light of day.

Proverbs 4:18 NIV

He leads me in the paths of righteousness for His name's sake.

Psalms 23:3b NKJV

The "righteous" do what is right (or certainly should) and walk in a "righteous" way – but we can only know that path and that way consistently by means of the Spirit speaking to us through the truth of the Word of God.

(16) And I will pray the Father, and he will give you another Counselor, to be with you for ever, (17) even the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees Him nor knows Him; you know Him, for He dwells with you, and will be in you.

John 14:16-17 RSV

The process of discernment, of judging between difficult cases and situations where there is no clear cut yes or no in scripture, is thus perhaps easier described than carried out in practice. We rely on the truth. We rely on the Spirit. But there is still the conscious factor of deliberation in making the judgment calls with which we must continually engage in this world, weighing the facts we see in appropriate humility, balancing them with truth based on a mature view of God's will, and once we have thus determined in the Spirit the best course, we act, trusting in the Lord that He is guiding us and will work things out for us who love Him (Rom.8:28).

[Wisdom speaking] "All the words of my mouth are just; none of them is crooked or perverse. ***To the discerning*** all of them are right; they are faultless ***to those who have knowledge.***"

Proverbs 8:8-9 NIV

Teach me good discernment and knowledge,
For I believe in Your commandments.

Psalm 119:66 NASB

So [in all things] you should [always] be calculating what it is that pleases the Lord.

Ephesians 5:10

(9) And this is my prayer: that your love may abound more and more in full-knowledge (*epignosis*: truth believed) and in all discernment, (10) so that you may be able to evaluate the things that are good and appropriate [for you to do] to be sincere and without offense in regard to the day of Christ (i.e., to gain a maximum reward at Christ's judgment seat), (11) full of the righteous production Jesus Christ [commends] to the glory and praise of God.

Philippians 1:9-11

Solid [spiritual] food is for the [spiritually] mature, those who by [diligent] practice have trained their [moral] perceptive faculties to [properly] distinguish between good and evil.

Hebrews 5:14

More will be said below about all this, and as we grow in the Lord this process will become more and more second nature. But perhaps a brief example here is not out of place. Ecclesiastes 3:7 says that there is "a time to be silent and a time to speak", and most of us can easily identify with that truth from personal experience. For on the one hand, "A word fitly spoken is like apples of gold in settings of silver" (Prov.25:11 NKJV), but on the other hand, "Even a fool is counted wise when he holds his peace" (Prov.17:28 NKJV). Spiritual discernment, that quality of distinguishing "what God's will is" for us at any given juncture (Rom.12:1-2; cf. Phil.1:9-11; Heb.5:14), is the quality possessed by the mature believer in ever greater degree as he/she learns and accepts in faith more and more biblical truth (and has that truth tested, reinforced and verified in just such situations as on the question of when to speak and when not to speak). Add to that an ever greater reliance on the Lord and an ever closer walk with Him in dependence upon the guidance of the Spirit in all humility, and it will be made clear when and where to engage or not to engage in whatever action is under consideration – and that is the essence of wisdom.

2. Areas of Discernment

In the Christian life there are absolutes which every Christian learns early on – the ten commandments, for example (although even here, after the cross, keeping the Sabbath must be understood as a moment by moment rest and trust in the Lord as opposed to the ritual seventh day observance of the Mosaic Law which has now been set aside in Christ: Eph.2:15). Essential sanctification demands that we stay away from behaviors which are unquestionably sinful, and these are "obvious" (Gal.5:19-21; cf. Rom.1:26-31; 1Cor.6:9-10; 6:18; 2Cor.12:20-21; Eph.5:3-6; 1Thes.4:3-4; 2Tim.3:1-5; Heb.13:4-5; Jas.4:1-4; 1Pet.4:3; 2Pet.2:9-10); and we clearly must

not neglect doing the things which as followers of Christ we are called to do. But in this complicated world there are many "areas of application", situations and circumstances where we must weigh the facts as we know them and apply principles of biblical truth to determine as best we can what the Lord would have us to do or refrain from doing as we follow the Spirit's lead.

To further explore this idea, we will break things down into a number of areas of application below (offered by way of example and with no claim to being anything like comprehensive). However, it would be good to keep in mind from the start that there is a critical distinction to be made between what we personally do have to deal with and what we do not actually face. The Christian life is practical, not theoretical; it concerns the actual issues we are personally facing, not political or social or historical generalities which do not actual confront us at the moment. It consists of directing our own individual will in godly ways, not in evaluating the actions of others much less attempting to direct or censure other people. The Christian life is loving towards all without at the same time invading the privacy or seeking to limit the freedom of others. We must all make our own choices – that is what history as designed by God is all about – and only what is God's will (or not opposed to God's will) that we choose to do out of faith it can be godly (Rom.14:23; cf. Jas.4:17).

Like one who takes a dog by the ears is he who passes by and meddles with strife not belonging to him.

Proverbs 26:17 NASB

But it was because of the false brethren secretly brought in, who had sneaked in to spy out our liberty which we have in Christ Jesus, in order to bring us into bondage.

Galatians 2:4 NASB

It is for freedom that Christ has set us free. Stand firm, then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery.

Galatians 5:1 NIV

(4) Each one should test their own actions. Then they can take pride in themselves alone, without comparing themselves to someone else, (5) for each one should carry their own load.

Galatians 6:4-5

For we hear that some among you are leading an undisciplined life, doing no work at all, but acting like busybodies.

2nd Thessalonians 3:11 NASB

Legalism, the opposite of grace, seeks to invent rules for every situation and behavior, and does so in completely unbiblical ways, adding leaven to an otherwise pure loaf even when it has some biblical support for its prohibitions. Walking in the Spirit is just the opposite. Should Christians who embrace grace and the freedom we have in Jesus Christ use that freedom to return to sin (Rom.6:2; 6:15)? God forbid! Instead, we use that freedom to listen to the Spirit and apply the

truth we have learned in order to do the godly thing at all times, choosing freely to respond to God's will for our lives in all situations in discernment rather than following a humanly concocted set of Procrustean rules.

Needless to say we are never going to be perfect in this area of discernment and application, and will err from time to time both through incorrect judgments and willful disregard of what we know to be correct. But it is only through this biblically mandated process of learning and applying the truth to our lives by choosing to follow the truth and the Spirit that we will gain growing success in learning how to do things in a way which truly is God's way, as well as in actually doing so.

A. Self-examination

Everything starts with being honest with ourselves. This has two sides. On the one hand, we cannot afford to lie to ourselves about our conduct or our attitudes, rationalizing our conduct, justifying it when the Spirit is telling us something different. We cannot afford to allow any root of arrogance to spring up and bear fruit (Heb.12:15; cf. Ezek.28:17). We must be quick to repent and confess whatever we may have done wrong whenever we have done it (1Jn.1:9; cf. Ps.32:5). On the other hand, if we are doing this, if we are actually growing and progressing in the Lord, following Him, we also cannot afford to allow anything to knock us off our mark, be it the opinions of others, regrets about the past, inordinate and inappropriate guilt, or any emotional upheaval whatsoever. As ever, we must keep the truth as our touchstone, not the way we may "feel" at any given moment. The Spirit's still, small voice speaks to us through the truth, and when we do hear it and follow it, we have peace – and that is how we know that we are neither reacting emotionally apart from the truth nor ignoring principles of truth out of selfishness and self-centeredness.

We are here in this world after salvation to do the will of God. And the will of God is that we follow His Son Jesus Christ wherever He leads us, seeking to be pleasing to Jesus Christ at all times in everything we think, say and do. Between obeying the clear negative commands (sanctification) and the positive ones (which center around spiritual growth, progress and production), the Lord gives us plenty of leeway to make the choices we are put here to make. Even if we are doing well, we could always do better; and even if we strive to be better, we will never be perfect; but there are no limits to what may be achieved for Christ for the believer who truly puts the Lord first and follows Him through the Spirit's guidance.

But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace to me was not without effect. No, I worked harder than all of them—yet not I, but the grace of God that was with me.
1st Corinthians 15:10 NIV (cf. 2Cor.11:23)

Paul was very aware of having worked harder and done more than any of his contemporaries. That does not mean that they were outside of God's will, only that Paul had used the freedom he had been given to give back to our Savior in a sacrificial way, perhaps to a degree beyond any other follower of our Lord (cf. 1Cor.4:8-13; 2Cor.4:7-12; 6:3-10; 11:16-33; Phil.3:7-11).

But I discipline my body and bring it into subjection, lest, when I have preached to others, I myself should become disqualified.

1st Corinthians 9:27 NKJV

And yet in spite of his sacrifices for the Lord and His Church, Paul remained so humble that we see him in this second verse being loath even to proclaim that his reward was secure. Paul was not perfect (none of us are), but he certainly sets the highest possible standard for us all when it comes to doing one's best for the Lord and at the same time not becoming self-assured about it but continuing to do it day by day for God's glory alone (cf. Jn.7:18).

(3) But with me it is a very small thing that I should be judged by you or by a human court. In fact, I do not even judge myself. (4) For I know of nothing against myself, yet I am not justified by this; but He who judges me is the Lord. (5) Therefore judge nothing before the time, until the Lord comes, who will both bring to light the hidden things of darkness and reveal the counsels of the hearts. Then each one's praise will come from God.

1st Corinthians 4:3-5 NKJV

Along with Paul, we seek to do our best. We do not spend an inordinate time in pointless self-evaluation (as long as our consciences do not convict us of some actual infraction). We trust the Lord to handle all this. We are confident that He will reward us on that great Day to come, regardless of the work we have been called to do (just as long as we are diligent in doing it, with great diligence resulting in greater reward).

The one who plants and the one who waters have one purpose, and they will each be rewarded according to their own labor.

1st Corinthians 3:8 NIV

Within these wide boundaries, we have freedom to choose. We know that the more we do for the Lord (growth in the truth, progress in meeting the testing of life, legitimate production that shares or supports the sharing of the Word of God), the more pleasing it is to Him and also the greater the reward in eternity. But we are also flesh and blood. We have material and emotional needs. If we do not eat, we will die. If we do not sleep, we will die. And if we do not provide ourselves with numerous other things that support our life and welfare, at the very least we will render ourselves ineffective for the Lord. Finding the right balance in our stewardship of the time, the energy and the other resources God gives us in this life requires mature assessment; it requires the discernment to examine ourselves realistically, taking into account our weaknesses as well as our strengths.

If, for example, we are actually not capable of living a godly life as unmarried persons, it is no good pretending that things are otherwise, for in the end we will only do more damage to ourselves by failing to be honest. If, for example, we need eight hours of sleep a night in order to function effectively, it would be better to search for efficiencies of time in other ways rather than

to degrade our health and compromise our work by restricting ourselves to significantly less. And it is no good either to compare our strengths to the weaknesses of others so as to feel superior, or to compare our weaknesses to others' strengths and become demoralized about them. We are all different in so many ways. But we all have free will, and we will all be evaluated – in absolute fairness and justice by the perfect Judge – for what we could do and did do rather than for what we could not.

Self-discernment in this area, therefore, must avoid the twin pitfalls of being too hard on ourselves but also of not being hard enough. Most people can do more than they think they can, but less than they would ideally like to. Somewhere between settling for the mediocre and striving for the unattainable is a "sweet spot" that will produce a good crop and a good reward. Working our way into it and sustaining our position in it is in many respects a lifelong process. We do get better at being consistent for the Lord as we grow, but we also have to avoid becoming demoralized or depressed when we fail to measure up to the standard we have set for ourselves. We need to remember that the Lord is for us, not against us. That He is pleased with all the good things we do, but will not disown us for our failures. We are in this life to demonstrate just how much we do love Him, and that ought to be motivation to put Him and His Church in front of self. But it is also a trap and a subtle form of arrogance to ignore one's true limitations or to lose momentum entirely when a high bar is set but not met. In all such things, if we are at peace with the Lord and if we are joyful in our salvation, then we can be fairly certain that we are on the right track. One can always improve – but one also has to be careful about falling back. Making these judgment calls can only be done by the person in question. Paying attention to the truth of scripture and listening carefully to the Spirit's guidance will avoid the dual mistakes of being too lukewarm on the one hand, or of letting any disappointment for failure to be as red hot as hoped for cause us to lose heat entirely on the other. Therefore success in arranging one's life to good purpose for the Lord is the result of developing good spiritual priorities – which are also realistic and sustainable over the long haul – and acting in accordance with them in a consistent manner. That this is in essence what the Lord wants from is clearly seen on virtually every page of the Bible (as these few examples below demonstrate):

You shall have no other gods before me.

Exodus 20:3 NIV

The sorrows of those will increase who run after other gods. I will not pour out their libations of blood or take up their names on my lips.

Psalms 16:4 NIV

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?

Micah 6:8 NKJV

(31) "Therefore do not worry, saying, 'What shall we eat?' or 'What shall we drink?' or 'What shall we wear?' (32) For after all these things the Gentiles seek. For your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things. (33) But seek first the kingdom of God and

His righteousness, and all these things shall be added to you."
Matthew 6:31-32 NKJV

Jesus said to him, " 'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind.' (38) This is the first and great commandment. (39) And the second is like it: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' (40) On these two commandments hang all the Law and the Prophets."
Matthew 22:37-40 NKJV

In practical terms, time is one of the major assets we have here in the world, and how we make use of it says a lot about how committed we really are to following Jesus Christ.

"As long as it is day, we must do the work of Him who sent Me. Night is coming, when no one can work."
John 19:4 NIV (cf. Is.55:6)

Redeem your time, for the days are evil.
Ephesians 5:16

Walk wisely in regard to those outside [the body of Christ], redeeming your time.
Colossians 4:5

Devoting time and energy to the Lord and to His Church go hand in hand. Just because we are doing "something" for the Lord for an hour does not mean what we are doing is really the best use of our time for Him (i.e., is attending a worship service in a lukewarm church for an hour really equivalent to spending that same hour deep in Bible study?), nor is the time itself necessarily reflective of effort (i.e., if we are daydreaming while reading our Bible or half asleep we are not getting as much out of the experience as if we were focusing ourselves enthusiastically on the task at hand). Generally speaking, more is better, but it is also true that more of what is better is better, and that sharply focused more is better than just more.

It is also true that there are limits to what we can do. In pressing against those limits in terms of amount of time, quality of time, and wisdom of choices in the use of dedicated time we find out a lot about ourselves and our dedication to the Lord. We can always do better – and we can (almost) always do worse. If we are moving forward in this regard rather than backward, it is not amiss to take a measure of satisfaction in that progress. For it is also good to avoid setting up a perfectionist standard that cannot be attained and/or continued if ever briefly attained. Life puts many demands on us all, and the Lord does not begrudge us the rest and relaxation needed to revive and refresh us.

(30) The apostles gathered around Jesus and reported to him all they had done and taught.
(31) Then, because so many people were coming and going that they did not even have a chance to eat, he said to them, "Come with me by yourselves to a quiet place and get some rest." (32) So they went away by themselves in a boat to a solitary place.

Of course, in the sequel to the verses above, the crowd followed them and required attendance even so – but our Lord provided for the needs of the multitude in a miraculous way. So there are times when special effort is needed above and beyond the normal output to do what we know the Lord wants done – and if this exceeds our capacity He is more than capable of providing what we need even so.

Most of us need some "down time". First, we all need some sort of "quiet time" to commune with the Lord and to come before Him in prayer (e.g., 1Cor.7:5). Our Lord often withdrew to remote places for this very purpose. And He did so to the detriment of His sleep. Most of the rest of us, however, would nod off in such situations despite our good intentions (as the disciples did on the night before the cross in Gethsemane). So sooner or later, we all need some sleep wherever we are at on our prayer list. We all also need some time to eat and digest our meals. We all need at least some time with friends, family, spouses, children – a good deal of time with our nuclear family if we are going to do the job of spouse and parent well. And we all need, or it seems we need, or it seems that we will not get along well without some means of occasional relaxation. What about reading the newspaper? Reading a book? Watching the news? What about other hobbies and leisure time activities? What about vacations?

It is important to keep in mind that the Lord does not begrudge us such things – as long as they do not involve sinful activities. And, after all, we have free will, the image of God. We have the power to make decisions about how to deploy all of the resources we are given and given to amass – how we spend our time, our money, our energy. It is between the necessities mandated by our weak flesh on the one hand (i.e., the need to eat and sleep and do other such things) along with the necessities mandated by our circumstances outside of the garden of Eden (i.e., we must work to earn our bread and do other such things to function in this world), and between the total consumption of all of our available income, time and energy in "the pursuit of happiness" on the other that Christian life is lived, that the Christian struggle to please the Lord is waged. The more done for Him, *really* done for Him rather than proceeding from incorrect assumptions or false motivations, the greater the reward – and the less done, the less received on that Day. Understand, the least self-sacrificing and most lukewarm Christian in the history of the Church will still possess the entire panoply of blessings we are all promised: a perfect resurrection body, a place in the New Jerusalem, the right to the tree of life and the waters of the river of life, and an eternity of blessing beyond anything presently even imaginable as part of the Bride of Jesus Christ. But those who have sacrificed more of their time, energy and resources for the Lord will be rewarded disproportionately for it and will not regret the smallest of sacrifices in the here and now on that great day to come.

"And if anyone gives even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones who is my disciple, truly I tell you, that person will certainly not lose their reward."
Matthew 10:42 NIV

It is important not to feel guilty for not measuring up to unrealistic standards we may set for

ourselves in this regard – especially if we do not appreciate that in spiritual growth, progress and production the same principles of momentum apply as with all other things in life. If we decide that we are going to compete in the "Iron Man", we cannot expect to run a Marathon on determination alone if we have not been in the habit of running a single mile previously; we cannot expect to bike 112 miles on guts alone if we haven't been on a bicycle since grade school; and we cannot expect to get through 2.4 miles of ocean if do not yet know how to swim. We may have to build up to these things over time, and, depending upon where we are starting from, it might take a good deal of time indeed even to get the point of being able to finish, let alone be competitive.

To continue the analogy, even if all we accomplish by the decision to pursue this secular goal is that we become better at running, better at cycling, and learn how to swim, we are certainly better off physically than if we had never gotten motivated to get off of the couch in the first place. Building up physical stamina is certainly a good thing. As Paul tells Timothy, while "bodily exercise profits a little, godliness is profitable for all things, having promise of the life that now is and of that which is to come" (1Tim.4:8 NKJV). So as noble, admirable and impressive as training for and competing in an Iron Man competition surely is, the smallest effort in godliness – seeking to improve our spiritual growth, progress and production to the glory of God – is more valuable than all the athletic prizes ever bestowed in human history put together.

Every one who competes in the games exercises self-discipline in everything; they do it to win a perishable prize, but we do it to win an imperishable one.

1st Corinthians 9:25

So we certainly have ample motivation to do more for the Lord – things that actually are *for* Him, and we can also take comfort in the fact that a little goes a long way. On the other hand, a lot will go far beyond our present ability even to conceptualize it. So then we should feel good about getting started doing what we know pleases the Lord, good about being consistent with doing a little bit at first and more later as we gain the spiritual capacity to do so, and not in the least bit guilty for what we have failed to do in the past or for not measuring up to unrealistic standards we set for ourselves (in either case this will only hamstring our efforts going forward – exactly the opposite of what the Lord wants). If our hearts really are dedicated to seeking the truth, there is no limit to what the Lord can do with us and through us. But we have to be willing.

B. Family

(9) I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, and marries another woman commits adultery." (10) The disciples said to him, "If this is the situation between a husband and wife, it is better not to marry." (11) Jesus replied, "Not everyone can accept this word, but only those to whom it has been given. (12) For there are eunuchs who were born that way, and there are eunuchs who have been made eunuchs by others—and there are those who choose to live like eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven. The one who can accept this should accept it."

Matthew 19:9-12 NIV

This passage is *not* speaking of self-emasculation, as some have erroneously taught, but of celibacy undertaken for the sake of serving the Church of Jesus Christ. Three things should be understood about this from the outset. First, very few people are actually capable of living a celibate life and not having a spouse and a family – not, that is, without falling into sexual sin. And for those who cannot control themselves throughout their entire life, it is much "better to marry than to burn" with passion and at the very least distract oneself from the serious considerations such sacrifice was meant to further (1Cor.7:9; cf. 1Cor.7:2).

Secondly and perhaps even more importantly, committing oneself to celibacy is merely a tool and not an end in itself. There is no reward for being celibate – that is a legalistic way to think, not the grace-perspective. In the history of the church-visible, many in various denominations have pledged themselves to celibacy without any apparent benefit to anyone – and in many cases probably without even being saved. Celibacy is no guarantee of anything positive on its own – but it is a guarantee of a distracted life (and very possibly worse) if a person is not meant for it.

Third, the ability to live a celibate life is a gift from God without which it is most inadvisable to try (young people, of course, are to remain celibate until marriage, but they have that hope to help them get through until God provides); even if a person has this particular gift, that does not mean that said person is above temptation – not at all. All the possession of this gift means is that the person in question will be able to make the sacrifice – and it is a great sacrifice. But there is no point in doing so unless the opportunity of greater time, freedom and energy is effectively used for Jesus Christ and for His Church in what is genuinely a godly way (1Cor.7:29-35).

I wish that all of you were as I am. But each of you has your own gift from God; one has this gift, another has that.

1st Corinthians 7:7 NIV

Jesus replied, "Not everyone can accept this word, but only those to whom it has been given."

Matthew 19:11 NIV

Understanding then that most of us are "not able to accept it", godly marriage and a family are true blessings from the Lord, and we should embrace both in a godly way, waiting patiently for the Lord to provide in both cases.

He who finds a wife [and] who finds a good thing [in so doing] obtains favor from the Lord.

Proverbs 18:22

(3) Children are a heritage from the Lord, offspring a reward from him. (4) Like arrows in the hands of a warrior are children born in one's youth. (5) Blessed is the man whose quiver is full of them. They will not be put to shame when they contend with their

opponents in court.
Psalm 127:3-5 NIV

Scripture while certainly not denying or decrying the idea of romantic love (cf. the entire Song of Solomon) most definitely puts the emphasis on patience and trusting in the Lord to provide *before* the fact, in terms of both marriage (cf. the example of Isaac's patience and the blessing that Rebecca was to him) and in children (e.g., Abraham waited patiently for the child of promise, and his one misstep of not being patient resulted in the troubles with Hagar and Sarah), and on duty and fidelity *after* the fact:

But if anyone does not provide for his own, and especially for those of his household, he has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever.
1st Timothy 5:8 NKJV

Nevertheless, each individual among you also is to love his own wife even as himself, and the wife must see to it that she respects her husband.
Ephesians 5:33 NASB

(1) Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right. (2) "Honor your father and mother," which is the first commandment with promise: (3) "that it may be well with you and you may live long on the earth." 4) And you, fathers, do not provoke your children to wrath, but bring them up in the training and admonition of the Lord.
Ephesians 6:1-4 NKJV

These essential duties – of taking care (both physically and emotionally) of those who are dependent upon us and those to whom we owe familial obligations – are in no way optional for Christians:

"If anyone comes to Me and does not hate his father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and his own life also, he cannot be My disciple."
Luke 14:26 NKJV

Just as we must take some care of our own lives to survive in this world, so our Lord's words above most certainly do not constitute either a command or an excuse to do less than what we are obligated to do for those to whom we are committed whether by blood or by choice. The passage above does, however, remind us that in this area of life as with all other things there is an important spiritual balance to be struck: the Lord has to be our top priority, even as we understand that there are other things which have to be done in life. *Compared* to our love for Him, every other relationship and priority must be counted as lesser. So while we may and (hopefully) do love our parents, spouses and children, loving them more than the Lord and developing priorities which reflect that greater love make it difficult if not impossible to be a truly effective disciple of Jesus Christ. We should not shortchange those we love and those to whom we have familial duties, but we cannot allow ourselves to become so wrapped up in that area of life that we become ineffective for the Lord in spiritual growth, progress and production.

(32) But I want you to be free from concern. One who is unmarried is concerned about the things of the Lord, how he may please the Lord; (33) but one who is married is concerned about the things of the world, how he may please his wife, and his interests are divided. The woman who is unmarried, and the virgin, is concerned about (34) the things of the Lord, that she may be holy both in body and spirit; but one who is married is concerned about the things of the world, how she may please her husband. (35) This I say for your own benefit; not to put a restraint upon you, but to promote what is appropriate and to secure undistracted devotion to the Lord.

1st Corinthians 7:32-35 NASB

C. Job and Business

"By the sweat of your brow you will eat your food until you return to the ground, since from it you were taken; for dust you are and to dust you will return."

Genesis 3:19 NIV

This is not the garden of Eden. Since the fall, work is a necessary part of life, and Christians are most definitely required to work (whether inside of the home or outside of the home) in order to provide for themselves and their families (as well as to have the means to help others: Eph.4:28).

For even when we were with you, we would give you this command: If anyone is not willing to work, let him not eat.

2nd Thessalonians 3:10 ESV

(6) Go to the ant, you sluggard; consider its ways and be wise! (7) It has no commander, no overseer or ruler, (8) yet it stores its provisions in summer and gathers its food at harvest. (9) How long will you lie there, you sluggard? When will you get up from your sleep? (10) A little sleep, a little slumber, a little folding of the hands to rest – (11) and poverty will come on you like a thief and scarcity like an armed man.

Proverbs 6:6-11 NIV

Together, these passages give a good perspective on the biblical position. The way life "is" here in the post-Eden world, work is essential, not just for ethical and moral reasons but also in order to maintain one's own physical life (and to support one's dependents). And while work may sometimes be tedious and difficult, doing a poor job – whatever the job may be that the Lord has led us to – is folly. That is also unacceptable to the Lord.

Whatever you do, do your work from the heart as [if you were doing it] for the Lord and not for men.

Colossians 3:23

Whatever work we are given to do then, we should always do it "as unto the Lord":

(5) You who are slaves, obey your masters according to the flesh with fear and trembling

with simplicity of heart just as you [should obey] the Lord, (6) not doing so with "eye-service" (i.e., only when they are watching you) as those who seek to please men, but as servants of Christ, accomplishing God's will from your heart, (7) serving with good will *as if to the Lord* and not to men, (8) for you know that whatever good thing each one of you accomplishes, he will receive [a reward] for this from the Lord, whether he is slave or free.

Ephesians 6:5-8 (cf. 1Tim.6:1-2)

While it is true that most Christians today are not slaves in the New Testament sense of things, these verses and others which speak of slaves and slavery are best interpreted in light of the respective times. In the ancient Greek and Roman world, the definition of being poor was having to work for a living (as opposed to belonging to the wealthy aristocracy); the definition of being *dirty* poor was having to work for somebody else – because that was, essentially, "wage slavery". Since that is the situation in which by far most Christians find ourselves today, we should not read these and similar passages and ignore them as if they did not apply to us – for they apply to us more than we may want to admit.

Slaves, in reverent fear of God submit yourselves to your masters, not only to those who are good and considerate, but also to those who are harsh.

2nd Peter 2:18 NIV

Few of us with any sort of life experience have never had a "bad boss" – and in today's ever more venal, dishonorable and self-serving world, "good bosses" are more and more rare. That fact, however, as the verse above makes clear, does not absolve the Christian who wants to please Jesus Christ from acting in an honorable way in spite of having to deal with a dishonorable boss. Of course that is also not to say that there are not limits. This part of our study is all about spiritual discernment.

In light of the scriptures above, how should we handle harsh treatment on the job? The first thing to note is that we are not, in fact, actual slaves. We can quit almost any job almost whenever we choose with a short notice (the military being a significant exception to that rule, and one might add any other situation where we have contracted to work for a set period of time). Also, many organizations have procedures for voicing disagreements and airing grievances. And of course in this country, at any rate, there are certain things that employers are not legally allowed to do, and if they do so anyway there is recourse through the legal system. But of course anytime we voice a disagreement with policy or our treatment, or lodge a grievance, or file a lawsuit, there certainly will be consequences – it may not be fair, but it is indeed the case. Also, and more importantly for our purposes here, everything we say and do on the job (and also what we think, inasmuch as what we are feeling and thinking inside will almost always come out in our attitude, words and actions) reflects on us – on us as Christians – and therefore on our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

So in our actions on the job, we always want to bear in mind that many will be observing us to see how we react to unfair treatment. As ambassadors for Jesus Christ, we certainly do not want

to get the reputation of being petty or thin-skinned or "impossible to work with". Threading the needle between being the best possible employee on the one hand and not being willing to tolerate outright abuse on the other can often be difficult. But it does seem fair to suggest before we do anything that might seem unreasonable or might bring us into conflict with our superiors, that we ought to at least ask the question: "How does this reflect on Jesus Christ?" Reasoned disagreement within proper channels when confronted with serious management mistakes and/or outright abuse and illegal actions is certainly not a violation of the letter or the spirit of scriptures considered above. But when we feel as if we are being treated poorly (and especially if we actually are being treated poorly), it is all too tempting to get on the wrong side of this issue: we don't want to be lacking courage, but we also don't want to be lacking endurance. Again, it's all about spiritual discernment.

Masters, provide your slaves with what is right and fair, because you know that you also have a Master in heaven.
Colossians 4:1 NIV

In many respects, it is more difficult for a manager/boss or "master" to get this principle right than it is for an employee. That is because those in positions of authority, whether it is their own business they are running or managing some part of someone else's operation, bosses/managers have their own pressures which may not be properly appreciated by those working for them. The private who feels that his captain is being completely unreasonable in the demands he is making of the unit no doubt has no idea of the amount of pressure the colonel for whom the captain works is exerting. Also, the private, even if he is a Christian, may not be mature enough to see that he himself could indeed be doing a better job, and that his resentment is merely stemming from a reluctance to "get out of his comfort zone", and that, just possibly, the demand being made have the legitimate purpose of making the unit better.

Bosses, managers, "captains" stand in the uncomfortable position of being between two fires. On the one side are the employees / enlisted personnel / workers who are naturally resistant to doing things differently, to do more than they had done before (no doubt for no more pay), and to being pressured. So getting their charges to respond as they need them to respond will require "the boss" to act in ways that will not endear him to those who work for him. And it will be tempting for "the boss" to become particularly upset with and annoyed at any and all who present particularly negative attitudes and more than average resistance. On the other side, the manager / senior officer / boss faces the unrelenting pressure of either his immediate superior or the unforgiving market place. Failure to achieve the result required will possibly result in this person losing his job or business. To bear up under that sort of pressure and still conduct oneself in an honorable, fair, reasonable and "non-threatening way" would be difficult for a mature Christian to do consistently, how much less an unbeliever.

And masters, treat your slaves in the same way (i.e., "as unto the Lord"). Do not threaten them, since you know that he who is both their Master and yours is in heaven, and there is no favoritism with him.
Ephesians 6:9 NIV

Of course none of us would have to be concerned about such issues at all – or give the serious consideration we are giving to discerning the best course through attention to the truth and guidance of the Holy Spirit – if it weren't for the fact that in this world as it is presently constituted we all need some sort of income to survive and provide for our dependents. It is well worth remembering, however, that we are not here in this world to store up vast quantities of treasure, and that nothing that we might manage to accumulate will be taken to heaven with us when we go to be with the Lord.

"Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy and where thieves break in and steal; but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also."

Matthew 6:19-21 NKJV

If we are able to hold onto this correct, spiritual perspective, it will help us to remember also that the problems and pressures we face on the job, whatever our role may be, are temporary. We have a share in a kingdom that is not of this world (Lk.12:32), and so our eternal lives do consist in the amount of our possessions (Lk.12:15).

Do not wear yourself getting rich. Be discerning enough to desist.

Proverbs 23:4

Economic issues in our modern world in particular largely boil down to money, and scripture has some very pointed things to say about that topic, and in particular the inordinate desire to accumulate excessive money and wealth along with the greed which motivates that desire:

Whoever loves money, never has money enough; whoever loves wealth is never satisfied with his income. This too (i.e., struggling for wealth) is meaningless.

Ecclesiastes 5:10 NIV

No one can serve two masters. For either he will hate the one and love the other, or cling to the one and despise the other. No one can serve God and Mammon.

Matthew 6:24 (cf. Lk.16:9)

And [Jesus] said to them, "Be careful to guard against every sort of greed, because the superabundance of possessions is not what one's life depends on."

Luke 12:15

(7) We have brought nothing into this world – and are not able to take anything out of it.

(8) So if we have daily sustenance and coverings for our bodies, we will be content with these. (9) Those who want to get rich fall into temptations, traps, and many senseless and harmful lusts – the kind which swamp men[’s hearts] to their destruction and damnation.

(10) For the love of money is a root [cause] of all evils – [and it is] in the pursuit of which [love of money that] some have wandered away from the faith (i.e., become apostates)

and have pierced themselves through with many pains.
1st Timothy 6:7-10

Keep your lives free from the love of money and be content with what you have, because God has said, "Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you".
Hebrews 13:5 NIV

The truth is that money does not provide security in this world – how much less in the next.

[Alas] those who trust in their wealth and boast in the abundance of their riches – surely [these things] cannot redeem a man; they cannot provide a man's ransom price to God. For the redemption of their lives is too costly [in terms of worldly coin] for Him to forebear forever, that a man should live on eternally and not see corruption.
Psalm 49:8-9

In the end all die; no one can "take it with them", regardless of worldly success (1Tim.6:7).

But man, though he be rich, will not live forever. He will come to his end like the animals do.
Psalm 49:12

We have been redeemed from death and damnation by the one true coin of the Kingdom, the blood of Christ which has washed away our sins and opened up the door of the slave market of sin, issuing us into an eternity where there will be no lack of anything forevermore.

What profit will a man have if he gains the whole world but loses his life?
Matthew 16:26

It is in that spirit that we ought to approach the issue of necessary work for our daily bread and all of the economic factors related thereto, remembering that there is a much more important "economy" with which we should be concerned, one wherein the work we do for Christ will never be lost and the reward gained will bless us and glorify our Lord for all eternity.

(7) But whatever I had gained [in my former godless life], compared to Christ I have come to consider these things as losses. (8) Indeed, I consider everything to be a loss compared to the surpassing importance of knowing Jesus Christ my Lord, for whose sake I have suffered the loss of everything, and consider [everything I have lost] as garbage, compared to gaining Christ, (9) and being found in Him – not having a personal righteousness [developed] through [following] the [Mosaic] law – but having that righteousness [that comes] through faith in Christ, that righteousness [that comes] from God based on faith.
Philippians 3:7-9

It is in precisely this spirit that we need to approach all such issues: Which job to take? When to

try and switch jobs? Do I take on a mortgage? What about credit cards? How do I deal with my debts? Should I take out a student loan? One could go on at length, obviously, and for these and many more such questions there is no pat biblical answer, and the answer for me today might be different from the answer for you – because we are different people and in different circumstances – and the answer tomorrow might be different from what it is today for us both. In all such things, we need to remember that what we do, as long as it is done honorably and with the right attitude of heart – and with the right ultimate purpose in mind, namely, to "live a life worthy of the Lord and please him in every way" (Col.1:10 NIV) – is not nearly so important as what the Lord does. He will never let us down (Heb.13:5), and He will always be caring for us, knowing better than we do all of our needs:

(25) Therefore I say to you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink; nor about your body, what you will put on. Is not life more than food and the body more than clothing? (26) Look at the birds of the air, for they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns; yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they? (27) Which of you by worrying can add one cubit to his stature? (28) So why do you worry about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow: they neither toil nor spin; (29) and yet I say to you that even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these. (30) Now if God so clothes the grass of the field, which today is, and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will He not much more clothe you, O you of little faith? (31) Therefore do not worry, saying, 'What shall we eat?' or 'What shall we drink?' or 'What shall we wear?' (32) For after all these things the Gentiles seek. For your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things. (33) But seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things shall be added to you. (34) Therefore do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about its own things. Sufficient for the day is its own trouble."

Matthew 6:25-34 NKJV

Paychecks, bills, debts, work problems, retirement issues, insurance, giving, health care, taxes and all the myriad other things that make up the economics of modern life are all areas where we need to take pains to put the kingdom of God first in full confidence that the Lord is looking out for us in every respect, being careful not to worry even as we work hard at what we do and make it our business to be responsible and give a good witness in how we handle every aspect of our affairs. If we are doing this, namely, growing, progressing and producing for the Lord as our first priority, discernment in how to handle all such mundane questions will be much easier and much clearer. When our faith in Christ and in His Word takes full root in our hearts, and when we continue to tend it, watering it with the water of the Word of God, we will find one day that it has grown to the point of towering over all worldly issues, putting all such monetary and work concerns into their proper and godly perspective.

"Though it is the smallest of all seeds, yet when it grows, it is the largest of garden plants and becomes a tree, so that the birds come and perch in its branches."

Matthew 13:32 NIV

D. Great Matters

Lord, my heart is not haughty, nor my eyes lofty. Neither do I concern myself with great matters, nor with things too profound for me.

Psalm 131:1 NKJV

Compared to the vast reaches of the galaxy, not to mention the universe, the earth is an infinitesimally small particle, and a human being is minuscule in the extreme compared to the earth. That does not stop the human ego, however, from imagining, planning, plotting, and opining on "great things" all the time, things that, if we reflected for the briefest moment and with the tiniest smidgen of humility, we would realize are completely out of our control and beyond our ken. Yet we have free will – and a sin nature – and these are all that is necessary to send our egos flying to the farthest reaches of the cosmos. Whether through the folly of imagination or the arrogance of personal opinion, few if any human beings have the good sense to restrain themselves in this regard, being only too happy to air those opinions and dwell on those imaginations, even, in far too many cases, devoting their time, energy and even lives to such "causes", whether for personal benefit or for "the good of others" (translation: manipulating others to their ultimate harm and claiming it "good" for the sake of ego – the very definition of evil).

(7) From their callous hearts comes iniquity; their evil imaginations have no limits. (8) They scoff, and speak with malice; with arrogance they threaten oppression. (9) Their mouths lay claim to heaven, and their tongues take possession of the earth.

Psalm 73:7-9 NIV

But "though his loftiness reaches the heavens, and his head touches the clouds" (Job 20:6 NASB), the reality of the smallness of the most arrogant person in the world will be made manifest by his own death – for even the devil, the one with more to brag about than any other creature the Lord has ever made, will be totally refuted by Him in the end and deposited in the Lake of Fire. And in the end, nothing in this world will have changed – and in the end, the Lord is going to make this entire universe new, destroying in an instant all that is old and corrupt (Rev.21:5; cf. 2Pet.3:7-13).

I have seen all the works that are done under the sun; and indeed, all is vanity and grasping for the wind.

Ecclesiastes 1:14 NKJV

Having rejected God and having hardened their hearts against these realities of man's insignificance and the pointlessness of trying to change the world, we can understand why unbelievers grasp after the wind in such arrogant ways. What is more disconcerting, however, is the penchant of so many believers in our Laodicean day for doing exactly the same thing, whether through personal ambition in attempting to amass fame, wealth, possessions, pleasures and power (i.e., gross sinfulness), or through adherence to some cause designed to "make the world a better place" (i.e., gross evil).

And [we encourage you] to make it your ambition to live quiet lives and to attend to *your own business* and work with your own hands as we commanded you, so that you may maintain a seemly walk towards those outside [the Church] and have need of nothing.

1st Thessalonians 4:11-12

The passage above gives the correct, biblical perspective. It may be difficult in today's modern age, living in a "democracy" where various and sundry are proselytizing for their positions from every street corner and every media and social media outlet, not to have "opinions". But we do need to recognize that these opinions mean less than nothing: if we voice them, we change the subject from Christ to economics or politics or society, etc.; if we act on them we denigrate our Christian witness and squander the time and resources God has given us to benefit Christ's Church; if we fret about them, we distract ourselves and take ourselves out of the fight – the *true* conflict that is being waged here on earth invisible to human eyes but not unknown to believers who have committed themselves to spiritual growth through the truth of the Word of God.

To do our best for our own growth, for the Lord's good pleasure with us, and for the benefit of His Body, it is necessary to follow Paul's advice above – which is really a set of biblical commands. We need to be ambitious not about our own gain or advancement, and not about the success of some cause; rather we need to be ambitious about "leading *quiet* and peaceful lives", "minding our *own* business" rather than concerning ourselves with "great matters" of state and politics, of society and global habitat. What *is* our job is to do a good job with the work we have been given to earn our daily bread – that is the way to bring honor to Christ through "a seemly walk", and to avoid the exigency of "needing something" from others, instead being in a position to share with those in need (2Cor.9:8).

(14) Do not be unequally yoked together with unbelievers. For what fellowship has righteousness with lawlessness? And what communion has light with darkness? (15) And what accord has Christ with Belial? Or what part has a believer with an unbeliever? (16) And what agreement has the temple of God with idols? For you are the temple of the living God. As God has said: "I will dwell in them and walk among them. I will be their God, and they shall be My people." (17) Therefore "Come out from among them and be separate, says the Lord. Do not touch what is unclean, and I will receive you." (18) "I will be a Father to you, and you shall be My sons and daughters, says the Lord Almighty."
2nd Corinthians 6:14-18 NKJV (cf. Ex.34:12ff.)

(9) I wrote you in my [previous] letter not to consort with immoral persons – (10) not [that you should] altogether [refrain from having any contact whatsoever] with greedy, crooked, and idolatrous people, for in that case you would have to depart from this world [entirely]! (11) But as it is I have written you not to socialize [with him] if some brother [Christian] has the reputation of being sexually immoral, or greedy, or idolatrous, or slanderous, or a drunk, or a crook – not even to share a meal with someone like that.
1st Corinthians 5:9-11 (cf. Eph.5:5-7)

We cannot "depart from this world entirely". We need to operate in it to earn our daily bread. So

we are allowed to have contact with unbelievers in the conduct of our lives – professional relationships, one might call them. In the first passage above, we are told to keep our relationships with unbelievers to a superficial and non-intrusive level as far as possible. That would certainly mean that marrying an unbeliever would be unwise (cf. 1Cor.7:39), as would "yoking" oneself in any sort of semi-permanent and voluntary business partnership to someone who does not share our love for the Lord Jesus Christ (Eph.5:5-7). While it is no doubt impossible to find a job in this world where all involved are believers, or a family that is entirely composed of believers, marrying an unbeliever or starting a business with an unbeliever is a mistake. And when it comes to anything not business related but strictly personal, we are not required to socialize with those whose standards are dangerously low and inimical to the spiritual health of those of us who love the Lord more than life. This is especially the case, as the passage above makes clear, when it comes to believers who are walking as "enemies of Christ" (Phil.3:18). For unbelievers at least have the excuse that they do not even claim to care about the Lord or His will, but believers have absolutely no excuse for scandalous conduct.

(20) For our [true] citizenship has a heavenly existence, and it is from there that we expectantly await our Savior, Lord Jesus Christ
Philippians 3:20

Finally, in regard to the believer's involvement in this world, while we cannot go out of it, we do need to remember always that while we are "in it", we most definitely are not "of it" (Jn.17:15-16) – we are biding our time here until we set eyes on the Savior we love. We are not to love the things of this world (1Jn.2:15), nor give into the fleshly patterns of loving the world: "the lust of the flesh", "the lust of the eyes", and "the boastful pride of life" (1Jn.2:16); all these things are passing away, but we are looking forward to a reward from the One who died to free us from our sins. Our "citizenship" is not here below but in heaven with our Lord Jesus Christ whose Church and Body we are.

Therefore our involvement here in the world must always be tempered by this knowledge. We understand that our Lord will soon return, and that He will reign righteously, putting down all evil. Before that glorious return, however, this world lies in the lap of the evil one (1Jn.5:19). For that reason, it is folly to attempt to change the world. For that reason, every mature Christian should know better than to become involved in a fruitless pursuit of personal wealth, possession, fame, pleasures . . . or political causes, any political cause. Regardless of the hypothetical rightness of crusading for or against abortion or evolution or climate change or racism or overseas tyranny or anything else whatsoever, all such actions merely involve the believer with unbelievers who are being controlled by the devil, and great spiritual damage always results. These matters are considered "great" by the world, but we believers see things from a different perspective, the Lord's perspective – or at least we certainly should. Only He and His truth are truly "great".

Great is the Lord, and greatly to be praised!
Psalm 48:1 NKJV

E. Ministry and Relations with Others Believers

Do nothing out of selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility consider others as more important than yourselves.

Philippians 2:3 CSB

Stay away from anything that [even] looks [like] evil.

1st Thessalonians 5:22

"Behold, I send you out as sheep in the midst of wolves. Therefore be wise as serpents and harmless as doves."

Matthew 10:16 NKJV (cf. Rom.16:19; 1Cor.14:20; Prov.14:18)

Spiritual discernment is also a key issue in how we relate to other believers, whether incidentally or through ministry. We certainly know that we ought to walk in love and act in love (e.g., Jas.2:8; 2Jn.1:6), but discerning precisely what that may mean in actual life circumstances often requires a good deal of spiritual maturity. As with most areas of discernment, we have to do here with two extremes which are to be avoided, through the recognition of which we hope to steer the proper middle course. On the one hand, selfishly ignoring the needs of our brothers and sisters in Christ when timely and desired help could be given is wrong; on the other hand, there are many times when circumstances and situations are such that the believer is well-advised not to "get involved". We want to humbly serve each other, but we also do not want to involve ourselves in any sort of anything that even hints of "evil". This world is full of wolves, and, sadly, renegade and otherwise spiritually confused believers sometimes fall into that category. We will only avoid trouble on that score, therefore, by being innocent in our actions (just like doves), and by being shrewd enough to avoid traps and pitfalls (just like serpents).

(22) Have compassion on those who are struggling [with their consciences] (i.e., wavering in their faith in regard to sinful behavior). (23) Rescue those you can by snatching them from the fire [of temptation and its consequences]; but exercise [such] compassion in [godly] fear, hating even the smallest part of sin's contamination (i.e., stay clear of, lit., "even the garment tainted by the flesh").

Jude 1:22-23

As the passage above indicates, believers involved in sinful activity – of whatever sort – are a special case. If we can do something to help "snatch them from the fire" without endangering ourselves, that would be good to do. But the caveat here – a call to exercise mature discretion based upon solid spiritual discernment – is not added to no purpose: if there is anything close to a reasonable prospect of ourselves being pulled into the sinfulness in question or tainted by it in any substantive way, then we should stay entirely clear and leave our intervention to the prayers we can surely offer without danger.

So, for example, if a believer is a recovering alcoholic and comes across another believer with the same problem, while his personal experience no doubt gives important perspective in helping

other Christians in this same trouble, extreme care ought obviously to be taken lest relapse from such close contact ensue. Generally speaking, we should think twice (at least) before attempting to "help" in such a direct and personal way any other believer who is struggling with a sin or sins which also constitute our own area of weakness – and we *all* have areas of particular weakness stemming from the individual uniqueness of our sin natures.

You are the light of the world. A city built on a mountain cannot be hidden. Nor do they light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on a lampstand, and [so] it illuminates everything in the house. Let the light within you shine in this way before men, so that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven.

Matthew 5:14-16

The principle our Lord gives us above is clear enough, but the "how" of achieving it is deliberately not filled in. That is because the ministries to which He calls us are as varied as we are. The most effective way to "help the Church of Jesus Christ" is through the particular ministry Christ assigns to us (1Cor.12:5), one which will obviously be directly attuned to the spiritual gifts with which the Spirit has gifted us at salvation. Since no one is going to be completely effective in ministry until such time as spiritual maturity is attained, the best thing we can do for any other Christian – and for the entire Church – is to set ourselves on a path of continuous and continuing spiritual growth. When we get to the point of recognizing our gifts and preparing sufficiently for ministry, we will be led into the precise "billet" Jesus Christ has for us – and it is from that position that we will do the most *genuine* good wherein our light will shine forth. At that point we will also be in a position, through the discernment that comes with prior spiritual growth and progress, to distinguish between legitimate spiritual help and unwanted interference (cf. Matt.7:6), with all of our good efforts rewarded by the Lord on that glorious day.

3. Impediments to Discernment

Perfection in analyzing the life-situations and circumstances we perforce encounter on the road to Zion is an impossibility for many reasons. First, we can never have perfect information about almost anything (not even often what is going on in our own hearts – although we are certainly responsible for every thought), and it is dangerously arrogant to forget this principle when we are evaluating situations which involve other people especially. If we assume that what others tell us is the absolute truth, this is clearly a mistake, even if they are kind and good hearted Christian people (no one is perfect; all have sin natures; all see things from their own point of view), just as it is equally a mistake to assume that we have been told everything by them (instead of only what is useful for advocating their point of view) or that those who "know" about the situation in question could possibly know everything about it.

We cannot allow the fog of imperfect information to stop us from making needful decisions, but it is prudent to acknowledge at all times what without the guidance of the Spirit and the grace of God we would be shooting entirely in the dark most of the time, no matter how "smart" we may feel ourselves to be. As we grow, however, our ability to navigate this problem grows, as do the timely help and guidance on all matters which we receive from the Lord the closer we walk with

Him day by day. The world being what it is, the information gap will always be there, but this problem is alleviated as so many others are by consistency in spiritual growth. We may never be like Elisha who found it unusual when the Lord did *not* reveal critical information to him (2Ki.4:27), but the closer we grow to the Lord, the more confident we can be of His particular guidance in all things, and the better we will hear the still, small voice of the Holy Spirit.

Second, we are not perfect so our motives are never absolutely pure. Human beings have sin natures. Human beings sin. In order to discern situations, we must first learn to discern ourselves, and that is also not the stuff of spiritual immaturity.

The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked; Who can know it?
Jeremiah 17:9 NKJV

If we are not judging ourselves aright, and not just our words and deeds but also our thoughts, we are out of fellowship with the Lord and thus stand little chance of making good judgments in other areas of life (cf. 1Cor.11:29-32; 1Jn.1:7-9).

Furthermore, we human beings are emotional creatures. Rather than objectively evaluating circumstances emotions react to them – whether we "feel" hurt or angry or guilty or grateful or happy or afraid, whatever we are "feeling" will often point us in the wrong direction and lead to faulty judgment, and the same is true when we feel compassion or anger or guilt etc. in viewing or learning about situations which do not directly concern us (inevitably the result of a biased and only partial account).

Gaining a measure of control over sin and emotional pressure – by confessing and resisting the former and by learning to coolly control and keep a correct perspective on the latter – are, once again, abilities which grow as the believer grows. But as with sin, so with emotional upheaval, the ability to do the right thing and resist the wrong thing does not guarantee either: it will still continue to be a matter of choice and will. Growth and progress in our walk with the Lord certainly should bear fruit in these areas, in spite of occasional lapses, and that is the pattern we do see in the great believers of the Bible as well.

Third, we do not have a perfect knowledge of scriptures and what they mean – even though we should aspire to that goal. This "problem", while it may never be completely resolved this side of heaven, is one which we can address head on in a direct and conscious way. We can spend more time reading and studying our Bibles. And if we are truly interested in learning God's truth, He will provide all the substantive Bible teaching we can handle. In this area, we are limited only by our free will decisions to read, study and believe. Even in rare instances where solid Bible teaching may not be immediately available to us, God will provide – the fact that we might have to wait a bit to demonstrate the legitimacy of our desire does not change the principle that He always provides our spiritual food, any more than testing in regard to physical food may be allowed occasionally to show what is really in our hearts (Deut.8:3). Learning the truth is not necessarily easy, it can be time-consuming, and it will compete with our energies and other priorities and needful activities – and so demonstrate how much we really are willing to put the

Lord first in our lives. But if we do persevere in spiritual growth – which is based upon reading and hearing the Word and its teaching, believing the truth we read/hear and putting it into practice in our lives – the problem of ignorance of God's will as revealed in the Bible will grow less and less with each passing day.

Now grow up through the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.
2nd Peter 3:18

Legalism: As great an impediment to discernment as ignorance of the truth of scripture is, turning the truth on its head is even worse; for in the latter case a person has confidence in being right when in fact he/she is dead wrong. One of the most egregious examples of systematic twisting of the truth is legalism, the very antithesis of grace, and it is such a problem for the church-visible today (entire religions such as the Roman Catholic church and Mormonism are based on it, and many if not most Protestant denominations and individual churches are leavened with it to a very great degree), that it will not be out of place to treat this contemporary bane in some detail to exemplify the problem of misinterpretation (whether willful or accidentally) impeding genuine Christian discernment.

Like justice Stewart's famous remark about obscenity, that he knew it when he saw it, similarly legalism, while perhaps not so easy to define, is impossible to miss – at least for any Christian who is truly spiritually mature and walking with Christ. That is not to say, however, that even mature Christians who know better cannot be enmeshed in legalism, especially when pressured by others. At Antioch, faced with the claim by certain Judaizers that circumcision was necessary for salvation, even Peter and Barnabas were caught up in the hypocrisy (Gal.2:12-14). That instance is very helpful in demonstrating what legalism is: first, it is a misrepresentation of the truth; second, it seeks to establish merit or "righteousness" through human works; third, it is absolutely contrary to God's grace in Jesus Christ. The word itself, legalism, is well-coined, because the false standard is directly related to a misinterpretation / misunderstanding of the Law of Moses or to another "law" likewise consisting of rules and regulations invented and taught by mere men (Is.29:13; Matt.15:9; Mk.7:7; cf. Col.2:22). Using such false yardsticks to direct one's behavior and guide one's course in life results in deadly error, but even worse is the self-righteousness, hypocrisy and judgmental condemnation of others which is the inevitable result of doing so.

Your glorying is not good. Do you not know that a little leaven leavens the whole lump?
1st Corinthians 5:6 NKJV (cf. Matt.16:6-12 Gal.5:9)

Believers who are truly seeking to follow their Lord have relatively little to worry about in respect to the other extreme also exemplified in the factions of our Lord's day, namely, the approach of the Sadducees who were entirely secular and had nothing resembling true faith. Legalism purports to be "of faith" but actually seeks to reduce everything to a set of rules – man-made rules which masquerade as having divine authority. This was the policy and procedure of the Pharisees who so leavened the truth that it became anything but. When it comes to most practical areas of living life in this world, while scripture does give us some absolutes which are

very clear, in many cases we are given instead only general principles which have to be understood and applied through the Spirit. Legalism seeks to "fill in the blanks" in such "debatable matters" (Rom.14:1) and replace freedom of application (which is in fact necessary to ever "get it right" because circumstances, situations, and people are kaleidoscopically different) with draconian and unyielding laws. And it usurps the authority of God by claiming He has said things He has not in fact said.

(7) "Hypocrites! Well did Isaiah prophesy about you, saying: (8) 'These people draw near to Me with their mouth, and honor Me with their lips, but their heart is far from Me. (9) And in vain they worship Me, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men' (Is.29:13)."

Matthew 15:7-9

Rules and regulations made up by human beings will not only never do the biblical principles we are given justice but often stand them completely on their head. Given the widespread infection of legalistic leaven into the lump of the church-visible today, time and space will not permit an exhaustive description of every such instance of the legalistic approach. What follows is merely a set of examples so that the reader may better appreciate the problem and learn how to better distinguish between the biblical, grace-based approach on the one hand, and the self-righteous approach of legalism on the other.

The first thing to note about legalism is that in fact it has nothing whatsoever to do with the Mosaic Law. The Law of Moses was designed to demonstrate our sinfulness (e.g., Rom.3:20), and thereby lead us to God's grace in Jesus Christ (Gal.3:24); by demonstrating that we needed a Savior, the Law, properly understood, prods the unbeliever to look to God for the answers, and provides that answer in the Substitute foreshadowed in its blood sacrifices. So while before the cross it is true that the precise nature of salvation through the coming Messiah, His first advent and His sacrifice for the sins of the world, were nowhere as clearly portrayed as they are evident today looking back at the reality of Christ being revealed to the world and actually dying for its sins (1Pet.1:10-11), salvation was the same: trusting in God the Father's Substitute, looking forward then through shadows to the time when He would take away all sin in a manner comparable to the way we look back today with greater clarity to the time when He actually did so, judging all our sins in Christ's body on the cross (2Cor.5:21; 1Pet.2:24).

(25) God made Him a means of atonement [achieved] by His blood [and claimed] through faith, to give proof of His justice in leaving unpunished in divine forbearance [all] previously committed sins, (26) so as to prove His justice in the present, namely, so that He would be [shown to be] just [in this] and [justified] in justifying the one who has faith in Jesus.

Romans 3:25-26

Besides Jesus Christ, no one has ever been able to "keep the Law", and failure in even a single point of "Law keeping" brings condemnation (Jas.2:10). Therefore the purpose of the Law is all about turning us to Christ by showing us that we are in need of grace (Gal.3:22), and it is *never* a

means of being justified before God.

Therefore no flesh shall be considered righteous before Him through the works of the Law, for it is through the Law that we come to acknowledge [our] sin.

Romans 3:20

You have become estranged from Christ, you who attempt to be justified by law; you have fallen from grace.

Galatians 5:4 NKJV

Since the principle that no one can be justified by the *actual* Law is eminently clear throughout the Bible, the idea that a person could be justified before God by any man-made system of law should be considered ridiculous and blasphemous in the extreme. And yet that is what many groups today teach (or imply or insinuate), putting out their own version of what is lawful and what is not, and judging their own behavior and the behavior of others by means of their false and concocted standards. That is the practical definition of legalism.

We will not concern ourselves with cults and non- or pseudo-Christian groups here as there are, sadly, plentiful examples of churches and denominations composed mainly of Christians which have become legalistic in this way. Make no mistake: we Christians are justified by faith, not works (Rom.3:28; 5:1; Gal.2:16; 3:11; 3:24), because salvation is a matter of God's grace, not of our works – hewing to some false, legalistic standard – "lest any man should boast" (Eph.2:8-9). As James 2:24 tells us, all genuine Christians do have "good works" to show – acts of faith from the heart, the tongue, the hand – but these do *not* consist of adopting and following a false legalistic standard, proclaiming a set of behaviors as "bad" and glorying in not engaging in them (while meanwhile sinning in many other ways, for "all sin": Rom.3:23). This, as mentioned above, was precisely what the Pharisees did, namely, "dumb down" the actual Law into a set of external and visible behaviors while ignoring the weightier matters of the Law, as our Lord told them, "justice, mercy and faith" (Matt.23:23). But at least the Pharisees could claim putting on a good show of "keeping" many of the visible commandments of the Mosaic Law such as festival observance, tithing to the Levites in Jerusalem and offering various sacrifices – none of which things is possible today since there is no temple at present and since there is no functioning Levitical priesthood. But neither these obvious truths nor the clear statements of scripture (given in brief above) have dissuaded such groups today from reveling in their legalism.

Prohibitions on drinking, smoking, dancing, card playing, going to the movies, use of makeup, "inappropriate" dress and the like are very common in any legalistic milieu. Let us be clear: depending on the particulars, any of these areas might involve a Christian in behavior that is indeed ill-advised and possibly even sinful. However, blanket prohibitions against things that are not actually sinful according to scripture in and of themselves is the hallmark of any legalistic code – and feeling "justified" and "self-satisfied" by adhering to such a code successfully is an all too common and concomitant attitude adopted by those involved in such horrific systems of false spirituality – one which is inimical, I hasten to add, to true spirituality.

Alcohol and Tobacco: To take these in reverse order, Tobacco is a new world plant and smoking as we know it today did not exist in antiquity. It is very doubtful in any case if scripture would have anything to say about the subject directly. Smoking is considered "sinful" in many legalistic organizations, groups and cliques, but there is no biblical justification for this position. As with many legalistic prohibitions, while the activity itself is not sinful per se, judging others for engaging in it most definitely *is* a sin (Matt.7:1-5; Lk.6:37; Rom.14:4; 14:10; 14:13; Jas.4:11-12; cf. Rom.2:1; 1Cor.4:5), and all the more vile inasmuch as it involves attributing sin to someone for a behavior that is not in and of itself sinful at all. That is not to say, of course, that smoking is a "good idea" or that it is not extremely harmful to one's health. It is not to say that it is not noxious and offensive to others or that smoking when and where the activity is prohibited is not a problem. And it is not to say that smoking represents a "good decision" on the believer's part or that it constitutes a "good witness", nor even that there may not be times and circumstances where, for the sake of avoiding influencing a weaker brother in the wrong way, a person who normally smokes might do better to refrain. But it is to say that even with all the negatives involved, proclaiming some non-sinful behavior a sin, even when it is unquestionably unhealthy and problematic for many reasons, is most definitely a sin, the sin of legalism, and cannot actually render the disliked activity sinful in fact. What is more, those who crusade against smoking and feel self-righteously justified in refraining themselves and in condemning those who do smoke have fallen headlong into the legalistic trap and are themselves mired in sin far worse than the offensive (yet not necessarily sinful) behavior they officially proscribe.

The above is the common pattern that legalism always takes and can be seen perhaps even more clearly in case of the use of alcohol. Scripture does speak about alcohol, and while drunkenness is most definitely a sin (e.g., Gal.5:21; 1Tim.3:8; Ti.2:3), alcohol use in moderation most definitely is not (e.g., Num.6:20; Matt.26:29; Jn.2:3-10). So while it is certainly biblical to warn about the dangers of excessive alcohol consumption (which are unquestionably many in addition to the sinfulness of getting drunk), there is never justification to proclaim something a sin which the Bible does not condemn as a sin – and how much more so in this case where it is even occasionally commended (Prov.31:6; Eccl.9:7; 1Tim.5:23).

In the case of this country, we can see from our own history the deleterious effects of taking such legalism even beyond the church-visible and into the political realm: Prohibition, while it did not end alcohol consumption, did tremendous damage in sparking the rise of organized crime – not to mention putting out of business many legitimate family run enterprises which *were* law-abiding. There is no doubt but that alcohol addiction is a terrible thing and that it has destroyed very many lives, not only those of the individuals with the addiction but also those of their families. Given the dangers of alcohol abuse – which even in the absence of outright alcoholism leads to very many other sins, crimes and disastrous accidents – it is easy to see why a pastor or family or group which had suffered because of it might well want to proclaim any use of alcohol sinful and thus pressure all within their orbit to abstain. But that decision, if it be made for whatever reason, has to come from the individual Christian in question. Proclaiming alcohol and its use to be sinful under any circumstances is wrong, Pharisaical, legalistic, and sinful in its own right. Good intentions do not justify turning the scriptures on their heads and claiming to have

God in one's corner in doing so. That is in fact a far quicker road to spiritual peril than even alcohol can be for those vulnerable to it.

Food: Partially because of the dietary regulations in the Mosaic Law, concerns about what to eat and what not to eat have long exercised the church-visible. But here is what scripture has to say on the issue:

(18) "Are you so dull?" he asked. "Don't you see that nothing that enters a person from the outside can defile them? (19) For it doesn't go into their heart but into their stomach, and then out of the body." In saying this, Jesus declared all foods clean.
Mark 7:18-19 NIV

(13) And a voice came to him, "Rise, Peter; kill and eat." (14) But Peter said, "Not so, Lord! For I have never eaten anything common or unclean." (15) And a voice spoke to him again the second time, "What God has cleansed you must not call common."
Acts 10:13-15 NKJV

If any of those who do not believe invites you to dinner, and you desire to go, eat whatever is set before you, asking no question for conscience' sake.
1st Corinthians 10:27 NKJV

(16) So don't let anyone judge you in regard to food or drink, or in the category of festival observances, be it of new moons or Sabbaths. (17) All these things are shadows of what was to come, but the reality has to do with Christ. (18) Let no one gain control over your life, desiring to [enslave you to himself] through a show of false humility and the adoration of angels, basing his approach on what he has [allegedly] seen while puffed up by his own fleshly thoughts, (19) yet not embracing the Head [Christ]. For it is from this Source that the entire body [the Church] is [truly] supplied and instructed through [all] its joints and sinews, and [thus] produces the growth that God has given. (20) If you have died with Christ to these false [pagan] principles [belonging to] this world, why are you letting yourselves be [wrongly] indoctrinated as if your life were of this world? In accordance with the commandments and teaching of [mere] men [these false teachers tell you] (21) "Don't handle! Don't taste! Don't touch!", (22) even though [we know] that all these [are only] things [which] decay with use. (23) Such teachings have a [false] reputation for wisdom, but [only] in concocted religion, [false] humility, and [legalistic] harsh treatment of the body – they have no actual power to neutralize the [sinful] flesh (i.e., the sin nature is not to be controlled by these legalistic approaches).
Colossians 2:16-23

There is certainly nothing wrong with a believer preferring to stick as closely as possible to the dietary regulations of the Law. Nor is there anything wrong with a believer preferring to follow a vegetarian or "vegan" diet, or to prefer "organic" or "whole" foods. It might even be argued that some such regimens are healthy. But while it is certainly the case that giving no thought whatsoever to one's diet is problematic (e.g., a total absence of vitamin C will eventually result in

contracting scurvy), assigning any sort of *spiritual* benefit to abstinence from one type of food or another (or in partaking of one type of food or another) is a grave mistake:

(1) The Spirit explicitly says that in the end times certain men will rebel from the faith, giving their allegiance [instead] to deceitful spirits and demonic doctrines. (2) With their own consciences seared away and speaking with the hypocrisy of men [who peddle] lies, (3) they will [instruct their victims] to refrain from marriage, and to keep away from certain foods – which God created to be received with thanksgiving by those who believe and fully understand the truth. (4) For everything God has created is good, and nothing is to be rejected [out of hand if it is] received with thanksgiving, (5) because it is sanctified [for our use] through God's Word and [our] prayers.

1st Timothy 4:1-5

As these passages demonstrate, the problem with adopting special dietary standards is not in the particulars of those standards but in assigning them *spiritual* significance. That is legalism, the adoption, promulgation and judgmental use of such false, man-made rules and using them as a measure of spirituality for oneself and in evaluating the conduct of others. And beyond all biblical argument, the spiritual damage of legalism is a far worse problem than any potential physical harm that might potentially result from violating one of these self-selected dietary programs – because it seeks to replace and thus negate the grace of God.

Cultural Activities: In any legalistic organization or credo one usually finds prohibitions against or strict regulations of engagement in various cultural activities and forms of entertainment. Clearly enough, some things are absolutely sinful and have no place in a Christian's life. In the ancient world, for example, prostitution was often a feature of pagan religion and even "worship", but scripture emphatically rejects involvement of believers in any such activity or the rationalizing of it (1Cor.6:15-20). Some things in our contemporary world are a good deal less clear than this. Dancing is one activity frequently prohibited by legalistic groups, and the rationale for such prohibitions is clear enough, namely, close physical contact by members of the opposite sex who in many cases are not married to each other. But while it may be true that the better part of valor for some Christians who are particularly vulnerable to temptations in this area would be to avoid this activity, intense forms of dancing in particular, nothing in scripture countenances a blanket prohibition, especially in regard to largely innocuous forms of it (and there was dancing in the ancient world as well, even godly dancing: cf. 2Sam.6:14). On the other hand, feeling self-righteous on account of refraining or being judgmental towards those who do not is a vicious sort of legalism.

Society today offers a wide range of entertainments, many of which can run the gamut from the relatively harmless to the dangerously addictive, depending on the precise form of the activity and also on the potential vulnerability to the specific activity on the part of the believer in question. What tempts me, may not tempt you, and vice versa. Some may enjoy video games. Some may, for whatever reason, have a particular weakness for them, and so much so that they begin to devote their entire lives to them, losing sleep, compromising their jobs, damaging their relationships, etc., all for the sake of some silly game. If we know someone who has destroyed

their life through video game addiction – and more to the point if we are related or otherwise closely connected to someone who has done so – it would be very tempting to "make a rule" in our church or denomination or even just within our circle proclaiming any engagement with video games whatsoever "a sin". The result of this would soon be, as is inevitably the case, a feeling of self-righteousness for not playing video games on the one hand, and a judgmental attitude (or worse) towards those who do on the other. That is standard legalism.

The truth is that there are many things in any society – and especially in our modern world – which are not in and of themselves either sinful or virtuous, but which are often taken past the point of prudence in a damaging way, and frequently enough taken to the point of destructiveness. Our example of alcohol use above is a perfect example of this phenomenon. The answer to all such temptations is always the positive mind-set of putting the Lord Jesus Christ and His Church first and all else second. If we are really trying to walk in a way pleasing to the Lord – and that of course includes as we have noted doing right by our family and our employer as well as being prudently solicitous of our own health and well-being too – then we are going to be much more resistant to doing anything unnecessary in a manic or obsessive way.

Watching sporting events is not a sin. Watching television is not a sin. Reading books, fiction or non-fiction, is not a sin. Playing golf is not a sin. Listening to music is not a sin. Going to the movies is not a sin, nor is going to a play or the opera or the ballet or a football game or any game or entertainment. Nor is it correct to think of our Lord as displeased with us for engaging in activities of this sort. Clearly, however, overdoing anything can be sinful. There is only so much time, so much energy, so much money and other resources to be had. We are here on this earth to make choices, and the choices we make say a lot about our true priorities. If we are ordering our lives in a way so that we are doing due diligence to the issue of our personal spiritual growth while at the same time conducting ourselves honorably in regard to our employment and our families, etc., then taking time out to relax is not something frowned upon by scripture. This is mostly a matter of degrees, emphasis, and, above all, *choice*. Focusing upon the (sometimes sinful) extremes to which, it is certainly true, many people and not a few Christians often go in regard to any of these and other unnamed activities and becoming judgmental and legalistic about them is just as certainly a spiritual error as engaging in the excess being criticized or prohibited.

Grooming:

(9) In like manner also, that the women adorn themselves in modest apparel, with propriety and moderation, not with braided hair or gold or pearls or costly clothing, (10) but, which is proper for women professing godliness, with good works.
1st Timothy 2:9-10 NKJV

(4) Every man praying or prophesying, having his head covered, dishonors his head. (5) But every woman who prays or prophesies with her head uncovered dishonors her head, for that is one and the same as if her head were shaved. (6) For if a woman is not covered, let her also be shorn. But if it is shameful for a woman to be shorn or shaved, let her be

covered.

1st Corinthians 11:4-6 NKJV

Much has often been made of these two passages (and similar ones). Contrary to what is often taken from them, however these verses give us general principles and extremes to be avoided rather than explicit rules about grooming, and they certainly do *not* invite being expanded into any system of rules – for that is exactly the opposite of what should be done in any case, and is mere legalism, pure and simple. The first passage which applies to female attire is explained by a closely parallel passage in Peter's first epistle:

(3) Do not let your adornment be *merely outward* – arranging the hair, wearing gold, or putting on fine apparel – (4) rather let it be the hidden person of the heart, with the incorruptible beauty of a gentle and quiet spirit, which is very precious in the sight of God. (5) For in this manner, in former times, the holy women who trusted in God also adorned themselves, being submissive to their own husbands, (6) as Sarah obeyed Abraham, calling him Lord, whose daughters you are if you do good and are not afraid with any terror.

1st Peter 3:3-6 NKJV

The point is that the attitude of heart manifest in godly behavior is what should be emphasized, not the external trappings of beauty the world emphasizes. Making oneself presentable is therefore no sin and not at all being discouraged by Peter or Paul; rather, it is the supervening importance of the spiritual factor as so much more important than any aspect of appearance which is to be emphasized in the Christian life. In terms of the second passage with which we began this section, Paul's comments later in the chapter explain what is actually meant:

(14) Does not even nature itself teach you that if a man has long hair, it is a dishonor to him? (15) But if a woman has long hair, it is a glory to her; for her hair is given to her for a covering.

1st Corinthians 11:14-15 NKJV

Rather than hats or veils, it is at this point clear that Paul was talking about hair all along. Women should avoid the pagan practice of tearing out their hair in grief or of shaving their heads for the fulfillment of Jewish vows, and men should avoid wearing their hair at a woman's length – extremes within which a wide variety of possibilities would best not be weighed in on by any Christian who appreciates the danger of wrongly judging others (Matt.7:1; Lk.6:37; Rom.14:4). Note also that Paul does not give the Corinthian men any command and only points out that their consciences will guide them if they pass over the proper extreme, and only rebukes the women who have gone to the other extreme because of the pagan connection to tearing the hair and the no longer valid connection to the Jewish system of making vows. Rather than "rules", therefore, these passages give general principles designed to help us avoid extreme behavior that may have negative spiritual consequences and provide a poor witness. The legalistic practice of telling other people just how long their hair can or cannot be is thus not authorized by these scriptures.

Legalism can be found in every nook and cranny of human life, in every human activity and cultural practice, and few churches and Christian groups today are completely free of it (cf. the near ubiquitous practice of the continuation of water-baptism, a Jewish rite not appropriate for the Church: Lk.3:16; Acts 1:5). The reason we are here on earth after salvation is to grow spiritually, to walk ever closer with the Lord, making consistent spiritual progress, and go on to help others do likewise through ministry. In this quest to please the Lord, the proper use of our free will to respond to what He desires us to think, say and do is fundamental. The Christian way of life, properly lived, is all about making good decisions – decisions pleasing to Jesus Christ. Surrendering that free will, that faith meant to be exercised in response to the Spirit's guidance, to any system of rules and regulations is devastatingly stunting to spiritual growth, since by definition it tramples the grace of God under foot. In terms of impediments to growing in the Lord, therefore, legalism of any sort is one of the most dangerous, and ought to be avoided by wise Christians intent upon winning a good report before the judgment seat of Christ.

It is for this freedom that Christ has set us free. So stand fast [in it], and do not again encumber yourselves with the yolk of slavery (i.e., the Law).

Galatians 5:1

4. Wisdom

Wisdom is the principal thing;
Therefore get wisdom.
And in all your getting, get understanding.
Proverbs 4:7 NKJV

The word "wisdom", whether in Hebrew (חָכְמָה, *chochmah*), Greek (σοφία, *sophia*), or English shares nearly identical, broad ranges of meaning. For our purposes here, wisdom is to be defined as knowledge and understanding which is deeply attuned to the truth and which thereby gives the believer a discernment in the Spirit capable of correctly parsing and analyzing the circumstances of life so as to respond to them in a proper, godly way. Wisdom is thus not an absolute but a quality characteristic of the mature believer which will continue to grow as long as the believer in question grows. Wisdom is also clearly more effective and precise when the believer is walking in the Spirit close to Jesus Christ – but while the Spirit does guide and direct, this does not remove the necessity for the believer to evaluate and discern based (one hopes) upon the wisdom God has given him/her through attention to the truth of the Word of God.

The law (*torah*, "teaching") of the Lord is perfect, converting the soul; The testimony of the Lord is sure, making wise the simple.

Psalms 19:7 NKJV

Belief in the truth, the Lord's "testimony" or "precepts" (enduring sacred principles taught by repetition), is what gives us wisdom, what makes us wise as opposed to simple or foolish – that is to say, the truth of the Word of God. True wisdom, godly wisdom as opposed to the wisdom of this world, always starts and ends with the Lord, learning to adjust our point of view,

standards and behavior not to what we think best but to what He tells us is best.

And to man He said, "Behold, the fear of the Lord, that is wisdom, and to depart from evil is understanding".

Job 28:28 NKJV

The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom, and the knowledge of the Holy One is understanding.

Proverbs 9:10 NKJV (cf. Ps.111:10; Prov.1:7)

Therefore instead of seeing things as the world does, through a false lens of lusts wedded to objectives and aspirations that are entirely temporary, and instead of insanely behaving as if what we see will endure, godly wisdom recognizes that the Lord is the One who is truly in charge of all things seen and unseen, and that it is to Him that we must respond, both now in this life but also very importantly in the one to come – godly wisdom respects, reveres, and righteously fears the One to whom we must soon enough give an account for all of our actions here on earth.

(9) Our ambition [as Christians], therefore, whether in this body or out of it, is to be pleasing to our Lord. (10) For we must all stand before Christ's tribunal, so that each of us may receive recompense for what he has accomplished through this body, whether it be good or worthless. (11) Therefore since we know *the fear of the Lord* (i.e., in anticipating this evaluation), while we attempt to persuade men, God sees us entirely for what we [truly] are – and I trust that what we [truly] are is equally clear to your consciences.

2nd Corinthians 5:10-11

In its most fundamental form godly wisdom is the correct appreciation of our place in this world and in the one to come: we are here for the Lord and for only a very brief time, and we are being judged now based upon performance for Him and will stand before Him on "that Day" to give a detailed account of all we have done and have failed to do. Living in recognition of these truths always, as Paul affirms above, provides a measure of godly trepidation meant to help us motivate ourselves to do what we should do (in growing through the truth, walking closer to Christ day by day, and helping others do likewise), while avoiding everything offensive to the Lord. In its essence, therefore, true wisdom is inseparable from a deep respect for the Lord Jesus Christ and a consciousness of what is really going on in this world as we walk through it – as opposed to what our eyes, ears, emotions and the rest of the world tell us is important.

There is, of course, also a difference between knowing what is right to do and actually doing it. Much is expected of those who have received much (Lk.12:48), so that spiritually mature believers are rightly judged by a higher standard (Lk.12:47).

(16) But as it is you are boasting in your braggart arrogance. Every such boast is evil. (17) Since for him who knows how to do good and does not do it, for him it is sin.

James 4:16-17

Applying wisdom to our lives is a matter of adopting the same process described earlier in this section, and consists in the main of correctly dividing and discerning the truly important from the truly unimportant. Beyond all argument, some things are much more important in this life than others, and it will do no good for the mature believer to be correctly straining out gnats (things of relatively little importance) while swallowing down camels whole – that may have the appearance of wisdom (as was the case with the Pharisees) but will result in the weightier things – justice, mercy and faith – being given short shrift (Matt.23:23-24).

(16) Do not be overly righteous, and do not be overly wise – why should you ruin yourself? (17) Do not be overly wicked and do not be a fool – why should you die before your time? (18) The best thing for you [to do] is to lay firm hold on the former (i.e., wisdom and righteousness), while not completely releasing your hand from the latter, for the man who fears God will escape both [extremes].

Ecclesiastes 7:16-18

Solomon's advice above – given in the Spirit – is not a justification or excuse for sin or questionable behavior. Quite to the contrary. This very wise observation demonstrates that in this life there are many things we do not completely understand, even when it comes to situations in which we are personally involved. There are biblical absolutes in life, and these are very clear and clearly demarcated by scripture. But when it comes to the *application* of truth to circumstances where many principles overlap, where many things are known to us only in part, and when even our own motivations cannot be parsed in an absolute way, the best thing is to keep to the middle of road as we march forward with the Lord. Pretending that we know everything about situations where that is not the case will throw us off into the ditch on the "overly righteous" (i.e., only apparently righteous) side of things; whereas, assuming that because there is much that is unknown we can sail safely onward where there is every reason to assume the existence of hidden rocks and shoals will land us in trouble with the other extreme. True wisdom "knows better" than to go out on a limb without the facts or to throw caution to the winds because not all the facts are knowable. The light may not be dazzlingly clear, but there will always be a glimmer of daylight in the "straight ahead" direction, and that will not be the case with either extreme.

The path of the righteous is like the first gleam of dawn, shining ever brighter till the first light of day.

Proverbs 4:18 NIV

As we grow, we will get better at this process: it is the combination of continued and continuing spiritual growth through attention to and faith in the truth substantively taught *combined* with its diligent application to our lives in the power of the Spirit that produce increasing success in living a truly wise Christian life.

Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by this renewal of your thinking, so that you may discern what God's will for you is, namely what it is good, well-pleasing, and correct [for you to do].

Romans 12:2 (cf. Rom.2:17-18)

(9) And this is my prayer: that your love may abound more and more in full-knowledge and in all discernment, (10) so that you may be able to evaluate the things that are good and appropriate [for you to do] to be sincere and without offense in regard to the day of Christ (i.e., to gain a maximum reward at Christ's judgment seat), (11) full of the righteous production Jesus Christ [commends] to the glory and praise of God.

Philippians 1:9-11

Solid [spiritual] food is for the [spiritually] mature, those who by [diligent] practice have trained their [moral] perceptive faculties to [properly] distinguish between good and evil.

Hebrews 5:14

Even though it can be expected to increase over time as we grow, our deployment of true biblical wisdom will always be a relative thing because on the one hand we will never on this side of eternity know perfectly everything the Bible has to offer, and on the other hand, sinful creatures that we are, we will also never be perfect in our motives, behavior and willingness to follow God's WILL, even when we do correctly discern it. Only our Lord Jesus Christ did both perfectly and at all times – an awesome thing to consider. For that reason, He is the ultimate role model for us in our pursuit of wisdom and desire to please the Father.

"Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls."

Matthew 11:29 NKJV

"I have given you an example that you may do as I have done."

John 13:15 (cf. Jn.14:15; 14:23-24)

(5) You too should have this attitude which Christ Jesus had. (6) Since He already existed in the very form of God, equality with God was [certainly] not something He thought He had to grasp for. (7) Yet in spite of this [co-equal divinity He already possessed], He deprived Himself of His status and took on the form of a slave, [and was] born in the likeness of men. (8) He humbled Himself, becoming obedient to the point of death, even [His] death on [the] cross [for us all].

Philippians 2:5-8

(21) It is to this [sharing in the sufferings of Christ] that you have been called, for Christ also died on your behalf, leaving you an example so that you might follow in His footsteps. (22) He committed no sin, nor was any guile found in His mouth. (23) He did not return slander when He was slandered, did not threaten when He suffered, but entrusted Himself to the One who judges righteously.

1st Peter 2:21-23

(2) Turning our gaze unto Jesus, the originator and completer of our faith (cf. "Alpha and

Omega"), who, for the joy set before Him, endured the shame of the cross, treating it with despite, and took His seat at the right hand of the throne of God. (3) Keep in mind all the terrible opposition He endured against Himself at the hands of sinful men, so as not to grow sick at heart and give up.

Hebrews 12:2-3

He who says he abides in Him (Jesus Christ) ought himself also to walk just as He walked.

1st John 2:6 NKJV

When, through spiritual growth and the perspective of experience in applying the truth learned through the Spirit, we correctly discern the righteous path through this world, that is wisdom.

And to man He said, "Behold, the fear of the Lord, that is wisdom, and to depart from evil is understanding".

Job 28:28 NKJV

5. The Law of Love

Everything is permissible for me, but not everything is beneficial. Everything is permissible for me, but I will not be made subject to the authority of anything (i.e., let any behavior compromise my spiritual growth *or* that of others).

1st Corinthians 6:12

Everything is permissible for me, but not everything is beneficial. Everything is permissible for me, but not everything edifies (i.e., contributes to spiritual growth of oneself *and* others).

1st Corinthians 10:23

Love will be the preeminent consideration in the application of truth to our lives – if we want to walk ever more closely to Christ and fulfill God's WILL. Love was what our Lord kept in mind at all times, sacrificing everything for the world He and the Father loved so much (Jn.3:16) – and especially for all of us who would respond to Jesus Christ in faith and become part of His Bride. Love is the ultimate litmus test whenever a believer is in doubt about the right course of action to take.

Owe no one anything except to love one another, for he who loves the other [person in question] has fulfilled the law.

Romans 13:8 NKJV

Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore love is the fulfillment of the law.

Romans 13:10 NASB

As those who have been liberated from the Law (Rom.6:14; 7:4-6; Gal.5:18; Heb.8:13), we Christians have a great deal of freedom in Jesus Christ (Rom.8:2; Gal.5:1). But while we are

allowed to do many things – and refrain from many things – action or lack of action may be "less than profitable" if it is not rooted and grounded in love. Love seeks the good not only of ourselves but the good of others as well, following in the footsteps of Jesus Christ (1Cor.13:4-8a; 1Pet.2:21).

Be kindly affectionate to one another with brotherly love, in honor giving preference to one another.

Romans 12:10 NKJV

In this regard, however, it is very important to point out that wisdom is not to be divorced from love. The *true* good of others is what we should seek and strive to promote, not what they themselves or third parties or even we ourselves under emotional pressure might only assume to be "good". And what is good if not salvation for those who do not know Jesus Christ and spiritual growth for those who do?

(31) So whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God. (32) Do not cause anyone to stumble, whether Jews, Greeks or the church of God – (33) even as I try to please everyone in every way. For I am not seeking my own good but the good of many, so that they may be saved.

1st Corinthians 10:31-33 NIV

All this is for your benefit, so that the grace that is reaching more and more people may cause thanksgiving to overflow to the glory of God.

2nd Corinthians 4:15 NIV

So whether as in the first passage we refrain from certain behavior to avoid causing offense – not out of fear or out of being bullied but out of a genuine desire not to lead anyone else to stumble – or whether as in the second passage we tell others the truth, even if it is not what they want to hear – not out of a desire to intimidate or bully others with our knowledge but out of a genuine desire to keep them from spiritual harm – in either case love focused in wisdom on the actual merits of the situation is what is demanded of mature believers wishing to walk in the footsteps of our Lord Jesus Christ.

(3) Our Warfare (Combat)

Having been recruited as soldiers of the cross by the commanding General whom it is our desire to please (2Tim.2:4), the Lord of Hosts Himself, our Savior Jesus Christ, having enlisted through faith and having been trained up to spiritual maturity so that we now view the world from the divine perspective and possess the spiritual discernment necessary to avoid being "tossed to and fro by every wind of false teaching" (Eph.4:14), we believers are now ready to take our place among the ranks of those actually engaged in spiritual combat for the glory of God and the edification of the Church.

Endure *hardship* with me like a good soldier of Christ Jesus.

Make no mistake. The Christian life, properly lived, is warfare, and it is warfare all the way to the end. Though it may appear otherwise to the spiritually immature, those involved in fighting the good fight day by day know very well that the relative peace and prosperity of those sitting on the sidelines is deceptive. Temporary blessing in this life is largely meaningless, especially if it is not from God. This life is short. It comes to an end in the blink of an eye, and no blessing enjoyed here on earth can be taken to the other side. The crowns of eternal reward are military decorations won on the battlefield, not while safely ensconced far from the fray.

And in truth, the battlefield is the only truly safe place. This spiritual warfare in which we find ourselves engaged does not always and forever spare those who have refused to engage in it. Malingering and failing to win any of the rewards that honor Jesus Christ, while bad enough for that failure and for that loss of eternal bliss, is actually extremely spiritually dangerous. Those who fight the fight may suffer – will suffer – *for* so doing, but their faith grows stronger day by day *in* so doing. Those who have chosen to "sit it out", remaining spiritually immature and being concerned only about living "a good life", leave themselves highly vulnerable to tribulation if and when it comes. Severe personal tribulation may or may not descend on the life of the spiritual immature believer in good times; however, we are presently on the cusp of *the* Tribulation, wherein immature believers will find themselves caught like fish in a cruel net by the unexpected trouble that comes violently upon them (Eccl.9:12). In a few short years, believers who have avoided the difficulties of spiritual growth, progress and production and have thus opted out of the spiritual warfare in which we have been called to engage will find themselves with only two harsh choices: 1) apostasy, or 2) engaging in a painful and extremely difficult "crash course" of spiritual growth under the most difficult of circumstances. Many such will prove unequal to the second choice and thus fall into the prophesied Great Apostasy.⁹

This is a war. There is no peace, there is no truce, there is no "finish" line, no end to the fighting . . . not until our Lord returns in glory or calls us home to be with Him, whether before or after the Tribulation begins. All other thinking is very dangerous. Christians never "retire", not from this most important of all struggles, not while breath is left in our bodies. We came into this world naked and naked our bodies will return to the ground – unless it be our lot to endure the seven years of trouble to the end and see with our present eyes the glorious return of our King.

In any case and in every case, everything we see in this world is temporary, and everything we may have or think we have is completely insecure – in the world's terms. The Lord is our security. The Lord is our portion. The Lord is the only fortress capable of withstanding the unseen assaults of the adversary. And He is indeed all-sufficient for our protection and defense. But it is *He* who is our defense and safety, not the things we see or which may be in our temporary possession – and that is an important perspective to which we need to cling wholeheartedly at all times.

⁹ See section II, "The Great Apostasy", in part 3A of the *Coming Tribulation* series.

The Lord is the One who is directing this fight in which we are involved, and He knows our needs so much better than any human general who ever supplied and directed a visible army. He will never leave us in the lurch. He will never let us down. And if we find ourselves in need – of anything – we can be absolutely confident that this need itself is serving some important purpose. The fact that we may not see it at the time is of no consequence – as long as we trust Him. The end of all our Commander is directing us to do is absolute and total victory, already won at the cross, and merely being exploited by Him through us and for our eternal benefit in this present final phase of history before His Kingdom comes. To participate in this conflict is an inestimable honor; but we need to take pains to see it as the honor it is, even when the invisible battle is raging fiercely around us and the situation appears grim – and indeed especially at such times.

For our battle is not against flesh and blood, but against [angelic] princes, against [angelic] authorities, against the cosmic powers of this [present] darkness, against evil spirits in the heavenly realms.

Ephesians 6:12

Since our warfare is largely unseen to the eyes of the world – they can see our suffering but not the reasons for it or our faith response to it – it will be helpful here to recount a few basic principles of spiritual warfare that are good to keep in mind at all times:

[1] Know your enemy.

[I grant forgiveness] . . . in order that we may not be taken advantage of by Satan, for we are not ignorant of his schemes.

2nd Corinthians 2:11

And it is no wonder, for Satan himself masquerades as an angel of light.

2nd Corinthians 11:14

(8) Stay sober and stay awake [on guard]. Our adversary the devil roams about like a roaring lion, looking for someone he can devour. (9) Resist him, strong in your faith, remembering that your fellow believers in this world are undergoing the exact same sort of suffering [that you are].

1st Peter 5:8-9

Satan's objective is to thwart the plan of God. That attempt has been completely undermined by the victory of the cross, but that has not prevented the devil from engaging in a furious rear-guard action throughout the Church Age, an effort which will intensify to maximum proportions during the soon to come Tribulation. We have discussed before and in great detail the tactics, organization and methodology of the enemy.¹⁰ What is important to reiterate here is that we are

¹⁰ See especially part 4 of the *Satanic Rebellion* series: "Satan's World-System, Past, Present and Future".

his targets not for our own sake but because we belong to Jesus Christ. It is *all* about Jesus Christ.

For that reason, we must avoid taking things personally, as if the trouble we experience as soldiers of Jesus Christ had to do with us as individuals, as if the devil would care about us if we were not serving our Lord as we ought to do. Being attacked is thus really a sort of compliment, though a most unwelcome one. Like Job before us, if we come in for special attention, whether from the highest level as in Job's case or from the lowest of the evil one's forces, it means that we must be making some difference for the Lord – and that only happens through spiritual growth, progress in our relationship and walk with Christ, and production for the sake of His Church. So while we are the targets of Satan's wrath at present, we can never afford to take it personally, and we can never afford to forget that we are merely substitutes for the One who substituted for us on the cross and bought us with His blood, our dear Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

(18) Though the world hates you, know that it came to hate Me first. If you belonged to the world, the world would love its own. (19) Now because you are not [a part] of the world, but I chose you out of the world, for this reason the world hates you. (20) Remember this principle I taught you: A servant is not greater than his master. If they persecuted Me, they will also persecute you.
John 15:18-20 (cf. Matt.10:25; 1Jn.3:13)

[2] Trust your leadership.

No one on military campaign becomes involved in the affairs of normal life. [He avoids such things] that he may please the one who enlisted him.
2nd Timothy 2:4

Turning our gaze unto Jesus, the originator and completer of our faith, who, for the joy set before Him, endured the shame of the cross, treating it with despite, and took His seat at the right hand of the throne of God.
Hebrews 12:2

If we were serving in a worldly military organization, even if it were the best of the best, there might still be times when we might be led to doubt that we were being employed to best effect or that our lives were being properly valued. Mere human commanders, even the best in the history of the world, can and do make mistakes. And mere human commanders operate with far less than perfect battlefield intelligence. Indeed, for that very reason the "fog of war" is proverbial for the ubiquitous confusion that reigns in combat situations. But as believers in Jesus Christ, the perfect Commander, we can have absolute confidence that He knows everything and that He has already taken every single detail into account in His utilization of us as soldiers in His army. In starkest contrast to earthly warfare, it is impossible for our Lord to have made the slightest mistake. All of our necessary supplies, every detail of our tactical employment, every battle we will ever be asked to fight, has already been perfectly scripted by Him and by the Father in eternity past, with every provision perfectly and completely provided for in advance. Nothing

whatsoever has been left to "chance" – a thing which does not actually exist in any case. We have nothing to worry about, nothing to fear, no cause for the least concern, even though to human eyes we may find ourselves in dire straits.

(5) You will not be afraid of terror by night, nor of the arrow that flies by day, (6) nor of the pestilence that goes about in the darkness, nor of the plague that destroys at noonday. (7) A thousand may fall at your side, even ten thousand at your right hand – you it will not approach.
Psalm 91:5-7

Our job as soldiers of the cross is to keep that confidence in our General regardless of what our eyes and ears and emotions may be telling us. In our heart of hearts the truth empowered by the Spirit is telling us not to fear the spiritual battle that rises against us – it is *not* about us; it *is* all about Jesus Christ, and He has it all in hand. He will deliver us. The only question is whether or not we will demonstrate courage based upon our faith in His deliverance (or comport ourselves like the exodus generation did instead, e.g.).

[3] Keep faith with your comrades.

(1) If [you have] any comfort in Christ, if [you have] any encouragement from [God's] love, if [you have] any fellowship of (i.e., coming from) the Spirit, if [you have] any sympathy and compassion [for fellow believers], (2) then make my joy full by being of one mind, of one love, of one heart, thinking the same thing, (3) doing nothing out of selfish competitiveness or self-importance, but in humility, considering each other as more important than yourselves, (4) with each of you looking out not for himself but for each other. (5) Have the [very same] attitude which also Christ Jesus did.
Philippians 2:1-5

(24) And let us give careful attention to one another[']s ministries] as motivation for [our own] love and good works, (25) not abandoning your mutual assembling as some have made it their practice to do [and which makes this impossible], but rather encouraging each other [to persevere in this work of the Lord], and doing so to an ever greater degree to the extent that you see the day [of the Lord] drawing [ever] closer.
Hebrews 10:24-25

The Church is a team, and in the military sense an army meant to work together in all things, with each soldier having his/her own responsibilities in the fight. But as in all armies at all times, protecting and fighting for one's comrades ought to be a prime motivation. Looking out for them in dangerous spiritual situations, sharing "rations" when needed, and offering "fire support" through timely prayer intervention are all part and parcel of being a good comrade in the ranks. And finally, doing our "job", remembering that our growth is a prerequisite, our endurance of testing a witness and an encouragement, and our ministering to our brothers and sisters a most critical part of the way we keep faith with them, supplying them with what they need to grow, progress and produce as well, and to stand up to the shot and shell of the devil's

world.

(15) . . . that we may, by embracing the truth in love, grow up in all respects with Christ, who is the head of the Church, as our model. (16) In this way, the entire body of the Church, fit and joined together by Him through the sinews He powerfully supplies to each and every part, works out its own growth for the building up of itself in love.
Ephesians 4:15-16

[4] Keep focused on the ultimate victory.

[For by means of the cross, God] has stripped [demon] rulers and authorities [of their power] and subjected them to public humiliation, having triumphed over them in [Christ].
Colossians 2:15

The victory has already been won – at the cross. We Church Age believers are actually conducting a pursuit, an exploitation of the spiritual opportunities offered by our Lord's triumph in Calvary's darkness in dying for the sins of the world. Through our faith, we are overcoming the world, its ruler, and all of his evil supporters (1Jn.5:4), and in so doing we are winning great rewards that will endure for all eternity, spoils of battle wrested from the evil one and his minions (Is.53:12; cf. Eph.4:7-8; Lk.11:21), destined to bring sublime pleasure to us and great glory to the Lord who bought us.

And I saw something like a sea of glass mingled with fire, and those who have the victory over the beast, over his image and over his mark and over the number of his name, standing on the sea of glass, having harps of God.
Revelation 15:2 NKJV

[5] Be strong and courageous in the fight.

So we may boldly say: "The Lord is my helper; I will not fear. What can man do to me?"
(Ps.118:6)
Hebrews 13:6 NKJV

The fear of death has always been one of the devil's prime weapons (cf. Heb.2:14-15). But we believers know through faith that we have absolutely nothing to fear on this account. On the one hand, our Lord protects us from all dangers, large and small, visible and invisible, so that nothing ever happens to us without His say so – and if He allows it, we trust Him that He is doing so for a very good reason, even though we may not be able to fathom it at present. And if it be His will to take us home, we know that He is doing so for absolute good, working everything out for the good for us who love Him (Rom.8:28). Therefore we have every right to be courageous in this fight in which we are engaged. For we are not fighting on our own behalf but on behalf of One who died for us and His Church. And we will never be allowed to suffer any reverse – if we are truly advancing side by side with Him – except that He means it for good, and that includes our departure from this world, when and where and how He decides. Such knowledge is incredibly

liberating when mixed with a sufficient amount of faith. As if a soldier advancing in a worldly battle was somehow being kept safe from every bullet and bomb, and knew it and believed it. We are ready to give our lives for Jesus Christ, and in the soon to come Tribulation it may very well be necessary to do so. But we believers can be absolutely confident that if the Lord so wills, that this martyrdom has always been part of His plan to glorify Himself through us and to have us win a maximum reward in so doing. Therefore we have no reason whatsoever to fear; rather we have absolutely every reason to be strong and courageous, trusting in Him no matter what betides.

If anyone [is marked] for captivity, he is going into captivity. If anyone [is marked] for death by the sword, by the sword [he must] be killed. Therefore endurance and faith [on the part] of [my] sanctified ones is [called for].

Revelation 13:10

[6] Fight the fight before you, and leave the rest to the Lord.

(15) And when the servant of the man of God arose early and went out, there was an army, surrounding the city with horses and chariots. And his servant said to him, "Alas, my master! What shall we do?" (16) So he answered, "Do not fear, for those who are with us are more than those who are with them." (17) And Elisha prayed, and said, "Lord, I pray, open his eyes that he may see." Then the Lord opened the eyes of the young man, and he saw. And behold, the mountain was full of horses and chariots of fire all around Elisha.

2nd Kings 6:15-17 NKJV

There is a great deal going on beyond our vision, spiritual combat in the spiritual realm, as evidenced in many places in scripture (the book of Daniel in particular). Even though we are given to know a goodly amount of information about it in general, like Elisha's servant we are not privy to the details of this unseen warfare as it is playing out around us day by day. That is no doubt a very good thing. We may suspect that certain opposition is coming from the evil one and his forces, but we cannot know the specifics. We can only be aware of the existence of this dimension of the fight we are fighting, but we are unable to affect it or interact with it in any way. That is not our job. Our job is to interact and deal with what we can see by means of the invisible power of the Spirit who resides within us, leaving the angelic conflict swirling invisibly around us to our angelic brethren and to the Lord who is directing them.

We have every right to be confident that just as the Lord had surrounded Elisha with abundantly sufficient angelic support, so also we are never going to be left in the lurch in this regard. Indeed, our entire Christian lives are testimonies to the faithfulness of an absolutely faithful Lord who has never ever let us down one little bit one single time – if we are evaluating these things correctly. And considering that even in the visible human realm there is so much we do not understand about the way that the Lord is directing events on the grand scale or even in our lives – until after the fact when we may come to see His purpose in this unexpected event or in that seeming-at-the-time-catastrophe – how much more is that not the case in the angelic realm where

our ignorance is near complete? But we can trust Him that our commanding General is conducting that part of the battle perfectly just as He is this part we can see.

Therefore it is height of temerity and beyond dangerous for any believer to tread in this area unbidden. Supposed exorcism and/or any sort of engagement with "demon forces" is neither authorized by the Lord nor being empowered by Him. The best we can say of those who tempt Christians into such behavior is that they are merely exploiting them with lies – and the worst that they may actually be agents of the evil one. So every Christian who wants to fight this fight aright will put all such things out of his/her head and concentrate on engaging in the battle that may be seen, the one directly in front of us, leaving strategy and unseen combat to the Lord who is directing us. If we do that, we shall have nothing whatsoever to worry about on this score.

(1) Beloved, don't believe every spirit [of every so-called prophet], but test the spirits [of these "prophets" to see] whether [or not] they are from God. For many false prophets have gone out into the world. (2) By this [test] you [will] know [whether or not a person has] the Spirit of God. (3) Any spirit (i.e., a person or organization) which professes that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God, but any spirit which does not profess that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is not from God. And this [latter] is the [spirit] of the antichrist, which you have heard about, that he is coming, and [even] now [his spirit] is already in the world. (4) You are of God, children, and you have overcome them. For **greater is He who is in you** (i.e., the Spirit) **than he who is in the world** (i.e., Satan represented by his antichrist-like false prophets now, and, ultimately, by antichrist himself).

1st John 4:1-4

[7] Maintain an offensive spirit.

The prayer of a righteous has great power when it is empowered [by the Spirit].

James 5:16b

Every time we read our Bibles, listen to Bible teaching, engage in ministry of any kind, direct our thoughts to the "above" rather than worldly things (Col.3:1-2; cf. Phil.4:8; 1Jn.2:15-17), every time we pray, we are taking the battle to the enemy and engaging in this spiritual combat to which we have been called. Every time we take such offensive actions we are benefitting the Church of Jesus Christ either directly or indirectly, and are engaging in combat which pleases our Lord. It is for these things that we will be rewarded for the part we played in this spiritual warfare, so it certainly behooves us all to stay offensive-minded, to get out of our foxholes, to put aside all fear, to be strong and courageous for Jesus Christ (e.g., Deut.31:6-7; Josh.1:6-7; 2Chron.32:7), and to make the most of the opportunities we are given every day as long as it is called "today" to exploit our Lord's great victory to His glory and great pleasure on that wonderful day to come.

The night is close to over, and day is near at hand. So let us put aside the works of darkness and put on [instead] the armor of light.

Romans 13:12

For the weapons of our warfare are not fleshly, but are powerful for God, for the destruction of strongholds, destroying sophistries and every presumption that raises itself up against the knowledge of God, and taking every thought prisoner so as to obey Christ.
2nd Corinthians 10:4-5

(10) As you move forward, my brothers, strengthen yourselves in the Lord and in the power of His might. (11) Put on the full armor of God, so that you may be able to stand firm against the tricks of the devil. (12) For our battle is not against flesh and blood, but against [angelic] princes, against [angelic] authorities, against the cosmic powers of this [present] darkness, against evil spirits in the heavenly realms. (13) On this account take up that full armor of God so that you may be able to resist in the day of trouble and, when you have completely done everything [necessary (in spiritual preparation)], to stand your ground. (14) So then *do* stand your ground, having girded your loins with truth and having put on the breastplate of righteousness, (15) and having shod your feet with the [shoes] of preparation for [sharing] the gospel of peace. (16) And at all times take up the shield of faith, with which you will be able to quench all the fiery missiles of the evil one. (17) And [in this spiritual warfare] put on the helmet of salvation and gird on the sword of the Spirit – which is the Word of truth. (18) In all your prayers and petitions [be] praying in the Spirit on each occasion, keeping at this with all persistence and petition on behalf of the saints (i.e., believers "sanctified" or made holy by the Spirit).
Ephesians 6:10-18

Fight the good fight of faith.
1st Timothy 6:12a

I give you this command, Timothy my child, in accordance with the prophecies that were made long ago about you, that you conduct a good campaign, one that is in keeping with them.
1st Timothy 1:18

I have fought the good fight. I have completed my course. I have kept the faith.
2nd Timothy 4:7

A. Spirituality and Sin

(16) But I tell you, walk in the Spirit and you will not carry out what the flesh lusts for. (17) For what the flesh lusts for is contrary to the Spirit's will, and the Spirit is opposed to what the flesh lusts for. Since these are diametrically opposed to each other in this way, what you are doing is not what you yourself choose.
Galatians 5:16-17

Sinfulness and spirituality are polar opposites as this passage makes crystal clear. Either we are walking in fellowship with Jesus Christ, guided by the Spirit, or we are walking after the

inclinations of our own hearts, following the desires of the flesh. Staying on the right track and avoiding the wrong one is, therefore, a fundamentally basic part of fighting the fight in which we are involved, and recovery from temporary failure thus an absolutely essential procedure in the Christian warrior's necessary methodology.

(1b) Blessed is he whose offense is forgiven, whose sin is covered. (2) Blessed is the man whose iniquity the Lord does not count against him and in whose spirit there is no deceit. (3) When I was silent [about my sin], my bones grew old with groaning all day long, (4) because day and night your hand was heavy upon me. My vigor was drained away as by the heat of summer. (5) [Until] I said, "I will make my sin known to You, and I will not cover [over] my guilt. I will confess my transgressions to the Lord", and You forgave the guilt of my sin. Selah.

Psalm 32:1a-5

If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.

1st John 1:9

Large or small, arrogant or ignorant, forgotten or remembered, long past or just past, the Lord forgives us when we confess. That does not mean, of course, that the blessed restoration to fellowship we all receive upon confessing to the Lord will in each and every case produce an end to or a diminution of any divine discipline we may be receiving as a result of our errors (nor also any natural consequences that may have resulted). Nor do these absolute promises of forgiveness and reinstatement in the Lord's good graces when we confess mean that we can harbor deceit in our heart when we do so: true confession is based upon true (biblical) repentance, the genuine recognition that we were wrong to do what we have done and the earnest intention of not doing it again. We are none of us ever going to be perfect in this, however, so that recognition of our weaknesses and fear on our part that we may fail again in the future is absolutely no excuse for not confessing when we do err. Without confession, we will condemn ourselves to walking in darkness and moving progressively farther from the Lord with each passing day.

(3) When I was silent [about my sin], my bones grew old with groaning all day long, (4) because day and night your hand was heavy upon me. My vigor was drained away as by the heat of summer. (5) [Until] I said, "I will make my sin known to You . . .

Psalm 32:3-5a

(6) If we say that we have fellowship with Him and yet walk in the darkness, we are lying and are not acting truthfully. (7) But if we walk in the light as He Himself is in the light, we do have fellowship one with one another (i.e., we with the Father and the Son as well as with other believers; cf. v.3), and the blood of Jesus His Son is cleansing us from all sin. (8) If we say that we do not possess sin (i.e., a sin nature which is producing personal sins), we are deceiving ourselves, and the truth is not in us. (9) If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just so as to forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness. (10) If we say, that we have not sinned, we make Him out to be a liar and His Word is not

in us.
1st John 1:6-10

Therefore confession is a critical skill and an essential practice that all believers involved in spiritual warfare must master and never relinquish, making use of this blessing day by day – for it has been paid for by the blood of Jesus Christ. If pride or fear or sloppiness of approach ever put the believer out of the habit of confessing his/her sins, spiritual momentum will inevitably suffer. Healthy, daily, circumspect confession is needful for us all – for sin is a dark ocean, wide and deep, and entails far more than most believers realize.¹¹ A lackadaisical attitude towards confession is apt to breed a similarly lackadaisical attitude towards sin, and even the greatest believers are not immune to lapsing, particularly if off-balance and out of spiritual shape (just ask David, Elijah, Peter, etc.). The best mind-set to adopt in this regard is the one evidenced by the apostle Paul, namely, that this side of heaven, we never "arrive" (at perfection or any other measure of completion):

(7) But whatever I had gained [in my former godless life], compared to Christ I have come to consider these things as losses. (8) Indeed, I consider everything to be a loss compared to the surpassing importance of knowing Jesus Christ my Lord, for whose sake I have suffered the loss of everything, and consider [everything I have lost] as garbage, compared to gaining Christ, (9) and being found in Him – not having a personal righteousness [developed] through [following] the [Mosaic] law – but having that righteousness [that comes] through faith in Christ, that righteousness [that comes] from God based on faith, (10) so that I may know Him and the power of His resurrection and the sharing of His sufferings, being made like to Him in His death, (11) in the (confident) hope that I shall, one way or another (i.e., without death at the second advent or after death), attain to the resurrection from the dead. (12) [It is] not that I have already gotten [what I am striving for], nor that I have already completed [my course]. Rather, I am continuing to pursue [the prize] in hopes of fully acquiring it – [this prize for whose acquisition] I was myself acquired by Christ Jesus. (13) Brethren, I do not consider that I have already acquired it. This one thing only [do I keep in mind]. Forgetting what lies behind me [on the course] and straining towards the [course] ahead, (14) I continue to drive straight for the tape, towards the prize to which God has called us from the beginning [of our race] in Christ Jesus. (15) So as many as are [spiritually] mature, let us have this attitude (i.e., of focusing on our spiritual advance and reward and not getting hung up on what lies behind: vv.13-14), and if in any matter your attitude is off-center, God will reveal that to you (i.e., assuming you are mature and are advancing as you should). (16) But with respect to the progress you have made, keep on advancing in the same way!
Philippians 3:7-16

¹¹ For more details, please see part 3B of the *Bible Basics* series, "Hamartiology: the Biblical Study of Sin" (particularly sections II, "The Nature of Sin", and V.1, "Repentance, Confession, and Forgiveness".)

Once we have made confession a normal part of our daily approach (Matt.6:12; Lk.11:4), presenting ourselves to the world in a sanctified way will be the counterpart of staying in fellowship with the Lord – with our walk in the Spirit reflecting our actually being in the Spirit (compare Gal.5:16-25 with Rom.8:9; cf. Eph.5:18). As we grow and progress, our sanctification should grow apace. We will never be sinless this side of heaven, but our behavior, based upon genuine spiritual motivation, should reflect to the world an ever greater degree our growing closeness with Jesus Christ. We represent Him after all (2Cor.5:20), and for that reason alone our conduct should be above reproach:

(11) Beloved, I entreat you as fellow sojourners and temporary residents [on this earth] to refrain from the fleshly lusts which are waging war against your [very] lives. (12) Keep your manner of life among the gentiles (i.e., unbelievers) [morally] good, so that when they slander you as evil-doers they may [yet] give glory to God when they look upon your good works (i.e., life and production).

1st Peter 2:11-12 NKJV

(1) Therefore, since Christ suffered for us in the flesh, arm yourselves also with the same mind, for he who has suffered in the flesh has ceased from sin, (2) that he no longer should live the rest of his time in the flesh for the lusts of men, but for the will of God. (3) For we have spent enough of our past lifetime in doing the will of the Gentiles—when we walked in lewdness, lusts, drunkenness, revelries, drinking parties, and abominable idolatries.

1st Peter 4:1-3 NKJV (cf. 1Thes.4:3-7)

This is the approach of the "professional Christian", that is, a believer who has come to realize that our lives are *not* about us but about Jesus Christ, that we are here in the world entirely for Him and that therefore everything we do is related directly one way or another to our service on His behalf. Just so a professional diplomat does not consider personal slights important – because he is representing the entire country; and just so a professional soldier does not fail to understand that every action he takes in warfare is part of a team effort and affects the entire force. So we as professional Christians understand that this life is short, that the only things of any lasting value which can be accomplished here are spiritual, and that to make the most of said time and to produce the maximum spiritual effect for the Lord who delivered us from sin and death we need to keep our eyes on Him – and that means, in this context, acting in the world in a way that reflects well on Him . . . for the benefit of men and angels both (in conduct seen and unseen). That is the professional attitude regarding sanctification which all serious Christians should adopt, striving to be honorable in all conduct at all times not merely out of fear of divine discipline, and not merely out of a concern for the Lord's displeasure (both legitimate motivations for upright conduct), but also out of a desire to represent Him well in all we think and say and do – because all of "this" here on earth is all about Him.

(1) Therefore since Christ died in His flesh, we also should arm ourselves with the same mind-set, [considering] that the One who suffered in His flesh is finished with sin, (2) to the end that [we also like Him] may no longer live what is left of our lives on earth in

human lusts but in God's will.
1st Peter 4:1-2 (cf. 1Pet.4:6)

Some practical points to keep in mind (not meant to be an exhaustive list but given only to supply additional context to the issue of sanctification):

1. Positional victory is already ours (Rom.6:2; 6:4; Gal.2:20; Eph.4:22-24; Col.3:3).
2. We are therefore expected to live in a sanctified way (compare 1Jn.2:4; 3:6 with 1Jn.1:5-10; 1Jn.2:1-2).
- 3) So we must "own" our behavior and resist sin, struggling even "to the point of blood" (Heb.12:4; cf. 1Cor.9:27; Gen.4:7).
- 4) Disengagement from the world and abnegation of worldly and spiritual responsibilities out of fear of compromise are not effective as strategies in struggling against sin (Lk.22:35-38; 1Cor.5:10).
- 5) Sanctified living (defense) requires prior and continuing spiritual growth (offense: Jn.17:17; 1Pet.1:22).
- 6) First line of defense: keeping watch over one's heart (Ps.4:4; Prov.4:23).
- 7) Second line of defense: keeping watch over one's tongue (Prov.21:23; Jas.3:2ff.).
- 8) Third line of defense: keeping watch over one's body (Ezek.18:5-9; 1Thes.4:3-4).
- 9) As with all things in life, momentum is critical in spiritual matters as well: victories lead to further victories, defeats lead to further defeats. We need to be careful not to let defeats compound into a downward spiral, but take care to break the cycle as quickly as possible; likewise, we need to be careful not to take victories for granted and let down our spiritual guard: this is a fight to the finish and it is not over until we see the Lord (Eph.6:11-17).
- 10) Correct orientation is critical and must be constantly directed towards the Lord and away from the world, first in our hearts, then in all we say and do (1Pet.3:15-16), and it is the Spirit and His ministry which helps us greatly in this, if we will but let Him do so (Zech.4:6; Jn.14:26; 16:13; Acts 13:52; Rom.5:5; 8:5-9; 8:14-17; 8:23-24; 8:27; 9:1; 12:11; 14:17; 15:13; 15:19; 1Cor.2:12-13; 12:11; 2Cor.1:21-22; 3:2-3; 3:17; 5:5; Gal.4:6; 5:5; 5:16-17; 5:22; 6:8; Eph.1:13-14; 2:18; 4:30; 5:18; Phil.1:19; 3:3; 1Thes.1:6; 2Tim.2:7; 1Pet.4:14; 1Jn.2:27; 3:24; 4:13).

B. Testing and Temptation

It is very important to distinguish on the one hand between genuine tests of faith which are given to us by God to help us grow by challenging our faith, and fleshly temptations which arise from

the sin nature spurred on by the evil one and his minions on the other. It needs to be pointed out that this is also a possible point of confusion because the same Greek root (*peira-*, *πειρα*) is employed for both testing and tempting. Context determines which is which.

By faith Abraham, when he was tested (root *peira-*, *πειρα*), offered up Isaac, and he who had received the promises offered up his only begotten son.
Hebrews 11:17 NKJV

In the passage above, we very clearly have a test of faith which comes directly and specifically from God as we know because that is what the passage clearly states.

(1) For I do not want you to be ignorant, brethren, about the fact that our [spiritual] forefathers (i.e., the Exodus generation) were all under the cloud (i.e., protected by the Glory). (2) And all of them were baptized into Moses (i.e., closely identified with him) in both the case of the cloud and of the sea (i.e., received the same protection and deliverance as he did). (3) And all of them ate spiritual food (i.e., divinely provided manna). (4) And all of them drank the same spiritual drink (i.e., divinely provided water). For all of them drank from the spiritual[ly significant] Rock which followed them – for that Rock was Christ. (5) But God was not pleased with most of them and their bones were strewn about in the desert as a result. (6) And in this they have come to serve as examples for us, so that we might not lust for wicked things as they lusted for them. (7) So do not become idolaters as some of them did, as it is written, "The people sat down to eat and drink, and got up to play (i.e., feasting followed by indulgence in idolatrous rites)". (8) And let us not commit fornication, as some of them committed fornication, and there fell in a single day 120,000 of them. (9) And let us not put Christ to the test, as some of them tested the Lord and [as a result] were killed by serpents. (10) And let us not complain, as some of them complained, and were killed by the Destroyer. (11) All these things happened to them as an example to us, and were written to warn us – we who live at the culmination of the ages. (12) So let him who thinks he stands firm beware lest he fall. (13) You have not suffered any testing beyond normal human [experience]. And God is faithful. He will not allow you to be tested beyond your capacity, but, along with the test, He will grant you the way out, so that you can bear up under it.
1st Corinthians 10:1-13

While the verbs in the last verse above (also from the root *peira-*, *πειρα*) are frequently translated "tempt" instead of test, that is potentially misleading: God does not tempt us and cannot be tempted (Jas.1:13), but the generation of the exodus put Him "to the test" many times (Ex.17:2; 17:7; Deut.6:16). The incidents recalled by Paul in this passage have to do with the legitimate and necessary tests the Lord brought upon the children of Israel to demonstrate to all concerned the depth of their faith or, as it happened, lack thereof (Ex.15:25; 16:4; 20:20; Deut.8:2; 8:16; 33:8).

"Surely all the men who have seen My glory and My signs which I performed in Egypt and in the wilderness, yet have put Me to the test these ten times and have not listened to

My voice."

Numbers 14:22 NASB

There clearly is a relationship between testing and temptation, first, because as in the case of the generation of the exodus failing a test can result in greater alienation from the Lord (in case the response is arrogant complaining rather than humble repentance), and also because this world is filled to overflowing with all manner of temptations which constitute part of the test of faith all believers must face every day. Nevertheless, this distinction, between a particular burden or trial the Lord puts upon us to strengthen our faith and to demonstrate the spiritual progress we have made on the one hand, and the tempting that rises from our sinful bodies in response to the multifarious enticements of the world and its present ruler on the other, is one of critical importance: temptation is something we can and should ignore – and we have been given all of the spiritual resources we need to do so (whether or not we do so) – but a test, such as the extraordinary one which befell Job, is something which cannot be avoided, but must be endured, and can only be successfully negotiated by trusting the Lord for deliverance. A temptation is an inducement to sin and has nothing to do with God.

(13) Let no one say when he is being tempted, "I'm being tempted by God!" For God has nothing to do with evil temptations, nor does He tempt anyone. (14) Rather, everyone is tempted by his own lust, being dragged away [by it] and enticed [by it]. (15) Then, should lust conceive (i.e., should the person give in to it), it gives birth to sin. And sin, should it be fully carried out to the end (i.e., should the person give in to a life of sin), produces death (i.e., spiritual death, the death of faith).
James 1:13-15

Spiritual testing, on the other hand, is all about God and has to do with His wise and merciful superintendence of our spiritual growth. For just as without exercise a person cannot improve his/her physical shape, analogously it is impossible to grow spiritually past a certain point without spiritual testing:

(6) In anticipation of this ultimate deliverance, your joy overflows, though at present it may be your lot to suffer for a time through various trials (7) to the end that your faith may be shown to be genuine. This validation of your faith is far more valuable than gold, for gold, though it too is assayed by fire, ultimately perishes. But your faith, when proven genuine in the crucible of life, will result in praise, glory and honor for you at the glorious return of Jesus Christ.
1st Peter 1:6-7

Since testing validates our faith and results in "praise, glory and honor" at the judgment seat of Christ, we not only have a right not to "feel bad" when we find ourselves under severe testing but it is altogether inappropriate that we do so. This, after all, is the mistake that Job made, not recognizing that the disasters which had come his way were, rather than a cause for despair or the result of some terrible sin, one of the greatest compliments the Lord has ever paid to a human being who loved and followed Him.

No doubt that is a most difficult perspective for any believer to achieve, let alone hold onto, in the midst of severe suffering. Job was able to go through what probably seems to us the worst of it, but in the end stumbled when he had to face the wrongly reasoned reproaches of his friends. Our advantage as believers today is that we *do* have the book of Job to "go to school on", so that we are well aware of this principle of testing for growth, testing for blessing, and testing for the demonstration of the quality of our faith. We also have been given to understand that so much of what is really going on in this world is all about the unseen warfare raging beyond our physical view. We know about Satan's accusations and about his attacks, and we understand that we will not be abandoned when so attacked for "greater is He" who is in us than "he who is in the world" (1Jn.4:4). But it is also understandable that believers who are hit with a fiery trial, something the Lord allows to happen to us to build up our faith and show the world (and us as well) that we have grown strong in Him and in our trust of Him, may at first become disoriented, as if "some strange thing" were happening to us (1Pet.4:12); whereas in fact "sharing the sufferings of Christ" in this way ought to cause us to "be joyful about it, so that at His glorious revelation, you may also rejoice with great gladness" (1Pet.4:13; cf. Rom.8:17; 2Cor.1:5; Gal.6:17; Phil.1:29-30; 3:10; Col.1:24; 2Tim.2:12) – since that pleases our Lord and is the path to the greatest eternal rewards.

Being able to distinguish between temptation, divine discipline and tests of faith is a crucial skill all mature believers must master. Incorrectly identifying the source of the trouble will inevitably lead to inordinate and misplaced guilt, animosity towards the Lord or a false sense of security (depending upon the actual situation and the precise nature of our improper reaction to it). Temptation ought to be the easiest source of trouble for us to identify (even though it is often far from easy to defeat): inducements to sin in whatever way are not from the Lord (Jas.1:13-15) and we obviously have no business as believers who ought to be pursuing sanctification giving them the time of day in the first place (Heb.12:14); if we do, we are already playing with fire (Prov.6:27-28). The evil one is clearly involved in such assaults but is unable to harm us with temptation as long as we do not respond to it.

Do not deprive each other, except for short periods by agreement in order that you may have opportunity for prayer, and may then be together again, so that Satan might not tempt you through your lack of self-control.

1st Corinthians 7:5

So do not give the devil an opening (lit. "place" to attack).

Ephesians 4:27

Put on the full armor of God, so that you may be able to stand firm against the tricks of the devil.

Ephesians 6:11

Therefore subordinate yourselves to God. Resist the devil and he will flee from you.

James 4:7

Stay sober and wide awake. Your adversary the devil prowls about like a roaring lion, looking for someone to devour.

1st Peter 5:8

More difficult to discern for many is the difference between testing and divine discipline. Clearly, none of us is without sin – and we would be calling God a liar if we claimed otherwise this side of heaven (1Jn.1:6-10). And while all sin is sin, while Christ had to die for every single sin for any of us to be saved, and while sin covers such a wide swath of human behavior that even avoiding altogether sinning in ignorance is impossible, there are clearly things which are "so bad" that they invite serious divine discipline from the Lord. Just as no child is perfect, but only dangerous and egregious behavior is likely to elicit a serious spanking from a loving parent, so with us we should not make the mistake of assuming that we are receiving divine discipline whenever anything goes wrong. That is both a very common and very dangerous error – because, since it is fleshly thinking rather than spiritual thinking, it usually brings on excessive and misplaced guilt and associates the problem with some perceived failure. And we do fail. But divine discipline is corrective and loving; it is not angry and retributive. If we mistake a test for discipline, we are not only going to make ourselves miserable when we ought to be rejoicing that the Lord has counted us faithful to "share in His sufferings", but we are also very likely going to fail the test. Passing tests of faith requires intensifying our trust in the Lord, but if we wrongly convince ourselves that we are being punished for some small error instead, it tends to diminish our trust in Him even as it diminishes our confidence that He is for us and not against us – and it tempts us to blame Him as well (just as Job did, just as the exodus generation did, just as Elijah did) instead of focusing our spiritual efforts on remembering His faithfulness, in confidence that He will bring us through the test.

In making this critical determination, there are some general principles to keep in mind:

- 1) God's discipline is meant for correction, not for punishment (Heb.12:10-11).
- 2) God's discipline is exactly analogous to that of a loving parent so there must be no over-reaction on our part or alienation from Him whom we love, anymore than from our parents because we were spanked as children (Heb.12:9).
- 3) All believers receive such discipline (Heb.12:7).
- 4) In fact, without such discipline, we would not even be sons and daughters of God (Heb.12:8).
- 5) He disciplines us for good precisely because He loves us (Prov.3:11-12; Heb.12:5-6).
- 6) It is thus right to conclude that anything which we may see as a "disaster" is most likely not divine discipline, for while discipline of an extreme kind does occasionally result from extreme sinfulness (such as David's adultery and murder), and can even be of a terminal nature to correct exceptionally disreputable behavior (1Cor.5:1-5; 1Jn.5:16), just as there is a great difference between a spanking (parental discipline) which does no lasting harm and an accident which

results in hospitalization, so there is an even greater difference between divine discipline meant for minor correction and unusually serious measures which a parent will take only in extreme circumstances (as in handing a child bent on criminal behavior over to a reformatory). If we have not done anything wrong on such a grievous level (and that is surely easy enough to determine if we being objective), then the more calamitous events that befall us must be for testing not discipline. Therefore when we are faced with some terrible development which comes unexpectedly upon us (1Pet.4:12; cf. Eccl.9:12), we need to have faith that the Lord is for us and that this negative development is actually for our good in every way, painful and difficult as it may be to endure, for it is a test, not "punishment" from the Lord.

- (2) Brothers, when you are being beset with all manner of trials, take pains to be joyful.
(3) For you should keep in mind that this testing of your faith develops perseverance. (4) So let your perseverance develop fully, that you may become fully mature and entitled to a full reward, having been found lacking in no respect.
James 1:2-4

Failing to correctly distinguish between trials and discipline can have spiritually deleterious effects. Considering a test of one's faith "punishment" for sins long past is always a terrible mistake. This is the trap which that great believer Job fell into, and it had a lot to do with making him vulnerable to the cold comfort of his erstwhile friends. Why? Because "punishment" for sins long past *would* be unfair, so that when we think that way we are subtly attributing injustice to God and the upshot is that we may become "angry with God" – and there are few attitudes more dangerous than that. Instead, we need to be objective in our analysis, recognizing a swift rebuke for a sin or swerving from the path as the discipline it is and taking our medicine instead of ignoring the correction, and realizing that if we "haven't done anything to deserve this" (whatever the "this" may be in the test we are undergoing), then this is a test, not a rebuke. And if so, the upshot of this conclusion ought to be joy (Jas.1:2-4) from which perspective we can endure and pass the test, not despair and reproaching God, the very thing that tripped up Job (Job 9:28-31; 10:13-15; 13:26; 23:14-16).

The Lord tests the righteous (i.e., believers), but the wicked and the one who loves violence (i.e., unbelievers) His soul hates.
Psalm 11:5 NKJV

It is an all too common mistake many believers make to assume – wrongly – that a sudden, unexpected or severe test is actually punishment from God for sins, mistakes, errors committed long ago. While admittedly this is a very natural trap to fall into, and all the more so to the extent that we may still "feel guilty" about "long ago sins", it is critical for any advancing believer to recognize that this is *not* the way the Lord deals with us. Just as it would make very little sense for a truly loving parent to wait, say, several years to discipline their child for some egregious behavior, so also our Lord is the opposite of arbitrary in all of His dealings with us. God loves us – a fundamental truth we must never let slip from our hearts. And loving us, He deals with us as the perfect parent would, fashioning the perfect discipline in the case of all sinful behavior, designed to turn us back to Himself on the one hand and teach us to behave better on the other.

Punishing us today for something we did many years ago is neither practical (since we needed the guidance then, not now) nor loving (for it would be more of a vindictive action in such a case and not one where the act and the discipline are closely tied and properly proportional).

For You write bitter things against me, and make me inherit the iniquities of my youth.
Job 13:26 NKJV

Job was wrong as we who have read the first two chapters of that book know very well. He was being tried and tested to glorify God – and to demonstrate His own spiritual growth and success. Attributing his present suffering to God's punishment of him for "the iniquities of my youth", that is to say, "long ago sins", was not only incorrect but borderline blasphemous. As mentioned above, Job has the excuse of not having read the book which bears his name, but we today have no such excuse. This is much more of an issue for mature believers who are progressing in their walk with the Lord, because it is at that point, namely, the point at which we begin to really live like Christians should live in applying the truth to our lives having grown up spiritually to the point of being able to do so, that we start to come in for just such testing, often instigated by the evil one who resents our spiritual progress. One of the very worst things we can do at such times is to mistake such testing for "punishment". The fact that we have never been tested "like this" before does not mean that it is not happening "now" – because we may have only arrived "now" at the point of being capable of handling such a test.

You have not suffered any testing beyond normal human [experience]. And God is faithful. He will not allow you to be tested beyond your capacity, but, along with the test, He will grant you the way out, so that you can bear up under it.
1st Corinthians 10:13

All this is not to say, of course, that if we *do* commit some serious sin worthy of equally serious remedial action that the Lord will not discipline us accordingly. Quite the opposite. Nor should we expect the level of discipline to be the same as we may have experienced "long ago" if it is the case of repeating some prior "iniquity of youth". Just as any good parent would, we may anticipate that the Lord expects more of those who are "spiritually older" (just as we have a different standard of tolerance for certain things from a six year old than from a twelve year old), and that repeated offenses are likely to bring more severe discipline (because, clearly, the "lesson" has not as yet been properly learned). But by all means we need to beware of attributing reverses, disease, trials and disasters to things we may have done a long time ago: the Lord dealt with us on those things *at that time*, so that if we are not conscious of any serious wrong-doing at present, what we are experiencing is a test, not punishment.

David's discipline (for his extraordinarily egregious double sin) was announced to him immediately (through Nathan the prophet), began quickly (with the death of his first child with Bathsheba), and the part of the punishment which came later had been previously prophesied so that David had more than enough information ahead of time to be able to distinguish this discipline from pure testing. And here we have another very important illustration of the difference between discipline from a loving Father and the sort of vindictive punishment which

believers swamped by guilt and misapplying the truth often miss: David *continued* to be blessed by the Lord *through* the discipline, continued to love Him and to feel His love in return, continued to pray to Him and to have his prayers answered. In short, David continued to live precisely the same wonderful life of faith *after* the discipline began as before and, what is even more important for believers prone to giving themselves over to inappropriate waves of guilt to notice, the Lord treated David with the same wonderful love as before – the discipline was a "layer" temporarily added without changing the underlying unbreakable mercy and grace he enjoyed in the Lord from his youth.

(5) I acknowledged my sin to You, and my iniquity I have not hidden. I said, "I will confess my transgressions to the Lord," and You forgave the iniquity of my sin. Selah (6) For this cause everyone who is godly shall pray to You in a time when You may be found; Surely in a flood of great waters they shall not come near him. (7) You are my hiding place; You shall preserve me from trouble; You shall surround me with songs of deliverance. (8) *"I will instruct you and teach you in the way you should go; I will guide you with My eye.* (9) *Do not be like the horse or like the mule, which have no understanding, which must be harnessed with bit and bridle, else they will not come near you."* (10) Many sorrows shall be to the wicked; but he who trusts in the Lord, mercy shall surround him. (11) Be glad in the Lord and rejoice, you righteous; And shout for joy, all you upright in heart!
Psalm 32:10-11 NKJV (cf. Ps.51:1-17)

Just as we were not cast off by our parents when we did wrong, and just as we sensed their love even if we had managed to anger them severely, all the more so our heavenly Father's "anger" – a description given only for us to understand the right way – is only temporary, and in no way diminishes His love for us and His provision to us.

(4) Sing praise to the Lord, you saints of His, and give thanks at the remembrance of His holy name. (5) For His anger is but for a moment, His favor is for life; Weeping may endure for a night, but joy comes in the morning.
Psalm 30:4-5 NKJV

A proper appreciation of the purpose of divine discipline and the Lord's method in employing it should, therefore, go a long way towards helping the advancing believer to cast inordinate guilt out of his/her heart. Even if we are "guilty" in terms of having committed sin, and even if we are being disciplined for it, once we have turned from our error and confessed our sin we are absolutely certain of our forgiveness (Ps.30:8-12; 32:1-11; 51:1-17; 1Jn.1:9). And we are also absolutely certain of the boundless love, mercy and grace of our dear Savior towards us no matter what. In such situations, we not only have a right to claim the forgiveness promised, expunging all feelings of guilt for whatever errors we have made, but it is in fact our Christian duty – and our spiritual forward-progress will be compromised if we fail to do so. This is our birthright, our heritage, as sons of the Living God who have been redeemed from our sins by the blood of Jesus Christ our dear Lord and Savior.

Instead of wallowing in guilt for sins long past if it be our lot to be tested (and so miss the whole point of the test), and instead of torturing ourselves after repentance and confession when we find ourselves actually under discipline for recent transgression, it is our job to reclaim with as much immediacy as possible the joy that is ours as believers in Jesus Christ who are part of His Bride now and forever, glorifying Him in so doing, so that we may fulfill the mandate found in James to "count it all joy" however severe the discipline, however severe the test, keeping the two straight and separate in our hearts.

(2) Brothers, when you are being beset with all manner of trials, take pains to be joyful.

(3) For you should keep in mind that this testing of your faith develops perseverance. (4) So let your perseverance develop fully, that you may become fully mature and entitled to a full reward, having been found lacking in no respect.

James 1:2-4

(12) Therefore (going back to the race analogy of v.1), pick up those hands hanging slack at your side, put some strength back into your weak knees, (13) and make straight tracks for your feet, so that, [even though you fell down,] what you sprained might not be twisted completely out of joint, but might instead work its way back to health.

Hebrews 12:12-13

(19) By this we know that we are of the truth, and before Him we persuade our heart, (20) that if our heart condemns us, God is greater than our heart and knows everything. (21) Beloved, if our heart does not condemn us, we have confidence to approach God (in prayer).

1st John 3:19-21

C. Personal Tribulation

Blessed is the man who stands firm in *testing*, because when he has been [tested and] *approved* he will receive *the crown of life* which [God] has promised to all who love Him.

James 1:12

Have no fear of what you are about to suffer. Behold, the devil is about to throw some of you into prison to *test* you, and you will have tribulation for ten days. Demonstrate *faithfulness* unto death, and I will give you *the crown of life*.

Revelation 2:10

Tests and trials come in all shapes and sizes, but some of them are noteworthy and can be seen to constitute the "final exam" (or series of exams) given to mature believers by the Lord to demonstrate to all concerned – themselves included – that they have indeed arrived at the point of being able to put the Lord and His truth first in their lives, even in the most dire circumstances.

(1) Now it came to pass after these things that God *tested* Abraham, and said to him, "Abraham!" And he said, "Here I am." (2) Then He said, "Take now your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains of which I shall tell you."

Genesis 22:1-2 NKJV

And He said, "Do not lay your hand on the lad, or do anything to him; for now I know that you fear God, since you have not withheld your son, your only son, from Me."

Genesis 22:12 NKJV

(15) Then the Angel of the Lord called to Abraham a second time out of heaven, (16) and said: "By Myself I have sworn, says the Lord, because you have done this thing, and have not withheld your son, your only son – (17) blessing I will bless you, and multiplying I will multiply your descendants as the stars of the heaven and as the sand which is on the seashore; and your descendants shall possess the gate of their enemies. (18) In your seed all the nations of the earth shall be blessed, because you have *obeyed* My voice."

Genesis 22:15-18 NKJV

Unique, "final exam" type testing may be short-lived as it was in Abraham's case on this occasion (although not easier for that reason – who among us would want to face this particular test?), or it may be of longer duration (we think, for example, of the extended nature of Job's trials). But it is not amiss to call this special testing "personal tribulation", both because of the way the Bible refers to the "trouble" that believers have and have to endure to fulfill the course of growth, progress and production which the Lord has set for us all (cf. Acts 7:10-11; 11:19; 20:23; 1Cor.7:28; 2Cor.1:6-8; 2:4; 4:8; 6:4; 7:4-5; 8:2; Eph.3:13; Phil.4:14; Col.1:24; 1Thes.1:6-7; 3:3; 3:7; 1Tim.5:10; Heb.10:33; Jas.1:27; Rev.2:9-10), and also in order to distinguish this suffering from the same word used for that greatest period of testing which is about to befall the entire world, not just individual believers, namely, the soon-to-come "Tribulation" (Matt.24:21; 24:29; Mk.13:19; 13:24; Rev.7:14; cf. Dan.12:1).

In this world you do have tribulation (Greek: θλιψις, *thlipsis*). But be courageous. I have overcome the world.

John 16:33

[They were] strengthening the hearts of the disciples, and encouraging them to remain in the faith, and saying "We must pass through many tribulations to reach the Kingdom of God".

Acts 14:22

What will separate us from Christ's love? Tribulation? Or privation? Or persecution? Or hunger? Or destitution? Or danger? Or violence?

Romans 8:35

(3) Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the God of compassion and

all encouragement, (4) the One who encourages us in all our tribulation so that we in turn may be able to encourage those in all types of tribulation by means of the very encouragement which we ourselves received from God. (5) Because as our sufferings for Christ multiplied in service to you, so through Christ did the encouragement we received multiply to the same degree. (6) So if we are experiencing tribulation, it is to provide you with encouragement and salvation. And if we are being encouraged, it is for the sake of the encouragement you have received, which is now at work in your successful endurance of the same sufferings which we also experienced. (7) And so our hope for you is a solid one, since we know that as you have become partakers of suffering, in the same way you will also become partakers of encouragement.

2nd Corinthians 1:3-7

Indeed, when we were with you I was warning you that we [all Christians] were destined to be subjected to tribulation.

1st Thessalonians 3:4

(4) So we ourselves [also] are boasting to the churches of God about your endurance and your faith in the persecutions and in the tribulations which you are [presently] enduring. (5) These are [all actually] evidence of the righteous judgment of God in His [judging] you to be worthy of His Kingdom on behalf of which you are also suffering.

2nd Thessalonians 1:4-5

I, John, your brother and fellow partaker in the tribulation and kingdom and perseverance in Jesus was on the island called Patmos because of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus.

Revelation 1:9

Such tribulation, affliction, pressure and distress is often the result of persecution directed at believers by the evil one and his agents seen and unseen precisely because we belong to Jesus Christ and are making progress in our walk with Him.

(10) "Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. (11) Blessed are you when they revile and persecute you, and say all kinds of evil against you falsely for My sake. (12) Rejoice and be exceedingly glad, for great is your reward in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you."

Matthew 5:11-12 NKJV

(7) But we have this treasure in earthen vessels, that the excellence of the power may be of God and not of us. (8) We are hard-pressed on every side, yet not crushed; we are perplexed, but not in despair; (9) persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed.

2nd Corinthians 4:8-9

Indeed, all who are willing to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted.

As these passages indicate, such testing, trial, tribulation is for the mature believer who is being persecuted on account of righteousness, on account of our Master, to show God's power and sufficiency to us in all situations, while trying to live a godly life – a life that is lived by seeing things from God's point of view rather than the worldly one. For until a believer reaches a level of maturity sufficient to handle such testing, the Lord is faithful not to allow it as beyond our capacity to bear (1Cor.10:13).

- (2) Brothers, when you are being beset with all manner of trials, take pains to be joyful.
(3) For you should keep in mind that this testing of your faith develops perseverance. (4) So let your perseverance develop fully, that you may become fully mature and entitled to a full reward, having been found lacking in no respect.
James 1:2-4

Seen from this perspective, the perspective of godliness – that is, the outlook of spiritual maturity from which the believer begins to view the world and the events that transpire herein from the heavenly viewpoint – severe trial, personal tribulation, is something we not only have a duty but also a right to feel good about. For we are only coming in for such attacks because we have made significant spiritual progress and the particular burden under which we are suffering, therefore, is actually a sign of God's favor, *not* of His displeasure.

As in the case of Job, where his severe tribulation was the highest possible divine compliment, so when we also are being tested and tried by the Lord it is imperative that we cleave unto the correct attitude of trusting the Lord and being joyful in whatever trouble He allows to come our way. In so doing we honor Him, demonstrating the depth of our faith, and we also greatly encourage others who see by our good example that it is indeed possible to persevere in tribulation to the glory of God.

James' often misunderstood words above may thus be seen not so much as a command to consider painful events enjoyable, but as giving us permission to "feel good" and to rejoice in this testing of faith which comes to all who are determined to follow Jesus Christ closely in this life. We don't have to look backward (as if setbacks and troubles have to do with past sins) – and it is spiritually deadly to do so. We don't have to look forward in despair – for we know with absolute confidence that our Lord is capable of parting whatever stormy sea confronts us and bringing us through dry-shod with rejoicing. Our job is to persevere through the test *today*, one day at a time, keeping firmly in mind that all this is temporary and that the rewards we are winning by trusting Him are worth far more than anything this transient world could ever possibly offer.

- (3) May the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ be praised, who has in His great mercy caused us to be reborn to a hope which lives through Jesus Christ's resurrection from the dead, (4) and to an inheritance which will never be destroyed, defiled, or dimmed, but which is being guarded in heaven for us, (5) who are ourselves also being

kept safe by God's power and our faith in Him to an ultimate deliverance ready to be unveiled at the end of time. (6) In anticipation of this ultimate deliverance, ***your joy overflows***, though at present it may be your lot to ***suffer for a time through various trials*** (7) to the end that your faith may be shown to be genuine. This validation of your faith is far more valuable than gold, for gold, though it too is assayed by fire, ultimately perishes. But your faith, when proven genuine in the crucible of life, will result in praise, glory and honor for you at the glorious return of Jesus Christ. (8) Though you have never laid eyes on Him, yet you love Him. And though you cannot see Him at this present time, yet you have faith in Him. For this reason you ***rejoice with an inexpressible joy*** that bespeaks the glorious future to come, (9) when you shall carry off in victory the ultimate prize – the [eternal] deliverance of your lives – which is the very purpose and objective of this faith of yours.

1st Peter 1:3-9

Whatever we are called upon to endure for Jesus Christ is most definitely "worth it" – and that will be made abundantly clear when we appear before His judgment seat on that glorious day to come. At that moment, we will not rue or regret a single thing we have suffered for His Name (1Cor.3:11-15; 2Cor.5:9-11). The challenge is to look forward to that "well done!" from Him here and now, and ***for that reason*** to "count it all joy" even in the midst of the fiery trial.

"His Lord said to him, 'Well done, good and faithful servant; you have been faithful over a few things, I will make you ruler over many things. Enter into ***the joy*** of your Lord.' "
Matthew 25:23 NKJV

While all Christians are called to "share the sufferings of Christ" (Rom.8:17; 2Cor.1:5; Phil.1:29-30; 3:10; Col.1:24; 1Pet.4:12-13; cf. Mk.10:38-39; Acts 5:41; 2Cor.4:10-11; Gal.6:17; 1Thes.1:6; 2Thes.1:4-5; 2Tim.3:12), and while the endurance of such trials and personal tribulations is a necessary part of the Christian growth-process, as we have noted the Lord does not place the burden of undeserved suffering (as opposed to divine discipline) upon immature believers who are ill-equipped to handle it (1Cor.10:11; cf. Matt.11:29-30).

In our lukewarm era of Laodicea where spiritual immaturity is the rule, the instances of believers actually sharing Christ's sufferings in enduring personal tribulations wherein they glorify God by winning the victory through faith are sadly few and far between. But it would be a mistake – a faulty perspective – to count these believers "blessed" because of their lack of troubles. That may be how things appear to worldly eyes, just as those who are actually advancing in faith may seem to be "cursed" on account of the undeserved suffering they are enduring. But we know – and should never let it slip from our minds – that it is those who are sharing the sufferings of Christ who are truly glorifying Him. And not only that. Mature believers who are coming in for personal tribulation are also being prepared for what is soon to come. For, in addition to honoring Christ through bearing up under testing now, the latter will be all that much better prepared for the terrible time of trouble which is about to fall upon the entire world; but the former, in addition to doing little to honor Christ now (even if in the world's eyes they seem to be "blessed" because of material prosperity and little in the way of trouble), will find themselves ill-

prepared to face the unique challenges of those last seven years before our Lord's return.

"Remember this principle I taught you: A servant is not greater than his master. If they persecuted Me, they will also persecute you."

John 15:20

These words of our Lord remind us that our attitude towards this world – and in particular our attitude towards all such undeserved suffering, persecution, test, trials, and tribulation – must always be that of a professional Christian. We are never to take such burdens personally – as if we were the object of attacks from the devil and his followers whether seen or unseen because of who *we* are or what *we* have done. After salvation, we believers remain here in this world as representatives of Jesus Christ (2Cor.5:20). The suffering we endure in this world from this world and from its evil ruler are not directed at us personally but instead entirely because of our status as part of the Bride of Christ. It is thus a deadly spiritual mistake to take any such suffering personally. Instead we must always maintain a professional attitude – it is not about us; it is all about Jesus Christ (Matt.10:22; Jn.15:20; 2Tim.3:12).

For to you it has been granted on behalf of Christ, not only to believe in Him, but also to suffer for His sake.

Philippians 1:29 NKJV

If you are reproached for the name of Christ, blessed are you, for the Spirit of glory and of God rests upon you.

1st Peter 4:14 NKJV

Since it is all about our Lord, we have the right to be joyful in our trials and troubles, knowing that we are indeed suffering for Him, knowing that He is well aware of our sorrows and will of course bring us timely relief. Our job is to wait quietly and confidently for His deliverance as a witness to others.

(13) Then Moses said to the people, "Do not be afraid! Take your positions and watch the deliverance of the Lord which He will accomplish for you today. For the Egyptians whom you have seen today, you will not see ever again forever. (14) The Lord will fight for you, but you must keep quiet."

Exodus 14:13-14

You have not suffered any testing beyond normal human [experience]. And God is faithful. He will not allow you to be tested beyond your capacity, but, along with the test, He will grant you the way out, so that you can bear up under it.

1st Corinthians 10:13

If we are experiencing discipline for recent sin, we know that we are being treated as sons and daughters by a loving Father (Heb.12:7-11). But if we are not conscious of any credible reason for the suffering which has befallen us, then we may be sure, as those who are putting Jesus

Christ first in their lives, that it is indeed for His sake that we are suffering. Regardless of the immediate source of our trouble whether seen or unseen, as in the case of Job it is the Lord who tests and tries us (Ps.7:9; 11:5; Prov.17:3; Eccl.3:18; Jer.11:20; 17:20; 20:12; 1Thes.2:4), and we bring glory to Him when we pass the test at hand.

So trouble that befalls the advancing Christian does not mean that he/she is in the wrong. Rather, with the exception of divine discipline for recent, significant straying from the Lord (and even here blessing in the midst of discipline results after repentance and confession), such tribulation is instead a sign of our spiritual *progress*: the Lord can now trust us with a level of personal tribulation which before reaching maturity we would not have been able to handle. In all such cases of genuine, personal tribulation, believers must be diligent about spitting out all false guilt (it is because of our good progress that we are receiving these trials), eschewing all self-pity (we are being assailed because we belong to Jesus Christ, not because of "us"), and taking pains as good witnesses to our dear Lord to be as joyful as possible under this duress – for it is in truth a sign of His good pleasure (not the reverse). We do not know all the facts (anymore than Job did). We cannot see the invisible conflict raging unseen around us (anymore than Job could). But we can trust the Lord that He is working things out for good for us who love Him in just the perfect way, regardless of how it seems to worldly eyes (Rom.8:28).

(1) A song of ascents. Of David. My heart is not proud, Lord, my eyes are not haughty; I do not concern myself with great matters or things too wonderful for me. (2) But I have calmed and quieted myself, I am like a weaned child with its mother; like a weaned child I am content. (3) Israel, put your hope in the Lord both now and forevermore.
Psalm 131:1-3 NIV

If by trusting Him we do endure successfully the trials that come the mature believer's way, that endurance leads directly to eternal reward, to the crown of life in particular (Jas.1:12; Rev.2:10), the penultimate reward which glorifies Christ forever – and we should certainly be joyful about that, even while in the grip of testing, trials and tribulation.

(3) And not only this, but let us glory in our tribulations, knowing that tribulation produces patience, (4) and patience produces proven character, and proven character produces hope (i.e., of eternal reward) – (5) and this hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured out in our hearts through the Holy Spirit given to us (so that we are confident of the eternal outcome; cf. 2Tim.1:7).
Romans 5:3-5

For I do not consider these present hardships in any way comparable to the glory destined to be revealed for us.
Romans 8:18

Rejoicing in the hope (of resurrection and reward), showing endurance in tribulation, persevering in prayer.
Romans 12:12

(17) For this present light affliction of ours is working out for us an eternal weight of glory beyond any possible estimation. (18) [Let us] not [then be] having [any] regard for what can be seen, but [instead] for what cannot be seen. For the things which can be seen are ephemeral. But the things which cannot be seen are eternal.

2nd Corinthians 4:17-18

(24) By faith, Moses, when he grew up, refused to be called the son of Pharaoh's daughter, (25) and chose instead to suffer maltreatment with the people of God rather than to enjoy the transitory pleasures of sin, (26) because he considered the reproach [suffered on behalf] of Christ greater riches than [all the] treasure vaults of Egypt. For he was looking to his reward. (27) By faith he left Egypt, not fearing the wrath of the king. For he grew strong by seeing the One who cannot be seen (i.e., by keeping his mind's eye on the invisible Lord Jesus Christ).

Hebrews 11:24-27

(35b) Some [of these great believers of the past] were tortured, refusing release, that they might obtain a better resurrection (i.e., worth more to them than their lives; cf. Ps.63:3). (36) Others endured ridicule and beatings, and even chains and imprisonment. (37) They were stoned, sawed in half, killed by the sword. They went about in sheepskins and goat hides. They were deprived, persecuted, abused. (38) The world was not worthy of them. They wandered the deserts and the mountains, making their homes in caves and fissures in the earth. (39) And through their faith, all of them became witnesses [to the world] (lit., "were martyred"), but did not receive the promise[d reward] – (40) because God was intending something better concerning us, [namely,] that they might not be rewarded (lit., "be brought to completion") apart from us.

Hebrews 11:35b-40

Blessed is the man who stands firm in testing, because when he has been [tested and] approved he will receive the *crown of life* which [God] has promised to all who love Him.

James 1:12

Have no fear of what you are about to suffer. Behold, the devil is about to throw some of you into prison to test you, and you will have tribulation for ten days. Demonstrate faithfulness unto death, and I will give you the *crown of life*.

Revelation 2:10

D. Spiritual Warfare

For our battle is not against flesh and blood, but against [angelic] princes, against [angelic] authorities, against the cosmic powers of this [present] darkness, against evil spirits in the heavenly realms.

Ephesians 6:12

(4) For the weapons of our warfare are not fleshly, but are powerful for God, for the destruction of strongholds, (5) destroying sophistries and every presumption that raises itself up against the knowledge of God, and taking every thought prisoner so as to obey Christ.

2nd Corinthians 10:4-5

It is of critical importance to notice right from the start of this section that "our battle", while it is a spiritual one in which we are being opposed by unseen forces (Eph.6:12), is waged here in the world that can be seen, and only *indirectly* in the one which cannot be seen: what we do does effect that conflict, but *not* through our direct engagement with it. Similarly, our weapons, while they are spiritual and not worldly, are employed visibly in the world around us and only affect in an indirect way the invisible conflict that rages beyond our view. Therefore the sort of odd behavior much in favor in certain circles today which is often called "spiritual warfare" is an incredibly dangerous practice for any believer to engage in. There is no mandate for any Christian today to engage in exorcisms or any sort of putative direct fight with demon forces. In fact, this sort of spiritually destructive activity is inveighed *against* by the scriptures.

When 2nd Peter 2:1-22 and Jude 1:3-19 warn against false teachers who slander *doxai*, "glories", they are referring to Gnostics who reveled in just such "spiritual combat", essentially "casting spells" against evil spirits (and inventing an entire system of false doctrine to designate and describe the "aeons" against which they and their followers did battle). As with many things false, the excitement and appeal of such activities is obvious. But those who are beguiled into wrongly thinking them legitimate have been blinded to the horrific danger of being swept up in the concomitant degeneracy and spiritual dissolution these two cited passages describe.

In truth, "our warfare" is carried out by following the Lord and doing His will – that is what chaps the evil one and his followers. To be protected and effective in this warfare, all believers have a "standard issue" panoply which we learn to wear and use from our earliest days of spiritual advance (Eph.6:10-18). Additionally, even though we are not ready to use them until we have chosen to learn the truth and walk in it long enough and consistently enough to be capable of being put into the front of the battle line by our Lord, all believers also receive a unique set of "special weapons" for this warfare, spiritual gifts which we have been given in order to minister that truth directly or indirectly to our fellow members of Christ's Church (1Cor.12:7ff.).

(7) And to each of us this grace has been given according to the measure of the gift of Christ. (8) For it says, "When He ascended on high, He led captivity captive (i.e., He brought pre-cross believers to heaven). He gave gifts to men." (9) Now [as to] this [phrase] "He ascended", what can it mean except that He had also [previously] descended into the lower reaches of the earth (i.e., Hades, from whence He brought the pre-cross believers to heaven)? (10) The One who descended is also the One who ascended above all the heavens (i.e., into the third heaven, the place of the Father's residence), in order to fulfill all things (i.e., complete the victory won at the cross; cf. Ps.110:1).

Ephesians 4:7-10

The spiritual gifts believers receive at salvation are thus a key part of the "plunder" Christ won at the cross (Is.53:12; Eph.4:7-10; cf. Lk.11:21-22), and it is by means of these special weapons that, when we are ready to do so, we will wage the most intense type of spiritual warfare on that part of the battlefield on which the Lord has assigned to us to minister for the benefit of His Church (1Cor.12:5).

In the meantime, even from earliest days, no Christian, not even the rawest of recruits, can expect to be completely exempted from spiritual combat of this sort. The Christian life is a battle fought out in the midst of the unseen war which precedes our creation. Every positive step we take attracts the attention of our invisible adversaries, so that this "warfare" perspective is critical to gain and maintain in order to live the life for Christ we are attempting to live. But while appreciation and study of this important dimension of our walk with Christ is crucial, it must be said that it is equally critical not to turn off the road either to the left or the right. Over-zealously pursuing a false, emotional and extra-biblical agenda of "spiritual warfare" which goes far beyond what is written (as so many are doing in our time) is just as dangerous to our true spirituality as is sitting idly by the side of the road in effective ignorance of the conflict in which we are engaged.

To maintain the correct, balanced perspective on this issue, we first need to understand the nature of the warfare in which we are engaged, and then also how to engage in it *only* in the way the Lord would have us to do so:

1) First, by advancing as the Lord wants us to, we will come into conflict with the forces of the evil one.

For our battle is not against flesh and blood, but against [angelic] princes, against [angelic] authorities, against the cosmic powers of this [present] darkness, against evil spirits in the heavenly realms.

Ephesians 6:12

2) The enemy that opposes us is not only invisible but also impossible to fight with visible weapons as any human enemy could be fought.

(8) Stay sober and stay awake [on guard]. Our adversary the devil roams about like a roaring lion, looking for someone he can devour. (9) Resist him, strong in your faith, remembering that your fellow believers in this world are undergoing the exact same sort of suffering [that you are].

1st Peter 5:8-9

3) Our fight is therefore entirely a spiritual one, waged entirely through spiritual means.

(3) For though we may walk in the flesh, we do not make war according to the flesh.

2nd Corinthians 10:3

4) Regardless of where we are personally in our advance, all believers are soldiers in this fight, and as such, like it or not, targets of the evil one and his followers.

Since the days of John the baptist until this present time, the Kingdom of God has been under violent attack, and violent men are laying hands upon it.

Matthew 11:12

Remember this principle I taught you: A servant is not greater than his master. If they persecuted Me, they will also persecute you.

John 15:20

5) It is imperative then that we conduct ourselves in the appropriate, professional manner, not taking the opposition we face personally, nor putting personal affairs ahead of our obligations to our Lord and Master.

No one on military campaign becomes involved in the affairs of normal life. [He avoids such things] that he may please the one who enlisted him.

2nd Timothy 2:4

As soldiers of Jesus Christ, we know that our good efforts to grow in grace through the truth, live that truth in our lives, and help others do likewise will continue to be opposed until our Lord returns, because it is through us that He is exploiting His victory on the cross (cf. 2Cor.2:14).

[For by means of the cross, God] has stripped [demon] rulers and authorities [of their power] and subjected them to public humiliation, having triumphed over them in [Christ].

Colossians 2:15

But we also know that for this same reason, our union with Christ as part of His Church, nothing the evil one and his followers might do is capable of stopping the progress of the plan of God.

And I tell you that you are Peter [the little rock], and upon this [mighty] Rock (i.e., upon Christ Himself; cf. 1Cor.3:11) I shall build My Church (cf. Dan.2:44-45), and the gates (i.e., the fortified defenses) of Hades (i.e., the devil's kingdom) ***will not [be able to] resist it.***

Matthew 16:18

Our job as believers, soldiers of Jesus Christ, is thus the same regardless of circumstances, namely, to continue to pursue the objectives for which we have been placed here on earth, come what may, until final victory.

(12) [It is] not that I have already gotten [what I am striving for], nor that I have already completed [my course]. Rather, I am continuing to pursue [the prize] in hopes of fully acquiring it – [this prize for whose acquisition] I was myself acquired by Christ Jesus.

(13) Brethren, I do not consider that I have already acquired it. This one thing only [do I

keep in mind]. Forgetting what lies behind me [on the course] and straining towards the [course] ahead, (14) I continue to drive straight for the tape, towards the prize to which God has called us from the beginning [of our race] in Christ Jesus.

Philippians 3:12-14

As Job found out, to use an extreme example, because of the opposition of the evil one and his followers, life can be full of surprises. This is not a straight-line "walk in the park" direct to Zion. As our Lord told us (Matt.16:18), we are on the attack (when we are advancing spiritually as we should be), and we face satanic resistance all along the way. Every hill we take on the road to our objective will be contested, and after every victory we will need to brace for the inevitable counterattack. Nor is the enemy content with merely resisting our efforts. He is constantly launching his own spoiling attacks designed to throw off our advance. Being human, there will be times when we are defeated, whether being routed out of fear (as in Elijah's case: 1Ki.19:3), or falling for whatever bait may be offered (as in Moses' and David's cases: Num.20:10-12; 2Sam.11:2-4 respectively). Given the realities of the spiritual combat in which we are involved, therefore, every believer needs to develop a "standard operating procedure" for dealing with unexpected attacks and counterattacks on the one hand, and for recovering from spiritual defeats on the other. For in the end none of us will be completely spared from either category of challenge until we see our Lord face to face.

1. Our Objective: Our intention is to keep growing spiritually and coping in a godly manner with the resistance we face day by day, continuing also to prosecute the ministries we have been given by the Lord to discharge. This is our baseline progress, and we do our best to maintain our momentum daily, gradually building up to the best possible, sustainable "cruising speed" in learning more and more truth every day, applying it more consistently in the tests we face, and helping others do so through the ministries with which we are entrusted. In doing so we keep in mind the heavenly rewards – the crowns of righteousness, life and glory – that fall to the lot of all who persevere in this noble quest of honoring Jesus Christ by what they think, say and do, and we make it our aspiration always to do "the right thing" and to say "the right thing" based upon consistently thinking "the right thing" regardless of pressures to do otherwise.

If life consisted of merely what can be seen with human eyes, no doubt more Christians would have a much better track record in striving for the goal of glorifying Christ by this godly approach to our lives.¹² But we know that our opponents are invisible – and powerful.

2. Our Opposition: The true purpose of the world we see is to serve as an arena for adjudicating the conflict between Satan (who began it by rebellion) and the Lord – who has already won its decisive victory at the cross (Col.2:14-15; cf. Matt.12:25-28; Lk.10:18; Rom.16:20). Since we believers are Christ's representatives on this earth, and since we are destined to replace one-for-one in the family of God those followers of Satan who rebelled against the Lord, we may be sure

¹² See section I.7, "The Judgment and Reward of the Church", in part 6 of the *Coming Tribulation* series.

that our spiritual progress will be contested every step of the way by the invisible forces of the devil.¹³

The above is a critical perspective for believers to maintain. Failure to keep in mind that we are combatants in an unseen conflict that in truth defines and directs human history will likely lead us to seeing the world as others see it rather than as God sees it. Hence we may feel that we are being treated unfairly when things go wrong – and things will go wrong – and even be tempted to blame God (always a deadly mistake) or else blame ourselves (also a mistake if in fact we are not at fault). Failing to remember that this is a spiritual battlefield and forgetting our key role in this struggle makes us spiritually vulnerable when we are attacked from unseen sources.

Life certainly offers enough "good times" and "not particularly bad" times that it is easy to become disoriented when the truly "bad times" arrive, forgetting that like Job the trouble that besets us is really part of a much bigger picture, and that if we are walking as our Commanding Officer would have us to walk such attacks are to be expected as we take on our part of the battle, "sharing the sufferings of Christ". Sooner or later all believers who are committed to this fight are allowed to be tested by the forces that oppose us (as Job was) in order to enhance our growth and to glorify the Lord (when we respond as we should).

We cannot afford to make the same mistake Job made, not even entertaining the possibility that his suffering was part of a larger conflict and thus alternatively blaming God and himself rather than accepting that his suffering was actually an important part of the plan of God (giving us the book of Job as a result, for one thing). Our part in this fight is important too, and, given what Christ has done for us in redeeming us from death through His victory, it certainly behooves us to hold up under fire, trusting Him for deliverance in the fight – and glorifying Him in so doing.

3. Our S.O.P.:

A Psalm of David.

I will praise You, O Lord, with my whole heart;

I will tell of all Your marvelous works.

I will be glad and rejoice in You;

I will sing praise to Your name, O Most High.

Psalm 9:1b-2 NKJV

Reading this or many of the other psalms of David it is impossible not to be struck by the joy he experienced in the Lord and also by the fact that the Lord and His truth were foremost in his mind at most if not at all times. That is the proper status of the mature believer, namely, keeping his/her thoughts focused on the Lord and "the things above" and not "the things below".

¹³ These and many important, related issues are treated in detail in the *Satanic Rebellion* series.

(1) Therefore since you have been resurrected [positionally] with Christ, keep seeking after the things above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. (2) Keep thinking on the things above, and not the things on the earth.

Colossians 3:1-2

Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable – if anything is excellent or praiseworthy – think about such things.

Philippians 4:8 NIV

In practical terms, this mental and emotional "high ground" is not so easy to achieve in the first place and very difficult to hold onto if ever it is gained. Slipping out of focus on the Lord and our eternal future and all the good things we have in Him and have learned from His Word is easy enough in the course of normal life, and we can be sure that the devil takes special note of that small group of Christians who are in the habit of occupying the spiritual high ground, making it his business to push us off the heights by any and all means at his disposal.

For to me, to live is Christ, and to die is gain.

Philippians 1:21

In many ways, therefore, this fight for the "high ground of the heart", to be in that place of joy and peace with our thinking concentrated on the Lord, our reward, and all things good and eternal, is the true essence of the spiritual warfare in which we are engaged. If we are controlled by our emotions, we are going to lose the battle at hand. If we are not oriented in our hearts to our proper place in the world – soldiers of Christ, sons and daughters of the living God, redeemed, sanctified, saved, sealed, adopted believers whose real life exists and is hidden beyond human view – it will be easy enough for us to slip back into the worldly thinking that dominated our lives before salvation and before attaining spiritual maturity.

This is not a "once for all fight". This is an every day, every moment of every day fight, and it is doubtful that any believer in the history of the world has gotten through any day without having to defend this position of peace and joy multiple times, and just as doubtful that any but the most exceptional have managed to get through a single day without being pushed off at least once or twice and having had to fight their way back up. But the more we engage in the struggle, when our efforts are conjoined with continued attention to the truth and its teaching, the better we will become at fighting this fight, with less "drift" and more "joy in the Lord".

Blessed is the man who does not walk in the counsel of the wicked or stand in the way of sinners or sit in the seat of mockers. But his delight is in the law of the Lord, and on his law he meditates day and night.

Psalms 1:1-2 NIV

Let the words of my mouth, and the meditation of my heart, be acceptable in thy sight.

Psalms 19:14 KJV

Watch over your heart with all diligence, for from it flow the springs of life.
Proverbs 4:23 NASB

Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable – if anything is excellent or praiseworthy – think about such things.
Philippians 4:8 NIV

Since, then, you have been raised with Christ, set your hearts on things above, where Christ is seated at the right hand of God.
Colossians 3:1 NIV

a. Growth Progression

As with most other things in this life, as we gain experience and knowledge, we get better in time . . . *if* we continue to apply ourselves and pay attention so as to learn. Mere "time in grade" is no guarantee of spiritual growth and certainly not of growth in the effective application of the truth. That takes consistency of effort. All one needs to do to affirm this fact is to consider so many Laodicean Christians today who have been "in the faith" for very many years and are not much better off spiritually than when they first believed – and in some cases worse off. As Frederick the Great is reputed to have said when someone tried to equate mere presence on numerous campaigns with quality of leadership, "Do you see that pack mule? He's been on all of my campaigns with me and is no better the battlefield leader for it."

Solid [spiritual] food is for the [spiritually] mature, those who *by [diligent] practice* have trained their [moral] perceptive faculties to [properly] distinguish between good and evil.
Hebrews 5:14

Right out of the starting gate, no one is immediately good at spiritual warfare, the battle we are waging in our hearts to keep our Lord first in all we think. We have to retrain our hearts and minds to see things from our Lord's perfect point of view, constantly nourishing them with the truth of the Word, correctly taught and believed, in order to achieve the spiritual momentum necessary to have some success in truly governing our thoughts and emotions for Christ.

b. Testing of our Control

Putting one's trust in Jesus Christ for life eternal in recognizing Him for who He is, the God-man, and what He has done for us, paying for our sins on the cross, brings immediate new birth. Being born again into the family of God is instantaneous. Fighting the Christian fight, however, is a continual challenge, step by step along the way, day by day, every day. For that reason, conquest of the "high ground" of peace and joy focused on the hope ahead, though won in exactly the same manner in which we put our faith in our Lord to be saved (i.e., through spiritual growth and experiential trust in Him for all things in this life and the next: Phil.3:16; Col.2:6-7), cannot be

the once and for all thing gained in an instant that salvation was. Our control of our thoughts and emotions will be tested . . . at all times. And just as it is impossible for human beings with sin natures to refrain entirely from every single sin (small slips in the mind and with the tongue being the most common for mature and growing Christians), so it is impossible to be in complete control of our heart at every passing moment. For we are not unopposed in this struggle, and our adversary is a master of the counterattack.

[I grant forgiveness] . . . in order that we may not be taken advantage of by Satan, for we are not ignorant of his schemes.

2nd Corinthians 2:11

(8) Stay sober and stay awake [on guard]. Our adversary the devil roams about like a roaring lion, looking for someone he can devour. (9) Resist him, strong in your faith, remembering that your fellow believers in this world are undergoing the exact same sort of suffering [that you are].

1st Peter 5:8-9

This principle – of the constant testing of our mental peace and inner walk with the Lord – is an important one for every believer to keep in mind, both so as to be on the alert for the attacks that come from within (from our sin nature) and without (from the evil one and his followers and also from the corrupt world system in which our lives are immersed), and also to avoid the very common spiritual malady of allowing defeat to become a pattern and so destroy our joy, disrupt our peace, and blur our hope.

No one has ever avoided lapses in the heart. But Christians who are successful in spiritual warfare get back up when they falter and punch back with principles of truth believed, reclaiming the high ground of the heart through refocusing their attention on the truth (cf. Prov.24:16). With experience, we learn how to use the resources our Lord has given us to fight this fight.

(10) As you move forward, my brothers, strengthen yourselves in the Lord and in the power of His might. (11) Put on the full armor of God, so that you may be able to stand firm against the tricks of the devil. (12) For our battle is not against flesh and blood, but against [angelic] princes, against [angelic] authorities, against the cosmic powers of this [present] darkness, against evil spirits in the heavenly realms. (13) On this account take up that full armor of God so that you may be able to resist in the day of trouble and, when you have completely done everything [necessary (in spiritual preparation)], to stand your ground. (14) So then *do* stand your ground, having girded your loins with truth and having put on the breastplate of righteousness, (15) and having shod your feet with the [shoes] of preparation for [sharing] the gospel of peace. (16) And at all times take up the shield of faith, with which you will be able to quench all the fiery missiles of the evil one. (17) And [in this spiritual warfare] put on the helmet of salvation and gird on the sword of the Spirit – which is the Word of truth. (18) In all your prayers and petitions [be] praying in the Spirit on each occasion, keeping at this with all persistence and petition on behalf of the saints.

The "full armor of God" has everything to do with the truth, the truth of the Word which girds our loins, that is, forms the foundation upon which all other things are based, the truth of the righteousness we have by faith so as to be acceptable in God's eyes, our sins forgiven by the blood of Christ so that nothing in this world can penetrate that breastplate to endanger our eternal life, the truth of our blessed role as those who both share in and share the gospel for the salvation and growth of others whereby we earn eternal rewards, the truth that if we but trust the Lord no fiery darts can ever harm us even though we have to ward them off with the shield of trusting Him, the truth that our salvation is secure as long as we believe in Him, keeping us safe like a helmet in spite of the blows of the evil one, and the truth that we have the Spirit within us to exploit the truth we have learned and believed – that is the way we take the offensive to gain and regain the high ground of our hearts through skillful use of His sharp, double-edged sword (Heb.4:12). We gain control of our hearts in peace and joy through focusing on the hope of all the wonderful things the Lord has done for us and all that is to come, and, whenever we falter under pressure, we regain that high ground the very same way.

Now may the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in [your] believing, that you may abound in [that] hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.

Romans 15:13 NKJV

Loss of our spiritual perspective may come as a result of sloppiness and attention to the things of this world, but for those who are resolutely advancing on the high road to Zion, it is more often the case that spiritual tests, opposition the Lord allows to come our way to train us and to glorify Himself, are the cause – when we do not handle them in a perfect way (or when we do not handle them well at all). As sure as Satan is the temporary ruler of this world, moreover, tests will come. Rather than bemoaning this fact, and rather than allowing our peace, joy and hope to desert us whenever something unforeseen and unpleasant befalls us, it is critical that every believer realize that this is not an unusual state of affairs but the expected status quo on this battlefield on which we find ourselves.

(12) Beloved, don't be alarmed at the fiery ordeal which has befallen you and is putting you to the test – as if something out of the ordinary were happening to you. (13) But to the degree that you are [truly] participating in Christ's sufferings, be joyful about it, so that at His glorious revelation, you may also rejoice with great gladness.

1st Peter 4:12-13

In fact, it is largely for this very reason, serving the Lord as faithful soldiers in this spiritual combat and glorifying Him by trusting Him in the pinch, honoring Him by considering Him faithful to deliver us come what may, that we believers are still on earth following salvation. After all, we have already chosen for Him over the world. Why must we endure this temporary life, this corrupt world, any longer? The answer is that the Christian life after being saved is all about winning eternal rewards, and those rewards are won by fighting the good fight, persevering in spiritual growth until maturity is achieved, persevering in the tests and trials of life so as to

demonstrate that we do deeply believe what we have affirmed, and that our faith is not merely superficial, and persevering in helping others do likewise as we minister the truth to them in the accomplishment or support of ministries which do so – all of which glorifies our Master, the Lord of Hosts.

(7) I have fought the good fight. I have completed my course. I have kept the faith. (8) In the future there is reserved for me the crown of righteousness which the Lord, the righteous judge, will award to me on that [great] day [of judgment] – and not only to me, but to all who have loved His appearance (i.e., who have exercised consistent love for Jesus Christ in anticipation of His return).

2nd Timothy 4:7-8

Have no fear of what you are about to suffer. Behold, the devil is about to throw some of you into prison to test you, and you will have tribulation for ten days. Demonstrate faithfulness unto death, and I will give you the crown of life.

Revelation 2:10

Blessed is the man who stands firm in testing, because when he has been [tested and] approved he will receive the crown of life which [God] has promised to all who love Him.

James 1:12

(1) So I urge the elders among you as a fellow elder and witness of the sufferings of Christ, even one who shares [with you] in the glory which is about to be revealed, (2) pastor the flock of God under your charge, overseeing them not out of compulsion but willingly in response to God, not eager for shameful material gain, but out of genuine enthusiasm, (3) not lording it over the charges [entrusted to you], but as genuine examples to your flock. (4) And when the Chief Shepherd appears, you will carry off in victory the crown of glory which will never fade.

1st Peter 5:1-4

So no time should be wasted agonizing about past defeats. That only results in present and future ones. Spiritual warfare greatly resembles earthly combat in this regard. Every battle produces casualties, pain and suffering – even great victories do. Just as no general has ever fought a perfect battle, so also in our spiritual struggles we must energetically resist the idea that it is perfection or nothing – for that will result in precisely nothing every time. Just as earthly battles are often confusing and disorganized – but the side which perseveres often wins out – so spiritual battles are never "nice and neat"; therefore we have to persevere in spite our occasional lapses, missteps, mistakes.

There is no "do over" button in this life. The testing will continue, the attack of the evil one will continue, until it has run its course. We cannot stop and "reset". And this will always be the case this side of heaven-home. Let us resolve, therefore, to remember that every moment is the true "new start", whether the last one was "played well" or ill, and let us further resolve to get better at

this fight, this endurance of any and all temptation, testing, misfortune, shock or surprise, until like the coolest of old veterans we learn how to defend this hill unto victory, however bloody, and can come to say after every such test as Wellington did after Waterloo, "They came on in the same old way, and we saw them off in the same old way".

Testing never happens without the Lord's permission, and it always has a personal purpose for us, working everything out for our actual good (Rom.8:28), pruning us to bring about more fruit (Jn.15:2), giving us memorable experiences of His deliverance whereby we may love Him more – and do even better the next time.

(2) And you shall remember that the Lord your God led you all the way these forty years in the wilderness, to humble you and test you, to know what was in your heart, whether you would keep His commandments or not. (3) So He humbled you, allowed you to hunger, and fed you with manna which you did not know nor did your fathers know, that He might make you know that man shall not live by bread alone; but man lives by every word that proceeds from the mouth of the Lord. (4) Your garments did not wear out on you, nor did your foot swell these forty years. (5) You should know in your heart that as a man chastens his son, so the Lord your God chastens you.

Deuteronomy 8:2-5 NKJV

. . . who fed you in the wilderness with manna, which your fathers did not know, that He might humble you and that He might test you, to do you good in the end–

Deuteronomy 8:16 NKJV

No one likes testing and trial, but it is ever allowed by the Lord "to do us good in the end", to show us to some very small degree what our Savior had to put up with in this world before He even went to the cross, to impress upon us the reality of how things really are in this world – nothing permanent, everything only so much temporary dust – so that we might live by His Word and not worldly things, so that we might come to love Him with all our hearts, so that we might appreciate what is coming over what now is all the more, and so that we might glorify Him by our faith and trust in His deliverance before the fact.

(8) The centurion answered and said, "Lord, I am not worthy that You should come under my roof. But only speak a word, and my servant will be healed. (9) For I also am a man under authority, having soldiers under me. And I say to this one, 'Go,' and he goes; and to another, 'Come,' and he comes; and to my servant, 'Do this,' and he does it." (10) When Jesus heard it, He marveled, and said to those who followed, "Assuredly, I say to you, I have not found such great faith, not even in Israel!"

Matthew 8:8-10 NKJV

(17) By faith Abraham offered up Isaac when he was tested, and was on the point of offering up [in sacrifice] his one and only son, the one [about whom he] had received the promises, (18) about whom it had been said, "In Isaac shall your seed be called", (19) [for Abraham was] reckoning that God was able to raise [him] from the dead, whence (i.e.,

from the dead) he did receive [Isaac] back even metaphorically (i.e., Isaac was as good as dead but God delivered him through the substitute of the ram, a type of Jesus Christ).
Hebrews 11:17-19

c. Holding our position

(16) Therefore we do not lose heart. Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day. (17) For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all. (18) So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen. For what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal.

2nd Corinthians 4:16-18

For those who have grown to spiritual maturity and can, in gratefulness to God, speak these words of Paul with a joyous heart, we should not imagine that we have "arrived" or have yet crossed the finish line. The race is not over yet.

(12) [It is] not that I have already gotten [what I am striving for], nor that I have already completed [my course]. Rather, I am continuing to pursue [the prize] in hopes of fully acquiring it – [this prize for whose acquisition] I was myself acquired by Christ Jesus. (13) Brethren, I do not consider that I have already acquired it. This one thing only [do I keep in mind]. Forgetting what lies behind me [on the course] and straining towards the [course] ahead, (14) I continue to drive straight for the tape, towards the prize to which God has called us from the beginning [of our race] in Christ Jesus. (15) So as many as are [spiritually] mature, let us have this attitude (i.e., of focusing on our spiritual advance and reward and not getting hung up on what lies behind: vv.13-14), and if in any matter your attitude is off-center, God will reveal that to you (i.e., assuming you are mature and are advancing as you should). (16) But with respect to the progress you have made, keep on advancing in the same way!

Philippians 3:12-16

We have made spiritual advances. But how do we "hold the hill" in the face of the adversary's inevitable counter-attacks?

1) Keep up the fight: As the passage above indicates (Phil.3:12-16), continuing to grow will help us to maintain our spiritual balance and equilibrium. Conversely, becoming spiritually distracted, fatigued, or lazy will open us up to attack. Achievement in all walks of life often requires going above and beyond what is considered "normal". As Max Hastings has written:

Events on the Normandy battlefield demonstrated that most British or American troops continued a given operation for as long as reasonable men could. Then – when they had fought for many hours, suffered many casualties, or were running low on fuel or ammunition – they disengaged. The story of German operations, is landmarked with repeated examples of what could be achieved by soldiers prepared to attempt more than

reasonable men could.¹⁴

If this is true of those fighting for temporal things – and in a very bad cause at that – how much more is it not the case for us who fight in the best possible cause for rewards that last forever.

(24) Don't you know that all the runners in the stadium run the race, but that only one receives the prize? Run in such a way so as to achieve what you are after. (25) And again, everyone involved in competition exercises self-control in all respects. Those athletes go through such things so that they may receive a perishable crown of victory, but we do it to receive an imperishable one. (26) So as I run this race of ours, I'm heading straight for the finish line; and as I box this bout of ours, I'm making every punch count. (27) I'm "pummeling my body", one might say, bringing myself under strict control so that, after having preached [the gospel] to others, I might not myself be disqualified [from receiving the prize we all seek].

1st Corinthians 9:25-27

Moving targets are notoriously harder to hit. And even if our good progress attracts attention from the forces of darkness, this is why we are here, after all. Further, it is often the case that the very momentum of growth, progress and production leaves fewer areas of vulnerability and thus offers fewer avenues of attack against us, whereas if we lose forward progress we may well find that defense from a static, sedentary position is more difficult than continuing our advance. As Robert E. Lee is reputed to have said about his victory at Chancellorsville, "I was too weak to defend, so I attacked". Beyond all argument, in any case, our greatest Christian heroes have always been "offensive minded" in spiritual matters:

I press toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.

Philippians 3:14 NKJV

2) Avoid unnecessary distractions: Corollary to the above, just as we ought to continue with the good (growth, progress and production), so we should take pains to keep away from things that diminish that momentum. This is true of all things definitely sinful, of some things definitely not sinful, and of many things somewhere in between. The Galatian believers began to give their attention to a number of false teachers who showed up after Paul's departure. Whatever their initial motivation in allowing themselves to be hoodwinked by legalism, in the end it compromised their spirituality and hindered their growth.

You were running well! Who knocked you off your stride so as not to believe the truth?

Galatians 5:7

3) Focus on the here and now: There are only three days with which a positive Christian needs to be concerned: the yesterday when Christ died for us and we were saved by grace through faith in

¹⁴ *OverLord* (1984) 184-185.

Him and His work on the cross; the tomorrow when He returns for us or calls us home to be with Him; and this very day wherein we find ourselves one day closer to the kingdom of heaven (Rom.13:11). Therefore as long it is called "today" (Heb.3:13), that is, as long as we are in this world, we need to keep our hearts fixed on doing what the Lord wants us to do *today*, not looking backwards at past successes (which has a tendency to result in unwarranted lassitude: but we still have work to do: Jn.9:4) or failures (which often induces a paralysis of inappropriate guilt: but we have been forgiven: 1Cor.6:11), and not worrying about tomorrow (except for keeping our heart fixed on being with the Lord on the greatest of all "tomorrows").

Therefore do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own.

Matthew 6:34 NIV

Redeem your time, for the days are evil.

Ephesians 5:16 (cf. Col.4:5)

Every day has enough evil of its own without worrying about tomorrow or looking back at yesterday. In fact, it is best not to look back at all (Phil.3:13). When we look back it is generally either to beat ourselves up about some prior failure or to pat ourselves on the back about some past success. The one destroys our morale and tends to make us sit down in the mud and do nothing; the other tends to make us think we are something special so that the "rules" don't apply to us, and the next thing you know we are failing in spectacular fashion. Both false perspectives keep us from what we should be doing: putting our heads down and pushing forward in the here and now "as long as it is called 'today' ". Christians need to have short memories about the past – except to remember the cross, and to have blinders on about tomorrow – except to anticipate the rewards and glories of eternity. God forgives us our past mistakes, provided we repent and confess (Ps.32:5; 1Jn.1:9); God expects us to look forward to the benefits of serving His Son, and not anticipate the pleasures of this world.

4) Don't run low on ammunition: The truth – in our hearts and believed – is the ammunition with which we fight this spiritual fight. We need to do all we can to have as much of it stockpiled in our hearts and ready to use for whatever spiritual need arises. As with physical ammunition, more is better, and in any spiritual combat, there is no point in husbanding it; rather we should expend as much as possible and certainly as much as necessary to win the day. For it is the truth of the Word which is the ammunition, the weapon, that the Spirit uses to empower us.

And gird on the *sword* of the Spirit – which is the Word of truth.

Ephesians 6:17b

For the Word of God is living and powerful; it is sharper than any two-edged *sword*, penetrating even to the point of being able to divide the spirit from its earthly life and the marrow from its bones; [for] it (i.e., the Word) acts as a judge of our heart's intentions and emotions (empowered by the Spirit).

Hebrews 4:12

5) Expect counterattacks: This has been mentioned before but is well worth repeating (cf. 2Pet.1:12).

So do not give the devil an opening (lit. a "place" to attack).
Ephesians 4:27

6) Never forget the objective: This is critical in all military operations of any kind, and just as crucial in spiritual warfare. We are here for a purpose, namely, to glorify our dear Lord Jesus Christ – our Savior who died for our sins to give us life eternal – doing so through spiritual growth, progress and production. And He has given us a special guiding star to keep in view in order to help us remember why we are here: the blessed encouragement of reward motivation.

Now without faith, it is impossible to please [God]. For whoever wishes to draw nearer to God must believe that He exists, and that He will reward those who earnestly seek Him.
Hebrews 11:6

We are striving for the eternal crowns of righteousness, life and glory. God helping us, we will win them all to the glory of Christ – if only we keep this objective of a good report in His presence on that day firmly fixed in our hearts to the end (Matt.25:21-23; Lk.19:17; Rom.14:10; 2Cor.5:10).

7) Fire support: We have to remember also that we are not fighting this fight alone. We have other believers with us in the line on the left and on the right, many of whom are offering up prayers for our support to the One for whom nothing is impossible (Gen.18:14; Job 42:2; Jer.32:17; Matt.19:26; Lk.1:37; 18:27). And we too are priests of God in Jesus Christ and have the right to come before Him and the Father to ask for the help we need to fight this fight (Rev.1:6; cf. Jn.14:13-14; Rom.5:1-2a; Eph.2:18; 3:12).

"Call upon Me in the day of trouble; I will deliver you, and you shall glorify Me."
Psalm 50:15 NKJV

Let us therefore come boldly to the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy and find grace to help in time of need.
Hebrews 4:16 NKJV

8) Don't let the things of this world sidetrack you: This world is temporary and it is passing away. Whatever we may gain here is dust. Whatever we have here should be thought of in the proper spiritual way, merely as means to the end we all should be seeking, namely, a good report at the judgment seat of Christ. Just as soldiers are given weapons, gear and supplies only because of the purpose of carrying on the fight, so we too should understand that everything we have been given by the Lord is analogously a part of this conflict in which we are engaged, and only has value to the extent that we use it to gain the objectives we have been given; otherwise, the things of this world are pointless in the end, and we value them for their own sake only at our

great spiritual risk.

(7) But whatever I had gained [in my former godless life], compared to Christ I have come to consider these things as losses. (8) Indeed, I consider everything to be a loss compared to the surpassing importance of knowing Jesus Christ my Lord, for whose sake I have suffered the loss of everything, and consider [everything I have lost] as garbage, compared to gaining Christ.

Philippians 3:7-8

(15) Do not be a lover of this world, nor of what is in this world. If anyone is a lover of this world, a [genuine] love for the Father is not in him. (16) For all that is in the world, the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the boastful pride of life, is not from the Father, but is from the world. (17) The world and its lust are passing away, but whoever does God's will is [going] to stay [alive with God] forever.

1st John 2:15-17

No matter how much we have, human beings that we are, it will never be enough (Eccl.5:10). No matter how little we have, God being who He is, it will always be enough. Therefore our life "does not consist in the abundance of [our] possessions" (Lk.12:15 NIV), but God is superintending our lives in just the right way. Would we do more with more? Maybe. Or maybe we would do less. And probably we would do less relatively speaking. God is evaluating us on what we do with what He does give us. If He gives us five talents, He expects another five, not another ten. The widow who threw in the two mites will be rewarded more than those who threw in much more (because of her relative lack of resources and her genuine and godly motives).

We do not determine or pick the battlefield on which we are to fight this Christian life. God does that for us. Our job is not to choose the particulars of the struggle. God picks them. Could they be different? Indeed. But would they ever be easy? Not as long as this is the devil's world. If we had more money or etc., we would have other problems. Our job is to trust the Lord to help us through the particular set of problems He has given us. Daniel apparently had all the comforts of life and lacked for absolutely nothing. On the other hand, he was tossed into the lions' den. The Lord delivered him "because he had trusted in his God" (Dan.6:23 NIV). Our problems are all somewhat different, but God is the same God. He will deliver us. Our job is to stay faithful and to do the best job we can in serving Him day by day come what may. Our job is to keep our eyes on Jesus, not the particulars of the life with which we have been entrusted, becoming wrongly preoccupied with securing them (Matt.6:32-33). This is not easy to do, but it is an essential part of the application of the mature believer, and the only way to fight this fight effectively.

9) Take ownership of your own role in the fight: We need to try and always keep in mind who it is that "owns" our free will. We are made in the image of God. That means we have been given the ability to make moral choices. This is the most dramatic and the most important thing in the universe and in God's plan – outside of the sacrifice of Christ; and in fact it is integrally related to that sacrifice because we have been given free will precisely so as to be able to respond to Him.

The world is full of noise. The world is full of pain. The world is full of pleasures – although for a genuine believer these easily turn to trouble if they pass beyond what is good, appropriate and prudent. But everything that is in the world is only so much dust. What this world is about, what it is really about from the correct, divine point of view, is the sum total of decisions made by all of us who have free will. That is why we are here. To make choices. That is why the world is here – so that we can have a place and a time to make those choices. This is the battlefield on which we find ourselves, and these are the parameters of the fight in which we are engaged. What we choose is so very important. And it is the totality of our choices as Christians that determines our eternal rewards. We are in charge of what we think, what we say, and what we do. That is a fundamental fact and thus it is incredibly important that we face it and accept it . . . and revel in it. We can, God helping us, carry out whatever mission we have been called upon to accomplish, in the pursuit of sanctification (staying away from sin), and edification (growing up in Jesus through the Word), and witnessing to Him by trusting Him (passing the tests He gives us), and production (helping others to fight this fight too). While at times it may indeed be difficult, yet it can be done. But we have to take responsibility for everything we do or fail to do as any good soldier and as any good commander must. We – and no one else – are the ones who are completely in charge of and responsible for the free will image of God given to us to determine our eternal fate and our eternal rewards, and we ignore that most critical fact to our peril.

10) Engage in battlefield realism: We must endeavor to be realistic about our personal limitations. While it is true that we should stay far away from sin and give all we have to the Lord, we are flesh. We do fail. We do fall short. When we do, we know the drill: repent, confess, move on. There are many Christians, more today than ever before, it seems, who have a tendency to let past failures dictate their future course of action. But no battle is ever fought without casualties, and even the greatest military captains sometimes made mistakes. Even the best of the best are not perfect, and that certainly goes for believers as well. The Bible is very clear in demonstrating the "feet of clay" of almost any great believer of scripture one might name.

After all, we are not here on this battlefield for personal business. We Christians are left here on earth after salvation to serve in the army of Jesus Christ, and this is a team effort. We all need to look at the bigger picture and to do our part for the team, not allowing our momentary opinion about ourselves, good or bad, to get in the way of the simple execution of the Christian life and our very clear mission of growth, progress and production.

Part and parcel of the above is seeing our role in the army of Christ realistically as well. It is very easy to run away from the things we ought to be doing, and just as easy to run after things we shouldn't be doing. Whatever God has truly given us to do, to that we need to remain faithful. We should not run away from a challenge, but we also should not let ourselves be duped by the evil one into abandoning the true areas of ministry to which we have been called for the sake of something that may not even be of God. But by the same token we should make it a point to carry out the particular responsibilities we have been given, whether or not they seem to us exciting or important.

In any military organization in any battle, every single job is important, even if every job is not naturally covered in glory. The soldier who takes the key objective could not have done so without the ammunition someone else brought up or without the intelligence that directed him to the right place or without the fire support that allowed him to make contact without first becoming a casualty (e.g.). If we have been given some small responsibility from the Lord, of caring for a "few sheep" the Lord has given us, for example, (1Sam.17:28), to this we need to remain faithful. For if we are "faithful in the little things", we can be sure that the Lord will put us in charge of greater things when we are ready for that and when it is His good pleasure to do so (Matt.25:21). And when this is definitely coming from Him, there will be no mistaking it on our part.

11) Be professional; don't take any of this personally: This spiritual warfare in which we are engaged is all about Jesus Christ, responding to Him and honoring Him, and it is for that reason that those who do so are opposed by the evil one. Jesus told us that if they call "the head of the house Beelzebub", we, the members of His household, should certainly expect no less.

"Remember this principle I taught you: A servant is not greater than his master. If they persecuted Me, they will also persecute you."

John 15:20

We are saved. Believers in Jesus Christ. So why are we still here? Why didn't the Lord take us to be with Himself long before now? Of course, we are here to serve Him in this fight. It is all about Him. It is not at all about us. Unbelievers are left alone by the evil one, often to live tranquil lives. Believers who are only marginal and who are not trying to make any sort of difference for our Lord are rarely bothered by the devil. But just let a Christian start to try truly living for Jesus, just let a believer begin to grow, and the forces of darkness takes notice. How much more is that not the case for those who are honestly trying to advance spiritually beyond growth and spiritual progression and into production, striving to minister to the flock of Jesus Christ?

Anyone who attempts to serve the Lord in an honorable way will most definitely be tempted, tested, persecuted and opposed to a far more serious degree than the rank and file, especially the lukewarm rank and file. It is easy to forget this. It is easy to get down about disappointments, setbacks, failures, losses, needs, troubles, etc. But we must remember that the greatest believers of scripture did not have a red carpet rolled out for them. Paul didn't lounge around in a feather-bed. Indeed, as one who was ever leading the charge from the front of the battle, his resume is chock-full of the most intense sufferings imaginable (e.g., 1Cor.4:8-13; 2Cor.4:7-12; 6:3-10; 11:16-33; Phil.3:7-11). But what did he say about all this?

To keep me from becoming conceited because of these surpassingly great revelations, there was given me a thorn in my flesh, a messenger of Satan, to torment me. Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me. But he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me. That is why, for Christ's sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in

difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong.
2nd Corinthians 10:7-10 NIV

(12) I know how to handle humiliation; I also know how to handle prosperity. I have learned by experience in each and every way how to handle being abundantly provided for and being impoverished, being in prosperity and being in a state of deprivation. (13) I have the strength to endure all [extremes] in the One who empowers me to do so.
Philippians 4:12-13

Never was there a man of sinful flesh who did more with less than Paul did. And that was part of the Lord's point in having him do so and in having us know so. If there were ever a biblical equivalent in spiritual warfare of a Congressional Medal of Honor winner, Paul was it. And how was he able to endure so much and achieve so much in spite of the opposition he faced? Because he knew to his core and kept firmly in mind that this fight was not about himself but about Him who died for us – and nothing is impossible for Him.

d. The example of Christ

(6) "I have manifested Your name to the men whom You have given Me out of the world. They were Yours, You gave them to Me, and they have kept Your word. (7) Now they have known that all things which You have given Me are from You. (8) For I have given to them the words which You have given Me; and they have received them, and have known surely that I came forth from You; and they have believed that You sent Me. (9) I pray for them. I do not pray for the world but for those whom You have given Me, for they are Yours. (10) And all Mine are Yours, and Yours are Mine, and I am glorified in them. (11) Now I am no longer in the world, but these are in the world, and I come to You. Holy Father, keep through Your name those whom You have given Me, that they may be one as We are."
John 17:6-11 NKJV

We believers belong to Jesus. We are members of His Body (Eph.1:22-23), part of His Church (Eph.5:25-32), the sheep of His flock (Jn.10:27), and He is the One whom we call "Lord" (Jn.13:13). But while He has completed His course and our eyes do not presently behold Him, we remain in this world as His ambassadors (2Cor.5:20), His special priestly representatives of the truth (1Pet.2:5; 2:9; Rev.1:6; 5:10; 20:6), as lights shining in the darkness for a witness to Him and to His truth (Matt.5:14-16; Eph.5:8; Phil.2:15). We are not blazing the trail to Zion; we are only following in His footsteps – and there are no better footsteps to follow.

(19) This is pleasing [in God's sight], [namely] if for conscience' sake someone bears up under afflictions when unjustly [subjected to] suffering. (20) But what sort of glory [is yours] if you endure punishment for having sinned? But if you endure suffering for doing what is good, this is pleasing to God. (21) It is to this [sharing in the sufferings of Christ] that you have been called, for Christ also died on your behalf, leaving you *an example* so that you might follow in His footsteps. (22) He committed no sin, nor was any guile

found in His mouth. (23) He did not return slander when He was slandered, did not threaten when He suffered, but entrusted Himself to the One who judges righteously.
1st Peter 2:21-23

As the passage above shows, while Jesus Christ is our example in all things, His endurance in suffering is absolutely apropos of the spiritual warfare we are studying. We have been called to share in His suffering – to endure as He endured, to persevere as He persevered, and to glorify God by our faith in His faithfulness as our dear Lord did so perfectly on every occasion, in spite of all opposition.

(1) Since then we too [like the believers of chapter 11] have such a large audience of witnesses surrounding us [both men and angels], let us put off every hindrance – especially whatever sins habitually affect us – and run with endurance the race set before us, (2) turning our gaze unto Jesus, the originator and completer of our faith (cf. "Alpha and Omega"), who, for the joy set before Him, endured the shame of the cross, treating it with despise, and took His seat at the right hand of the throne of God. (3) Keep in mind all the terrible opposition He endured against Himself at the hands of sinful men, so as not to grow sick at heart and give up.
Hebrews 12:1-3

Our Lord's life was one of sacrifice from beginning to end, and it ended in the cross. If we would fight this fight the way He did, then we must follow His perfect example as best we can, day by day, putting Him and His Church first in our hearts.

If anyone wants to follow Me, let him [first] deny himself, then pick up his cross and follow Me.
Matthew 16:24

Our Lord's threefold temptation in the wilderness by Satan is a good place to start when giving specific consideration to His example so as to put the above verse into actual practice. When tempted after fasting for forty days to turn stones into bread, He responded with scripture (Deut.8:3): "It is written, 'Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God (Matt.4:4 NKJV).'" In other words, what we *need* in life – and in any test – is God's truth. Everything else, including the essentials of physical life, will always be faithfully provided for those who love and follow Him . . . so that we may be able to follow Him in learning more and more about Him day by day, walking closer with Him, and helping others do likewise.

"But seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things shall be added to you."
Matthew 6:33 NKJV

When tempted to throw Himself down from the top of the temple, a test which was certainly more potent for Him for whom the verse quoted by the devil (Ps.91:11-12) specifically applied,

and as One who had absolute faith in the Father's deliverance of Him if He were to do so, our Lord responded with scripture again (Deut.6:16): "It is also written: 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test (Matt.4:7 NIV).'" Many people, Christians included, are often motivated to "prove it" when challenged to do so – whether out of feelings of insecurity or an ungodly concern for the opinions of others. But believers should take our Lord's rebuke of Satan to heart, remembering that it is only God's opinion that counts. No matter what anyone else thinks, we are responsible to hold the high ground He has given us to hold, to fight the fight He has given us to fight, and to advance along the path He has given us to walk. No one wants to be ill thought of (Prov.3:4; 22:1; Eccl.7:1), but a truly "good name" comes as a blessing from the Lord. Worrying about the opinions others are forming about us is a mistake – as long as what we are setting ourselves to think, say and do is truly intent on winning the Lord's favor. Believers always need to be wary about responding to the world and its opinion and shun seeking the glory and approbation of human beings. We are here in this world for the glory of the Lord Jesus Christ, and it is His approval we seek here and now, and it is to His "well done!" we are looking forward to in the future.

Am I now trying to win the approval of human beings, or of God? Or am I trying to please people? If I were still trying to please people, I would not be a servant of Christ.
Galatians 1:10 NIV

Our Lord reserved His sternest rebuke for the devil's suggestion that he would give our Lord the world for worshiping Him. Quoting from Deuteronomy a third time (Deut.6:13), our Lord responded: "Away from me, Satan! For it is written: 'Worship the Lord your God, and serve him only (Matt.4:10 NIV).'" This temptation cuts to the core issue of everything that is. Elijah upbraided his countrymen on Mount Carmel for "Baal dancing" between two opinions, and far too many Christians today think, speak and act as if they were of this world and owed allegiance to its dark leader just as much as to the One who made us and saved us by His blood sacrifice on the cross. To fight a good fight for the Lord and hold onto the progress we have made, we have to keep our eyes on the prize of heavenly reward and disdain the things in this life which are nothing but lust, dust and rust.

What profit will a man have if he gains the whole world but loses his life?
Matthew 16:26

(7) But whatever I had gained [in my former godless life], compared to Christ I have come to consider these things as losses. (8) Indeed, I consider everything to be a loss compared to the surpassing importance of knowing Jesus Christ my Lord, for whose sake I have suffered the loss of everything, and consider [everything I have lost] as garbage, compared to gaining Christ.
Philippians 3:7-8

In application of our Lord's response to the first temptation: We should avoid looking for the easy way out in any test or trial. We need to do things the right way, even if on some occasions that will turn out to be the hard way. We have to wait on the Lord's deliverance, confident that

He will "send His angels to minister" to us in due time and in good time for His own glory (Matt.4:11).

In application of our Lord's response to the second temptation: Arrogance is a very subtle thing, and it can be very tempting to suppose that "showing people" our faith – by doing ill-advised things – is right and good. But we should resist "jumping off the roof" when that is unnecessary and clearly unwise. We have confidence in the Lord and He is our courage and strength. We know in our hearts that He will deliver us from each and every test if we but trust and wait on Him, but it is not our place to put Him into a position of having to deliver us from folly, however defined. Believers should be bold in doing what He actually wants us to do, but prudent and circumspect when challenges, dares, and "opportunities" are not clearly of His making.

In application of our Lord's response to the third temptation: We should refuse to allow ourselves to be bribed by the world. Nothing in this world, not the entirety of it, is worth the loss of the smallest portion of our eternal reward, for that small part lasts forever, but this entire world is destined to be destroyed in short order. Compromising ourselves on any point for what amounts to "a mess of potage" is always a grave mistake, even though the world, the flesh and the devil are expert at presenting us with all manner of attractive temptations whose end result is always being forced "off of the hill" and consigned to a difficult and sometimes bitter recovery of the high ground and spiritual progress we have thus lost.

Our purpose in this life as soldiers of Jesus Christ is to accomplish the objectives our Lord has given us to fulfill. Our goals are thus invisible to the world, but well-known to us in our hearts through the truth and the Spirit. In the same way, the world will never understand the fight we are engaged in fighting – because the adversary and his forces are hidden to their view. But we must keep this essential difference between our experience – the experience of a believer – and theirs – the experience of the unbeliever – ever foremost in our minds. Our objective is to please our unseen Master for an unseen reward, and to do so we must fight this fight the way He fought it, with the Spirit and with the truth (Jn.4:23-24), regardless of the pressures and troubles that come our way, following in His footsteps until the path we are treading is finally illuminated in the brilliant glow of the eternal day to come (Prov.4:18).

(1) Therefore since Christ died in His flesh, we also should arm ourselves with the same mind-set, [considering] that whoever has suffered in his flesh [as Jesus did] is finished with sin (lit., "has stopped from" it), (2) so that he might not live the remaining time of his life in this flesh [in service] to [its] human lusts *but to the will of God*.

1st Peter 4:1-2

4. Readiness for Spiritual Combat:

(8) Be self-controlled and alert. Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour. (9) Resist him, standing firm in the faith, because you know that your brothers throughout the world are undergoing the same kind of sufferings.

1st Peter 5:8-9 NIV

In order to carry out the command of verse nine to effectively resist in firmness of faith the assaults of our adversary and his forces – the spiritual combat in which we Christians are all involved daily, like it or not – it is imperative to first take heed of Peter's double command in verse eight. Without being "sober" (NIV: "self-controlled"), awake and alert, we are likely to be taken unawares in a surprise attack. That is true even if we have just experienced a great spiritual victory – and perhaps especially so, for Satan is a master of the spiritual counter-attack. If our guard is down, he will attack like a roaring lion. A thief will not attempt a robbery if he knows that the householder is on the alert (Matt.24:43; Lk.12:39); likewise the evil one and his followers are measured in the use of their resources. And if we *are* on alert, then we will be much better able to bear up under any attack that does come our way. Every professional military has a system of security to guard against and give early detection of enemy attack for precisely these same reasons. In any sort of combat, almost nothing is worse than being surprised and caught unprepared for attack (and history is replete with examples of this, Pearl Harbor being a notable one in our country's experience).

"Therefore keep watch, because you do not know the day or the hour."
Matthew 25:13 NIV

(33) "Be on guard! Be alert! You do not know when that time will come. (34) It's like a man going away: He leaves his house and puts his servants in charge, each with his assigned task, and tells the one at the door to keep watch. (35) Therefore keep watch because you do not know when the owner of the house will come back – whether in the evening, or at midnight, or when the rooster crows, or at dawn. (36) If he comes suddenly, do not let him find you sleeping."
Mark 13:33-37 NIV

"You also must be ready, because the Son of Man will come at an hour when you do not expect him."
Luke 12:40 NIV

"So be alert at all times, praying that you might have the strength to endure all these things which are going to happen, and to stand before the Son of Man."
Luke 21:36

"Why are you sleeping?" he asked them. "Get up and pray so that you will not fall into temptation."
Luke 22:46 NIV

So be alert, remembering that for three years I did not stop warning each of you [about these dangers] day and night with my tears.
Acts 20:31

So let us therefore not sleep like the rest [of unbelieving mankind], but be awake and alert.

1st Thessalonians 5:6

Behold, He (i.e., our Lord Jesus) is coming like a thief. Happy is he who both stays awake and guards his clothing, in order that he may not walk about naked and [people] see his shame.

Revelation 16:15

The last citation recalls the severe penalties (of various kinds) imposed upon Roman soldiers who fell asleep on guard duty. Ramifications for Christians who fail the test of alertness are dire indeed. Nothing could be worse than losing one's faith as a result of such spiritual carelessness with the subsequent loss of all we have striven to achieve for our Lord thus far. But even short of that ultimate disgrace, lack of alertness opens the believer up to all manner of spiritual difficulties.

Guard duty in the military is incredibly boring – but few things are more important. In combat situations, failure to be alert following a victorious operation opens one's unit up to great vulnerability as this is the best time (and the most usual time) for counterattacks when facing resolute foes. Our foe is indeed resolute – but we have nothing to fear as long as we are alertly relying upon our Lord. What is needed, therefore, is an ever-present readiness for spiritual combat. We need always to have our spiritual boots on, so to speak, because the attack can come at any time (1Pet.5:8-9).

(14) So then **do** stand your ground, having girded your loins with truth and having put on the breastplate of righteousness, (15) and having shod your feet with the [shoes] of preparation for [sharing] the gospel of peace.

Ephesians 6:14-15

Keeping our spiritual balance is definitely a part of alertness. Keeping our hearts stayed on the Lord and focused on Him and His truth keeps us alert and keeps us safe. Allowing our minds and interests to drift to other things is the definition of a lack of alertness. We do not need to – nor should we – be terrified at the prospect of attack; rather we are confident in the Lord's deliverance from all attacks. But with equal importance we cannot allow ourselves to allow the Lord and His truth to slip from our thinking. Between apoplexy of anticipation and complete and total disregard for the dangers all believers encounter in this life is the "sweet spot" of confident, calm, joyous and peaceful trust in Him, hope in Him and love for Him. A good daily regimen of Bible reading, Bible study, accessing good Bible teaching, and other such things that are conducive to the building up of a constant communion with our Savior (such are prayer, contemplation of psalms, deliberately witnessing to others in all we say and do, and making a point of seeing His hand in all things, etc.) will contribute to being alert to the trials and tests that can befall us suddenly and unexpectedly – whereas the opposite is also true.

For man also does not know his time:

Like fish taken in a cruel net,

Like birds caught in a snare,

So the sons of men are snared in an evil time,
When it falls suddenly upon them.
Ecclesiastes 9:12 NKJV

(5) You will not be afraid of terror by night, nor of the arrow that flies by day, (6) nor of the pestilence that goes about in the darkness, nor of the plague that destroys at noonday.
(7) A thousand may fall at your side, even ten thousand at your right hand – you it will not approach.
Psalm 91:5-7

(25) Have no fear of sudden disaster or of the ruin that overtakes the wicked, (26) for the Lord will be at your side and will keep your foot from being snared.
Proverbs 3:25-26 NIV

Sudden attacks and disasters do occur but the believer who is stayed upon the Lord has no need to fear them. What we do have need of is alertness. Therefore when bad things begin to happen, the very first thing we need to do is to do what any good soldier or Marine on guard duty would do: sound the alarm. In other words, we need to be alert enough to our physical circumstances and more particularly to our spiritual ones so as to ever be able to connect the two. In this way, we will realize that physical attacks, disappointments, tests of any and every sort, have for us a spiritual dimension which is all important. Since we are being targeted by the evil one because we belong to Christ, it is our Lord who is really the issue and we can be assured that He will take care of it, whatever "it" may be. Our job is to recognize this critical truth and to wait patiently for His deliverance, not giving into panic or fear because of such sudden attacks or counter-attacks.

In such cases, one very common mistake is the tendency on the part of certain believers to interpret all contrary developments as divine discipline for sin. Failing to recognize that God does discipline us when we fall out of our proper mode of conduct is a problem, of course, because we need to be aware that He is always training us like a good coach, like the perfect Father He is, so that we may do better day by day. But not all trouble is discipline, clearly. And if we wrongly analyze the situation and attribute testing to God disciplining us this will have two very negative side-effects: 1) it will be terrible for our spiritual morale (as being punished when we are in fact not due any punishment); and 2) it will confuse the issue when we are disciplined (and all are disciplined from time to time: Heb.12:8). Generally speaking, discipline for those who are doing their best to walk with Christ is light compared to testing – and should also be very obvious as coming for equally obvious and serious offenses; whereas testing is generally quite difficult – which is what makes it a test. We need to take the former with the solace of Paul's words in Hebrews chapter twelve as proof of our sonship, and the latter with great confidence that since we are being tested and suffering for Christ, it is for His glory and He will see us through. And by all means we need to avoid confusing the two. A particularly dangerous form of said confusion is to attribute trouble to sins and failures long past. But God has already dealt with us on these in those long past times, and He is not revisiting them on us now (wrongly thinking this was Job's greatest mistake: Job 13:26); therefore we need to avoid revisiting them

as well, "forgetting what lies behind" (Phil.3:13).

Whenever we are aware of our emotions roiling within us, this is a sure sign of trouble, usually occurring as a reaction to attack. Whether we are experiencing anger or fear, the two opposite and most prevalent flanking emotions which tend to pull or push us off our spiritual course (often directing our gaze backwards and/or towards some false form of security), rapidly taking objective stock of our true situation will be necessary to do so that we may "rally" our hearts through the truth we have learned and believed.

Be strong and courageous. Do not be afraid or terrified because of them, for the Lord your God goes with you; he will never leave you nor forsake you.
Deuteronomy 31:6 NIV

5. Meeting the Threat

Once we are aware that we are under attack – through proper alertness – it is important to meet the threat immediately and aggressively. In worldly combat, that would mean taking cover (defense) and returning fire (offense). In spiritual terms our faith in the Lord is our shield of defense (Eph.6:16; cf. Ps.91:4; 115:9-11); and the Word of God is our sword of attack (Eph.6:17; Heb.4:12). Therefore our response to any temptation or testing always has to do with the Word of God, reminding ourselves of the important truths we have learned and believed and deploying them against the proximate threat we are encountering.

Are we tempted to fall into sin? But we believe that the Lord is right here beside us and inside of us. If we saw Him with fleshly eyes, would we dare to err? How much more so should we refrain seeing Him with spiritual eyes enlightened by the Holy Spirit who indwells us!

The fear of the Lord is pure, enduring forever.
Psalm 19:9a NIV

Are we tested beyond what we think we can bear so as to despair? But we believe that the Lord loves us and cares for us, and that He has already died in our place for us. Since dying for a single one of our sins is worth more than the entire world from beginning to end to an incalculable degree, how much more should we not understand then that He who died for every single one of our sins – and for the sins of the entire world – is our present help in trouble and will see us through this trial, no matter how seemingly desperate!

(1b) God is our refuge and strength, an ever-present help in trouble. (2) Therefore we will not fear, though the earth give way and the mountains fall into the heart of the sea, (3) though its waters roar and foam and the mountains quake with their surging.
Psalm 46:1b-3 NIV

When confronted with an impossible situation of absolute loss and no solution, David did not allow himself to fall into despair or the paralysis of inaction; rather, "he encouraged himself in

the Lord", finding strength by relying in the One who is strong who loves us and cares for us – and did so enough to die for us (1Sam.30:6) – and the Lord delivered him in a wondrous way and in total despite all expectations (1Sam.30:7-19).

When anxiety was great within me, your consolation brought me joy.
Psalm 94:19 NIV

So when the assaults of the evil one come, we need to remember – in absolute faith – that the Lord has it all in hand, and that the real battle is not the one outside, whether seen or unseen, but the one on our inside. For the real contest is between us and ourselves, between the spiritual "us" who wish to please the Lord and the carnal "us" who wish to please ourselves – which in an environment of temptation means giving in, and in an environment of testing means despairing, whining, and running away. But if we would trust the Lord, both to follow Him faithfully (so as to resist temptation) and to trust Him implicitly (so as to confidently persevere through whatever tests may come), we would always have victory in the One who has won the ultimate victory for us on Calvary's cross.

(10) Then I heard a loud voice in heaven say: "Now have come the salvation and the power and the kingdom of our God, and the authority of his Messiah. For the accuser of our brothers and sisters, who accuses them before our God day and night, has been hurled down. (11) They triumphed over him by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony; they did not love their lives so much as to shrink from death."
Revelation 12:10-11 NIV

Rather than subjecting us to things we cannot endure (which God never does: 1Cor.10:13), the Lord works with us to build us up in our faith so as to pass ever more challenging tests, until our faith, small as a mustard seed when we began, grows up into a mighty tree which fills the entire space of our heart, capable of enduring anything the Lord may ask of us, even martyrdom, should that be His will.

Finally on this point, we have to remember that this is a spiritual war in which we are engaged. And as in secular war, there is no perfect plan, no perfect operation, no battle without pain and trouble and casualties. Being tempted and tested is not enjoyable, but we can and should and must find the joy and hold onto the peace our Lord has given us as the spiritual heritage of those who love Him – so that we may stay fixated on the hope of all the eternal blessings ahead. Our Lord knows very well that we are not perfectly prepared (no one ever has been except for Him), are likely not to fight a perfect fight under pressure (no one ever has except for Him), have limited time, insufficient resources and finite strength (but these are sufficient for what He asks of us just as they were sufficient for Him). He does not hold such things against us, but He works with us perfectly as the perfect Lord and Master to help us not only to pass the test and overcome the temptation, but to learn and grow from the experience so as to be even more effective the next time out. He helps us – if we are willing to be helped; but if we are not willing or are insufficiently so, then it is a fair point that it is hardly fair to blame Him when we are put off balance by some test or temptation which, if we had met it with more faith and truth and

discipline rather than with less, we would surely have handled much better. Let us then resolve to be more willing and to do better at believing and applying the truth in all testing and temptation, having faith if we do, in spite of our insufficiencies, that there is no limit to the power of God – for those who do not limit their response to it.

If the ax is dull and its edge unsharpened, more strength is needed, but skill will bring success.

Ecclesiastes 10:10 NIV

6. Calling for Support

And call upon me in the day of trouble: I will deliver thee, and thou shalt glorify me.

Psalms 50:15 KJV

The most distinguishing characteristic of the American armed forces in modern times has been their abundance of fire support and a (felt by some to be excessive) reliance thereon. But while in the secular analogy there can be such a thing as an over reliance of firepower from above, the same is absolutely not the case in spiritual warfare. The more we come to recognize our utter helplessness and hopelessness without the Lord, and the more we come as a result to rely on Him as our "ever present help in times of trouble" (Ps.46:1), the better for us in every aspect of our spiritual walk, and especially in times of unexpected attack. In fact, the very *first* thing we should do when we see trouble coming is to call upon the Lord for deliverance, and we should keep doing so until the trouble has passed by. All one needs to do to verify this as a correct procedure is to read through the book of Psalms and note how David, one of the greatest men of God of all times, was constantly and continually calling upon the Lord for help – and these psalms only represent the prayers he was inspired and led to write down for us (there were surely very many more).

So do not fear, for I am with you; do not be dismayed, for I am your God. I will strengthen you and help you; I will uphold you with my righteous right hand.

Isaiah 41:10 NIV

We are not to call for help in fear. We are to call for help in absolute confidence of the Lord's perfect faithfulness, responding to that perfection in solid trust and faith that He does love us, is paying attention to our plight, and will most certainly help us.

(3) He will not let your foot slip— he who watches over you will not slumber; (4) indeed, he who watches over Israel will neither slumber nor sleep. (5) The Lord watches over you— the Lord is your shade at your right hand; (6) the sun will not harm you by day, nor the moon by night. (7) The Lord will keep you from all harm— he will watch over your life; (8) the Lord will watch over your coming and going both now and forevermore.

Psalms 121:3-8 NIV

Asking for help is best done with a proper understanding of the fight we are in, of course. If we

ask whenever we find ourselves under any sort of pressure for the immediate relief of that pressure, we have to understand that such might not be the Father's will. After all, He is training us to be able to bear up under ever greater loads, and that training cannot happen unless we are made to have to exert a little patience and perseverance, "waiting on the Lord" for His perfect deliverance in His perfect timing.

Now this is the confidence that we have in Him, that if we ask anything according to His will, He hears us.

1st John 5:14 NKJV

If it be the will of God for us to have to be delivered **through** any given trial, then prayer for immediate deliverance **from** the trouble we are encountering will be answered according to the will of God rather than our personal preference (cf. Ps.145:18). That does not mean that we should not ask for help – far from it! Indeed, it means that even if we are not understanding the situation we are facing with the perfect perspective of heaven (and there are many reasons why that might be the case, not all of which reflect badly on our spiritual application), even so our prayers will be heard.

In the same way, the Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us through wordless groans.

Romans 8:26 NKJV

Spiritual warfare requires – for all who would fight it effectively – the discarding of any reluctance to pray for "fire support" when the enemy attacks.

Let us therefore come **boldly** to the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy and find grace to help in time of need.

Hebrews 4:16 NKJV

As believer priests (1Pet.2:5; 2:9; Rev.1:6; 5:10; 20:6; cf. Heb.10:21), those with direct access to that throne of grace through virtue of being in Christ and belonging to Him (Rom.5:2; Eph.2:18; 3:12), we need to take full advantage of our Lord's encouragement to ask for help on each and every occasion of need (Jn.14:13-14; 15:7; 15:16; 16:23-24; 16:26).

(18) The Lord is near to all who call on him, to all who call on him in truth. (19) He fulfills the desires of those who fear him; he hears their cry and saves them.

Psalms 145:18-19 NKJV

7. Intense Spiritual Combat:

It needs to be said that beyond the daily shot and shell of the unremitting spiritual warfare that all believers have to fight through here in the devil's world, there are also times of particularly and unusually intense testing and attack which befall positive believers from time to time. This beyond-the-ordinary test we have had occasion to study before in the Peter series, dubbing it,

following biblical usage, "personal tribulation". These are major offensives against us on Satan's part – in the manner of his attack on Job – rather than merely the normal daily harassment of which we all have a part.

Beloved, don't be alarmed at the fiery ordeal which has befallen you and is putting you to the test – as if something out of the ordinary were happening to you.

1st Peter 4:12

Three things to note at the outset of this discussion, all of which are causes for encouragement, are that 1) these are exceptional situations and they do not last forever – it may seem so when we are "under the gun", but we may take courage in the knowledge that, as with Job's testing, all such major assaults eventually end, and in a blessed conclusion (Job 42:10-17); 2) such extreme tests only come the way of mature believers, so that, as was the case with Job, tests of this sort are divine compliments to us for our faithfulness in spiritual growth, progress and production (although it will hardly seem so at the time absent a careful maintaining of the heavenly perspective); and 3) as with all tests, even these extreme ones are bearable (1Cor.10:13) – a biblical fact that we most certainly need to hold onto at such times.

So mature believers in particular need to have an awareness that such intense testing does exist and may come upon us at any time, so as not to be immediately panicked and discouraged when it does happen. But we do not need to be looking over our shoulders, worrying about impending testing: God has all these things in hand, and we know that in His perfect faithfulness we will be delivered from whatever may betide.

(1) Now it came to pass after these things that God tested Abraham, and said to him, "Abraham!" And he said, "Here I am." (2) Then He said, "Take now your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains of which I shall tell you." (3) So Abraham rose early in the morning and saddled his donkey, and took two of his young men with him, and Isaac his son; and he split the wood for the burnt offering, and arose and went to the place of which God had told him.

Genesis 22:1-3 NKJV

Who among us can honestly say that given such a charge we would carry it out immediately and without quibbling? But the great believers of the Bible are great for a reason: their deep faith in and trust of the Lord. Abraham was one of the greatest, and we see something of the truth he deployed to meet this awesome test in the book of Hebrews:

(17) By faith Abraham offered up Isaac when he was tested, and was on the point of offering up [in sacrifice] his one and only son, the one who [about whom he] had received the promises, (18) about whom it had been said, "In Isaac shall your seed be called", (19) [for Abraham was] reckoning that God was able to raise [him] from the dead, whence (i.e., from the dead) he did receive [Isaac] back even metaphorically (i.e., Isaac was as good as dead but God delivered him through the substitute of the ram, a type of Jesus

Christ).

Hebrews 11:17-19

Great faith means trusting the Lord even when things look dark and impossible, but faith does not mean being oblivious to the truth. Quite the opposite. The truth is the living water which nourishes the seed of faith and causes it to grow from mustard seed to massive tree. Such was the case for Abraham. Unlike so many believers, we see from this passage that he was absolutely convinced of certain key truths about our Lord. He knew that nothing was impossible for the Lord – so He could easily resurrect Isaac. He knew that the Lord is always faithful and never ever tells us anything but the absolute truth – so His promise about Isaac being Abraham's heir would stand even in the face of Isaac's death, even if that meant bringing him back to life in a miraculous way. And he knew that the Lord is perfect in every way, perfect in character, perfect in faithfulness, working everything out together for good at all times for those who love Him. So Abraham knew that whatever was about to happen had to be for good since the Lord was the One who was commanding it.

This reasoning, **godly** reasoning, goes against everything we as human beings are hard-wired to think reinforced by our grim experiences in this evil world. But God is above this world, God created this world, and God is the One who is going to destroy it and remake it in perfect righteousness. If we are going to survive our time down here with faith intact – and if we are going to pass the exceptional testing which comes to those who have advanced to spiritual maturity – we are going to have to adopt Abraham's attitude and follow in his footsteps. We are going to have to learn in detail just who the Lord is, and we are going to have to **believe** what we learn about Him and His perfection down to the depths of our heart. We are going to have to trust Him with all our hearts – and that is only possible if we really do know Him thoroughly in the depth of our hearts.

If we do learn who the Lord really is and commit ourselves to trusting in His perfect faithfulness no matter what we see, hear or feel, there will never be a test that we cannot pass. Not because we are anything or because we have any particular strength. Quite the opposite. We will pass the test because we are trusting entirely in the Lord and His goodness, and not relying on ourselves or our resources at all.

And when Daniel was lifted from the den, no wound was found on him, because he had **trusted** in his God.

Daniel 6:23 NIV

(9) And He said to me, "My grace/favor is sufficient for you, because My power is brought to perfection [only] in your weakness". (10) Therefore I rejoice in my weaknesses, in the abuses against me, in these pressures, in persecutions and disasters on account of Christ, for when I am weak, then I am strong.

2nd Corinthians 12:9-10

Put another way, to the extent that there is something we can do, to that extent we are not dealing

with a "maturity test". Only when the situation is truly impossible, when there is nothing more we can do, when we are forced to rely entirely on Him whom we love, only then is our faith, its quality and resoluteness, really put to the test. There is nothing impossible for our Lord, and we believe that He is perfectly faithful, that He loves us, and that He is working everything out together for our absolute good. The question is, will we respond with faith and trust to that truth as Abraham and Daniel and so many of the great believers of the Bible did when put to the test? We can and we shall – if we are consistent about learning the truth and putting it into practice day by day, with every small test building our confidence in Him for the big ones to come, growing closer to the Lord through that truth which is the very thinking of Jesus Christ (1Cor.2:16).

For he who serves Christ in these things is acceptable to God and approved by men.
Romans 14:18 NKJV

Greet Apelles, approved in Christ. Greet those who are of the household of Aristobulus.
Romans 16:10 NKJV

For there must also be factions among you, that those who are approved may be recognized among you.
1st Corinthians 11:19 NKJV

For not he who commends himself is approved, but whom the Lord commends.
2nd Corinthians 10:18 NKJV

Be diligent to present yourself approved to God, a worker who does not need to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth.
2nd Timothy 2:15 NKJV

(6) In anticipation of this ultimate deliverance, your joy overflows, though at present it may be your lot to suffer for a time through various trials to the end that your faith may be shown to be genuine. (7) But your faith, when proven genuine in the crucible of life, will result in praise, glory and honor for you at the revelation of Jesus Christ. For this [validation process] has a greater benefit [for you] than [is true in the case of] gold, which, while it is also proved by fire, ultimately perishes (e.g., in contrast to the eternal rewards of faith proved genuine through testing).
1st Peter 1:6-7

The words approved and proven in the verses above all come from the same Greek root which has to do with the assaying of refined precious metals to demonstrate their value and genuineness. It is beyond question the case that God knows everything ahead of time. The Father's plan was ordained before this world began, and our Lord Jesus Christ knows everything we think and everything we choose even before we do so – and did in eternity past. God certainly knew that Abraham's faith was solid, that Daniel would trust Him, that Job would stand the test – and only falter under the remonstrances of his false comforters. God knows all. But it

is only just and fair for Him through our response to Him to demonstrate to everyone – to men and angels both and also to ourselves – that our faith truly is valid and valuable, "more precious than gold", and worthy of great eternal reward.

Blessed is the man who stands firm in testing, because when he has been [tested and] approved he will receive the crown of life which [God] has promised to all who love Him.

James 1:12

Have no fear of what you are about to suffer. Behold, the devil is about to throw some of you into prison to test you, and you will have tribulation for ten days. Demonstrate faithfulness unto death, and I will give you the crown of life.

Revelation 2:10

As these verses indicate, exceptional testing is a requirement for gaining the second of the three crowns, the crown of life, the reward that testifies to the success of a mature believer not only in having faith but in having *sufficient* faith, truth and spiritual resilience to bear up under suffering and testing that goes beyond the basic level. This is something important to keep in mind if and when we are called upon to negotiate particularly difficult personal tribulation. Without such a test, we would not be able to demonstrate sufficiently the depth and quality of our faith and our commitment to the Lord, nor to glorify Him in this special way of trusting Him in spite of all we are seeing, hearing and experiencing, trusting in His truth and being confident of His deliverance, even if "the mountains fall into the heart of the sea" (Ps.46:2).

(7) But we have this treasure in earthen vessels, that the excellence of the power may be of God and not of us. (8) We are hard-pressed on every side, yet not crushed; we are perplexed, but not in despair; (9) persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed – (10) always carrying about in the body the dying of the Lord Jesus, that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our body.

2nd Corinthians 4:7-10 NKJV

For this present light affliction of ours is working out for us an eternal weight of glory beyond any possible estimation.

2nd Corinthians 4:17

Some [of these great believers of the past] were tortured, refusing release, that they might obtain a better resurrection (i.e., worth more to them than their lives; cf. Ps.63:3). Others endured ridicule and beatings, and even chains and imprisonment. They were stoned, sawed in half, killed by the sword. They went about in sheepskins and goat hides. They were deprived, persecuted, abused. The world was not worthy of them. They wandered the deserts and the mountains, making their homes in caves and fissures in the earth. And through their faith, all of them became witnesses [to the world] (lit., "were martyred") . . .

Hebrews 11:35b-39a

So whether we call it "testing" (as in Abraham's case: Gen.22:1; Heb.11:17; cf. Ps.66:10; 81:7; Is.48:10; 1Pet.4:12; Rev.2:10), "personal tribulation" (as I have done in the Peter series; cf. Acts 14:22; 1Thes.3:2-4), or "sharing the sufferings of Christ" (Rom.8:17; 2Cor.1:5; Phil.1:29-30; 3:10; Col.1:24; 2Tim.2:12; 1Pet.4:12-13; cf. Gal.6:17), or any of the many other scriptural representations of what we are terming here "intense spiritual combat", neither the fact of such hardships with which mature believers are faced from time to time nor their absolute necessity for our growth and qualification for great eternal rewards can be doubted – by those who accept what the Bible has to say about the matter, for the Bible is replete with examples of such suffering . . . as well as of encouragement and perspective to endure it. What is needful here is to consider the scripturally indicated methods and resources for coping with this sort of extreme trial so as to do so successfully to the glory of our Savior and our own satisfaction in spiritual victory.

a. Comfort and Encouragement

(3) Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, (4) who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves have received from God. (5) For just as the sufferings of Christ flow over into our lives, so also through Christ our comfort overflows.

2nd Corinthians 1:3-5 NIV

The Lord does not make us go through the fire alone. We have the comfort and encouragement of the Holy Spirit at all times, especially when the "sufferings of Christ" overflow into our lives (*n.b.*, the word translated "comfort" in the passage above is the Greek *paraklesis* and means both "comfort" and "encouragement"). It is important to remember this, that we have the Spirit, that we have His comfort/encouragement, that the Lord is with us in the trial, so as to allow Him and His truth to minister to us as we walk through the valley of the death shadow. His rod and staff will comfort us, but only if we allow it to happen by recalling this truth of His ever present comfort and blessed encouragement. This requires looking at things from the divine viewpoint, from the heavenly perspective, through the Lord's eyes, rather than our own. All mature believers possess this ability in principle through our understanding of the truth. Applying it step by step through various fiery trials is the difficult part – but it is also an essential part. And it is not going to happen without conscious effort. We have to take pains to refute in our hearts the feelings of bitterness and despair that always well up when life and the world are treating us unfairly, when our burdens seem too heavy to bear. That is the time to turn our thoughts to the Lord, to welcome and aggressively embrace the comfort and encouragement He longs for us to have through the Spirit who indwells us.

(15) For you have not received a spirit of slavery [leading you] back to [a state of] fear [of damnation], but you have the Spirit who has entered you into God's family, in whom we cry, "Abba! My Father!" (16) For the Spirit Himself testifies to our spirit that we are God's children. (17) And if we are God's children, then we are also His heirs, even fellow heirs of Christ – that is if we have indeed suffered with Him so that we might also be

glorified together with Him. (18) For I do not consider these present hardships in any way comparable to the glory destined to be revealed for us.
Romans 8:15-18

b. Eternal Rewards

For whoever wishes to draw nearer to God must believe that He exists, and [must believe] that He will reward those who earnestly seek Him.
Hebrews 11:6b

Our efforts for the Lord in spiritual growth, progress and production are not in vain (1Cor.15:58). We know that we have a treasury in heaven filled with ineffably wonderful things which correspond to our good performance for Jesus Christ as in bearing up under exceptional testing, so that is where our heart and our desire is set (Matt.6:21; Lk.12:34). We are running toward the goal to gain that eternal prize of a good reward (Phil.3:14), and we know that nothing here on earth can compare to it (Rom.8:18). Exceptional tribulation for testing being absolutely essential for our qualification for exceptional eternal rewards (Jas.1:2-4; 1:12), we do not lose heart in these adversities (2Cor.4:1; 4:16), but press on in sure and certain confidence that the Lord is working even these troubles out together for our good in every way possible (Rom.8:28; cf. Gen.50:20), regardless of what our eyes, ears and feelings may tell us to the contrary (2Cor.4:17; 5:7). For if only we remain committed and refuse to be wearied by exceptional testing of the sort we are considering here, we shall reap a wondrous crop and receive a glorious reward from our Savior Himself on that blessed day to come (Gal.6:9).

(5) He who, in spite of weeping, goes forth in resolution, carrying seed to sow, (6) will doubtless return rejoicing, bringing in his sheaves.
Psalm 126:5-6

c. Team Spirit

(1) Since then we too [like the believers of chapter 11] have such a large audience of witnesses surrounding us [both men and angels], let us put off every hindrance – especially whatever sins habitually affect us – and run with endurance the race set before us, (2) turning our gaze unto Jesus, the originator and completer of our faith, who, for the joy set before Him, endured the shame of the cross, treating it with despise, and took His seat at the right hand of the throne of God. (3) Keep in mind all the terrible opposition He endured against Himself at the hands of sinful men, so as not to grow sick at heart and give up.
Hebrews 12:1-3

We are not alone in this fight, in this trial of exceptional testing we have been called to face. God is with us – always. Jesus indwells us, as does the Holy Spirit. And we are part of a team, the most elite team in world history selected personally and individually by God Himself in eternity past, the Body of Christ, the elect assembly or Church of Christ. Our names are written

in heaven and we stand to win a "new name" commemorating our heroism for our brothers and sisters in Christ on an eternal roster even more impressive than David's list of "mighty men" (Rev.2:17; 3:12). We Christians are all "one" with each other and one with Him who redeemed us in ways and to a degree we can scarcely appreciate this side of heaven.

Keeping in mind that we are not lone actors but part of a worldwide band of brothers and sisters all striving for the same Lord and for the success of the entire body is critical to maintaining a good attitude under the pressure of a fiery trial (1Cor.12:26; Eph.4:16; Col.2:19). We are *not* alone. We have brothers and sisters who care about us, who love us, and who are praying for us, just as we pray for them. We are *not* alone. We have a Lord who loves us, who died for us, and who is in us to help us to "will and to do" (Phil.2:13). And we also know of believers who have or who are – or who most likely will – be enduring similar significant testing (1Pet.5:9). We see how they handled the pressure and we rejoice with their successes (and seek to emulate them to give an equally good witness); and we take note of their failures too – and endeavor not to make the same mistakes – so that we might be a comfort and an encouragement to others and not a stumbling block for lack of demonstrating sufficient faith. There is a "fellowship of the fiery furnace", and like the three friends of Daniel, if we are walking with the Lord, the flames cannot touch us.

d. Joy and Peace

(2) Brothers, when you are being beset with all manner of trials, take pains to be joyful.

(3) For you should keep in mind that this testing of your faith develops perseverance. (4) So let your perseverance develop fully, that you may become fully mature and entitled to a full reward, having been found lacking in no respect.

James 1:2-4

It is not always possible to be overjoyed, especially when we are under the pressure of serious testing, and there is a time to grieve as well as to rejoice (Eccl.3:4; cf. Rom.12:15). But it is true that underlying even our deepest grief, the mature Christian has a reservoir of residual happiness based upon all of the blessing that are his/hers in Jesus Christ our Savior. Therefore whatever we are called upon to endure, we can at least abide in the peace of mind and heart which our Lord has bequeathed us (Jn.14:27), even if joy must follow along behind for a while – even as in good times when we are naturally joyous about all the good things the Lord has done for us here and now, peace follows along as the underlying foundation of our joy.

(1) Do not let your heart be troubled. You believe in God [the Father] – believe also in Me. (2) There are many rooms in my Father's house. If there were not, I would have told you. For I am going in order to prepare a place for you. (3) And if I go and prepare a place for you, I shall come again and take you to Myself, so that where I am, you may be also.

John 14:1-3

Jesus Christ is our supreme joy, and the prospect of being with Him face to face forever is joyous

beyond expression. In times of exceptional trouble, therefore, we are wise to respond to our Lord's command above – "do not let your hearts be troubled". For we are to a large degree in charge of and responsible for what goes on in our hearts. The world, the flesh and the devil put pressure on our inner person and seek to "trouble it"; but we can counter this pressure by careful and thoughtful consideration of the eternal life, eternal home, and eternal relationship with our Lord and with each other that belongs to us more surely than tomorrow's sunrise.

Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds.
James 1:2 ESV

This is not the way the natural man thinks; this is not the way the world thinks. And even mature believers do not generally fall into this pattern of thinking without a conscious struggle. Turning trouble and hardship into joy in our hearts is not the stuff of the spiritually immature and requires concerted, godly effort on the part of the mature. Earthly philosophies and self-help systems attempt this sort of thing by encouraging self-deception, but for we who are believers, the truth really *is* that all exceptional testing is a cause for joy. That is not what our eyes and ears tell us – and that is most certainly not what our emotions tell us. But it is what the Bible tells us.

We should understand the divine logic of this principle too. If we are being put to the test, that means we have actually gotten somewhere in our quest to honor Jesus Christ with our lives. If we find ourselves in the midst of a fiery trial, that means that our Lord has found us worthy enough and strong enough to endure it. If we are undergoing maturity testing of this type, it certainly means that we are spiritually mature, and that we are ready to advance to the next level. It means that we are being assayed by the Lord to prove our worthiness to receive the crown of life. It means that we are being given the opportunity to glorify Him by our good response to the test, by the good witness we are providing, by showing the world of men and angels both that we believe Him and trust Him and His promises more than what we see and hear and feel.

This is not at all a trick of mental jiu jitsu – as false human systems seek to employ. No, this is an aggressive appreciation of the spiritual realities we say we believe, and exceptional testing gives us the opportunity to demonstrate that we not only say we believe these important truths – about the faithfulness of our Savior and all of His many promises to us – but that we really *do* believe them . . . and are willing to act on them, come what may. Victory of this kind does not come to the physically strong or the naturally courageous. Spiritual victory, overcoming the world and our fleshly selves when the pressure is on so as to stand strong for the Lord in spite of everything, is born of a recognition of our nothingness and God's "everythingness". To persevere in maturity tests of this sort requires us to recognize that we are completely helpless and hopeless without Him, and are therefore entirely dependent upon Him. That is the place of true humility, and that is the place of strength and courage that comes from absolute trust in Him and not in ourselves or in anything we might have or be able to say or do.

(9) But he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me. (10) That is why, for Christ's sake, I delight in

weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong.

2nd Corinthians 12:9-10 NIV

(12) I know how to handle humiliation; I also know how to handle prosperity. I have learned by experience in each and every way how to handle being abundantly provided for and being impoverished, being in prosperity and being in a state of deprivation. (13) I have the strength to endure all [extremes] in the One who empowers me to do so.

Philippians 4:12-13

For the mature believer, our strength is His strength, and our weakness is the place where that strength is perfected, because it is the very impossibility of relying on ourselves that forces us into the complete reliance on Him necessary to glorify Him in the day of trouble.

(3) And not only this, but let us glory in our tribulations, knowing that tribulation produces patience, (4) and patience produces proven character, and proven character produces hope – (5) and this hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured out in our hearts through the Holy Spirit given to us (cf. 2Tim.1:7).

Romans 5:3-5

e. Everything is Always Over

For his anger endureth but a moment; in his favour is life: weeping may endure for a night, but joy cometh in the morning.

Psalms 30:5 KJV

Even divine discipline comes to an end (Lam.4:22). How much more would this principle then not be so in the case of suffering which is undeserved and meant to demonstrate our faith?

Now the Lord blessed the latter days of Job more than his beginning.

Job 42:12a NKJV

We must take pains when we find ourselves "under the gun" of extreme testing not to allow ourselves to be mentally defeated by the satanic lie that "this will never end". Everything always ends. And the Lord always brings such testing to a good result, as He did with Job. Every day has enough evil unto itself (Matt.6:34), so we are not required to even consider tomorrow, except to hold fast to the certain hope of deliverance that is the portion of all who love the Lord Jesus Christ with an incorruptible love (Eph.6:24). As Christians of stalwart faith, those who have pledged ourselves to follow the Lamb wherever He leads us (Rev.14:4), it behooves us not only to endure exceptional testing when it comes our way, but to do so with a spirit of confidence and trust in Him that is not artificial but based upon the inner power of the Word of God believed, that in so doing we may prove an inspiration to all of our brothers and sisters who are watching our witness.

(17) But the Lord stood with me and strengthened me, so that the message might be preached fully through me, and that all the Gentiles might hear. Also I was delivered out of the mouth of the lion. (18) And the Lord will deliver me from every evil work and preserve me for His heavenly kingdom. To Him be glory forever and ever. Amen!

2nd Timothy 4:17-18 NKJV

f. Fellowship with Jesus Christ in the Fiery Furnace

(25) Then King Nebuchadnezzar was astonished; and he rose in haste and spoke, saying to his counselors, "Did we not cast three men bound into the midst of the fire?" They answered and said to the king, "True, O king." (26) "Look!" he answered, "I see four men loose, walking in the midst of the fire; and they are not hurt, and the form of the fourth is like the Son of God."

Daniel 3:24-25 NKJV

When Daniel's three friends were bound hand and foot and thrown into the fire to die, our Lord did not allow them to perish. And not only did He save them, but He blessed them with a special time of sweet fellowship with Himself amid the flames that were not allowed to harm them in the least. So it is with us – or can be, at least. When we are under pressure, that is the time when fellowship with the Lord is the most necessary and also in some ways the easiest to achieve. That is because when we are under pressure we recognize our weakness and our need for Him all the more urgently. This should lead us to take all measures necessary – extra time in prayer, special time of thinking about Him, more intense study of the Word, more focused concentration on Him and the truth at all times – to make this happen. It will not happen on its own, but it is true that if we apply the truth we have learned aggressively and consistently, the times of greatest trouble can be the times of our closest walk with the Lord – and the times of greatest spiritual victory.

(9) But he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me. (10) That is why, for Christ's sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong.

2nd Corinthians 12:9-10 NIV

Seeing our dear Lord Jesus Christ with the eyes of faith is therefore more important than ever when we find ourselves under exceptional testing. We must remember that we belong to Him. We must remember that He cares for us. We must remember that we are being persecuted on His account, and glory and rejoice in that fact rather than giving ourselves over to complaining and despair.

"Remember this principle I taught you: A servant is not greater than his master. If they persecuted Me, they will also persecute you."

John 15:20

In short, in times of intense tribulation, we need to see our Lord more clearly than ever in the understanding of the fact that we are representing Him, and that many are watching to see how we will handle the test as His ambassadors. If we make up our minds to walk through this fire hand in hand with Him, we will not only pass the test, but we will find that it is precisely in the midst of the fire, in the midst of the fight that we see Jesus the most clearly. This is courage. True Christian courage. Not the physical courage of the world but entirely the opposite. We are courageous because we know very well that we are helpless and powerless in the face of the assaults of the world and its ruler. We have no power at all. But our Lord is omnipotent. So we have courage born of true humility. Those who have exceptional physical courage, whose exploits in this world we admire, will, given enough pressure, break and plumb the depths of fear. But we cannot be broken because our courage is based upon acknowledging our absolute weakness and helplessness so that we rely instead on His absolute power, love, goodness and grace. Those who have true faith such as this face the fiery trial with courageous humility – a complete lack of arrogance which finds instead its bravery in a complete and total reliance on the power and the love our of our dear Savior. We trust in Him though we are bound hand and foot. We trust in Him that He has the power to deliver us from the fire of the furnace, from the mire of the pit, from the lions' den. This is the place of fellowship in the fiery furnace, and this sort of close walk with the Lord can only be experienced in tribulation. And in this experience we have a Lord who walked this way before we did, and who sacrificed and suffered far beyond anything He asks of us:

(5) You too should have this attitude which Christ Jesus had. (6) Since He already existed in the very form of God, equality with God was [certainly] not something He thought He had to grasp for. (7) Yet in spite of this [co-equal divinity He already possessed], He deprived Himself of His status and took on the form of a slave, [and was] born in the likeness of men. (8) He humbled Himself, becoming obedient to the point of death, even [His] death on [the] cross [for us all]. (9) Therefore God exalted Him to the highest place and gave Him the Name that is above every name (10) that at the Name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth (11) and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord to the glory of God the Father.

Philippians 2:5-11

The end result of our Lord's endurance of the test of all tests is the Name above every name. If we will but follow Him and His example when the trouble surrounds us, not only will He bring us safely through as He always does in absolute faithfulness, but we will also share in the spoils of His victory.

"His master replied, 'Well done, good and faithful servant! You have been faithful with a few things; I will put you in charge of many things. Come and share your master's happiness!' "

Matthew 25:21 NIV

g. Anchored by Hope

(16) For men are accustomed to take oaths on the authority of something greater than they are, and there is absolutely no doubt about the fact that an oath is taken for the purpose of confirmation. (17) Just so God, out of a desire to make it abundantly clear to us, the heirs of His promise [after the pattern of Abraham's faith], that His will in this matter [of salvation and its resultant blessings] is unchangeable, guaranteed it with an oath (Gen.22:16-17), (18) so that through two unchangeable matters wherein it is impossible for God to prove false (i.e., His Word and His oath), we who have escaped [the wrath to come] and taken hold of *this hope* (i.e., of life eternal, resurrection and eternal reward) offered to us might have a strong basis for encouragement. (19) And *this hope* [truly] is what "*anchors*" our lives, so to speak: it is certain; it is solid; it penetrates beyond the [heavenly] veil into the [holy of holies], (20) where our vanguard, Jesus, has entered on our behalf, having become a high priest forever according to the order of Melchizedek.
Hebrews 6:16-20

As this passage in particular teaches, hope, in the Bible, is not a whimsical wish or a merely sought after possibility. Rather it is a certain expectation based upon the unbreakable promises of God Himself. We rest on a foundation of love, the love our Lord had for us that saw Him through the judgment on the cross whereby we are saved from death, darkness and damnation and thus love Him in return. And faith is the indestructible rope connecting our salvation in the Lord who loves us to the sure and certain hope which awaits us in heaven above. Resting in the love of Jesus Christ, let us then set our hearts on the glorious promises to come (Col.3:1-2), in complete faith that He who promised us is absolutely faithful, regardless of what we may have to suffer in this life before our glory is revealed (1Jn.3:2).

Not only this, but let us also boast in our tribulations, knowing that tribulation develops endurance, and endurance results in proven reliability, and that such reliability brings with it *hope* [of eternal reward].
Romans 5:3-4

Looking for that blessed hope, and the glorious appearing of the great God and our Saviour Jesus Christ.
Titus 2:13 KJV

Let us hold on without turning [to the right or to the left] to the *hope* we have professed – for the One who has promised us [eternal life] is faithful.
Hebrews 10:23

8. Recovering from Defeat:

(14) Therefore (going back to the race analogy of v.1), pick up those hands hanging slack at your side, put some strength back into your weak knees, (13) and make straight tracks for your feet, so that, [even though you fell down,] what you sprained might not be twisted completely out of joint, but might instead work its way back to health.
Hebrews 12:12-13

No one has ever run a perfect race. No one has ever fought a perfect fight. In spiritual terms, while we deeply desire to walk perfectly with our Lord at all times – and that is the standard to which we have been called – sinless perfection is something which even the most mature of believers will never achieve. The great believers of the Bible may have come close, but even they had feet of clay (and some of their more prominent lapses are recorded in scripture in part to assure us that this principle is true).

The fact of imperfection must not, however, be allowed to become a justification or rationale for sloppiness in our spiritual walk. Quite to the contrary, we ought to be humbled by the knowledge that "we all stumble much" (Jas.3:2), and for that very reason make it a top priority to defend against just such stumbling as far as we are able to do so. But even with our best effort, there will be times when we fail, for "all sin" (Rom.3:23). When we do fail, when we do sin, when we do fall into some bad pattern or fall out of our good pattern that has brought us to where we are in our spiritual advance, the advice given by Paul in the quote above should be embraced immediately and energetically: we need to get back up; we need to pull ourselves back together; and we need to get back into the race just as soon as is humanly possible. For nothing is worse than allowing sin to beget sin and torpor to beget torpor until we find ourselves in some terrible funk of spiritual free fall where one mistake leads to another in a vicious circle of retrogression. As the contemporary proverb goes, "when you find yourself in a hole, first – stop digging". This is good advice. If we are engaged in wrong doing of any kind, first, we need to stop it at once. That is the first principle of recovery from all spiritual defeats. To this most important of points, we add the following:

1) Confess to the Lord: Whatever we may have thought, said or done, however many times we have thought it, or said it, or done it, however long and however far our stumble has been, we are promised absolutely absolute forgiveness upon confession along with restoration of fellowship with the Father and the Son whom we love more than life itself (Ps.32:5; 1Jn.1:9; cf. Ps.51:1-19). We should make it a habit to confess immediately whenever we err. If we do make this our practice, we will find that we are less likely to turn a small stumble into a precipitous fall.

2) Accept God's Forgiveness: When we do confess, we must accept that God's promise to forgive us is true and that we have indeed been forgiven. The discipline we have received may continue – as when we forgive a penitent child without necessarily restoring his or her privileges immediately (in order to let the lesson sink in). But we are within our rights – and indeed it is really obligatory – to accept the glory and the warmth of our Lord's love and fellowship again, immediately after we turn back to Him and confess whatever we may have done that was offensive to Him (Lk.15:22-24).

3) Avoid Self-Loathing: For whatever reason, many believers are harder on themselves than the Lord is. He does discipline us, but in a loving way – as a father comports himself towards the son he loves (Heb.12:5-11). We need to remember that discipline is His job, not ours. It is a subtle form of arrogance to continue to mope around after confession, after having received God's forgiveness. Such pointless exercises in self-flagellation are at the least border-line

legalistic, gain no points with God, and only delay the believers return to the race and to the fight.

4) Reorient: Just as soon as we are back on our feet, we need to put ourselves mentally back into the race. From a spiritual point of view, that means remembering that we are very dear to our Savior, that the Father loves us with a perfect love, that this life is temporary, and that what is going on down here on planet earth is really only important in a lasting way in terms of its spiritual import. We need to reorient to the truth of why we are here: to please Jesus Christ; and to what we are about and have purposed to do: to grow up to spiritual maturity and to keep growing, to progress in our walk with the Lord and to keep progressing, and to help our brothers and sisters in His Church do likewise through the ministrations we are given to provide in their behalf – and to keep doing so might and main, all the way to the end. We need to remember to respond to the Spirit who is telling us this at all times as He reminds us that our Christian hope "does not disappoint" (Rom.5:5), because we know absolutely by faith that we are saved, that we have a perfect, eternal body in waiting for us, that we have a place in the New Jerusalem in the presence of the Lord we love forever, and that if we persevere in running this race we also have fantastic eternal rewards in store, the least of which is worth more than this entire, temporary world we now behold.

It should also be noted that long post-mortems following spiritual defeats serve no useful purpose and can often cause us to set our gaze looking backwards instead of forwards as we ought to be doing, but there are things we can do to reduce our vulnerability to future failures. After all, the evil one has all believers who are moving forward for the Lord in his sights, so that we can expect attacks similar to the one to which we succumbed to occur in the future as well:

1) We should "take the lesson", being determined not to repeat the same mistake (so as not to suffer the same or worse discipline). As the contemporary saw goes, insanity may be defined as doing the same thing over again and expecting a different result. Experience is only valuable if it is properly interpreted, remembered, and acted upon in the future; otherwise we are no more benefitted by it than Frederick the Great's famous mule.

(5) I acknowledged my sin to You, and my iniquity I have not hidden. I said, "I will confess my transgressions to the Lord," and You forgave the iniquity of my sin. Selah (6) For this cause everyone who is godly shall pray to You in a time when You may be found; Surely in a flood of great waters they shall not come near him. (7) You are my hiding place; You shall preserve me from trouble; You shall surround me with songs of deliverance. (8) *"I will instruct you and teach you in the way you should go; I will guide you with My eye.* (9) ***Do not be like the horse or like the mule, which have no understanding, which must be harnessed with bit and bridle, else they will not come near you.*** (10) Many sorrows shall be to the wicked; but he who trusts in the Lord, mercy shall surround him. (11) Be glad in the Lord and rejoice, you righteous; And shout for joy, all you upright in heart!

Psalm 32:5-11 NKJV (cf. Ps.51:1-17)

2) We should come to recognize our particular weaknesses and areas of particular temptation

(everyone has them because everyone has a sin nature). In so doing we may prudently avoid situations, circumstances, locations, stimuli, activities and people who are likely to lead us into temptation and increase the danger of our stumbling. We should take great pains to avoid anything that furnishes an opportunity for the "sin that easily besets" (Heb.12:1), whatever it may be in our individual case.

3) We should make great efforts to construct spiritually profitable priorities in our hearts and stay true to them.

But seek first the kingdom and His righteousness, and all these [other] things [you need] will be given to you in addition.

Matthew 6:33

Alternative priorities, seeking after, going after, lusting after "other things" which are not *the* first priority a Christian should have can be spiritually deadly to the extent to which they are allowed to replace, supplant or diminish our zeal for what is truly important. And it is essential to note that things which are manageable by some believers are toxic for others. This is true of things which are not necessarily in and of themselves sinful but which can lead to sin and to being seduced from the high road to Zion if given inordinate attention. That is, after all, the essence of idolatry, putting something else "before our face" in place of Jesus Christ and His truth (Ezek.14:4-8; 1Cor.5:11; Col.3:5). If we ever exalt any other desire or ambition or person or activity or purpose above the Lord and what He desires from us, we may be sure that spiritually we will soon be moving "backwards" after "another" instead of forward for Him (Ps.16:4).

4) We should avoid self-pity when we find ourselves under pressure. It is all too easy for believers to ask with Job "why, Lord?" Complaining is a natural human reaction to adverse events, but for believers, complaining is often difficult to separate from blaming God or finding fault with the way He is superintending our lives, and that is incredibly dangerous from a spiritual perspective (Ex.16:7; Num.14:27; 1Cor.10:9-11; Jude 1:16; cf. Phil.2:14-15; Jas.5:9).

Spiritual warfare is much more difficult than fighting a seen foe, and mastering ourselves on the inside is far more difficult than imposing some sort of external ascetic regimen – which is no doubt why many cults establish false systems of just such asceticism. But as Paul assures us, these are in fact "of no value against the indulgence of the flesh" (Col.3:23). Believers need to learn to be flexible on the non-essentials to the same degree that we are inflexible about the things that really matter. In defeat, believers who are quick to recover, confess, and move back immediately to a place of complete confidence in the Lord and a steadfast determination to do His will may find that the greatest victories sometimes come in the wake of spiritual defeat – when we do get back up again. So get back up again. And by all means avoid any erroneous thinking and emoting that tends to pile error upon error through pointless indulgence in feelings of guilt or a foolish perfectionism that assumes one stumble can end everything. Our salvation is not hanging by a thread, and neither is our spiritual progress. The former is as solid as our faith, and the latter as our faithfulness – which we mean to deploy and apply anew just as soon as we start to run this race again.

(38) For I am persuaded that neither death nor life, neither angelic nor human authorities, neither things present nor things to come, neither heavenly powers, (39) be they the highest [of the elect] or the lowest [of the fallen], nor any other created thing [on this earth] will be able to separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.
Romans 8:38-39

9. Spiritual Victory:

The end of all things is near. And all things in this world are evanescent and ephemeral. We who love Jesus Christ are merely sojourners on this earth, and we are looking for a city not built by human hands but created by the One we love more than life to bless us eternally. And we know that perseverance in this temporary fight, though we may have to trek through darkest night, will bring victory in the end, the sweet success of a life lived pleasing to the Lord, for He is our ultimate reward.

In all this we are decisively victorious through Him who loved us.
Romans 8:37

(54) And when this corruptible [body] puts on incorruption and this mortal [body] puts on immortality, then will be fulfilled this prophecy which has been written: "Death has been swallowed up in victory (Is.25:8). (55) Where is your victory, O death? Where is your stinger, O death (Hos.13:14)?" (56) Now the stinger of death is the sin [nature] (i.e., it produces our sin), and the power of sin is the Law (i.e., it reveals our sin). (57) But thanks be to God who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ!
1st Corinthians 15:54-57

For everyone who has been born from God overcomes the [devil's] world. And this is the victory that has overcome the [devil's] world: our faith [in Jesus Christ]! For who is the one who overcomes the [devil's] world except the one who believes that Jesus is the Son of God.
1st John 5:4-5

Whoever has ears, let them hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To the one who is victorious, I will give the right to eat from the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God.
Revelation 2:7 NIV

Whoever has ears, let them hear what the Spirit says to the churches. The one who is victorious will not be hurt at all by the second death.
Revelation 2:11 NIV

Whoever has ears, let them hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To the one who is victorious, I will give some of the hidden manna. I will also give that person a white stone with a new name written on it, known only to the one who receives it.
Revelation 2:17 NIV

To the one who is victorious and does my will to the end, I will give authority over the nations.

Revelation 2:26 NIV

The one who is victorious will, like them, be dressed in white. I will never blot out the name of that person from the book of life, but will acknowledge that name before my Father and his angels.

Revelation 3:5 NIV

The one who is victorious I will make a pillar in the temple of my God. Never again will they leave it. I will write on them the name of my God and the name of the city of my God, the new Jerusalem, which is coming down out of heaven from my God; and I will also write on them my new name.

Revelation 3:12 NIV

To the one who is victorious, I will give the right to sit with me on my throne, just as I was victorious and sat down with my Father on his throne.

Revelation 3:21 NIV

(2) And I saw [something] like a sea of glass, [but this time it was] mixed with fire, and those who were [in the process of] winning the victory over the beast and his image and over the number of his name were standing on the sea of glass holding lyres of the Lord God, (3) and they were singing the song of Moses the servant of God, even the song of the Lamb.

Revelation 15:2-3a

Those who are victorious will inherit all this, and I will be their God and they will be my children.

Revelation 21:7 NIV

Perseverance in fighting the good fight, godly alertness in our Christian walk, and a clear-eyed determination to stay faithful to Jesus Christ come what may, through fire and water, trouble and tribulation, setbacks and defeats, will bring victory in the end, our safe return to our Lord above with faith intact – or blessed reunion with Him at His return. And if we have been courageous in the fight, we know that eternal rewards await us for this victory as well. There is nothing better than a good report from our Lord for fighting a victorious fight in this world, and we have every right to glory in such a victory.

(23) Thus says the Lord: "Let not the wise man glory in his wisdom, let not the mighty man glory in his might, nor let the rich man glory in his riches; (24) But let him who glories glory in this, that he understands and knows Me, that I am the Lord, exercising lovingkindness, judgment, and righteousness in the earth. For in these I delight," says the Lord.

Jeremiah 9:23-24 NASB

E. The Christian Walk

(24) Don't you know that all the runners in the stadium run the race, but that only one receives the prize? Run in such a way so as to achieve what you are after. (25) And again, everyone involved in competition exercises self-control in all respects. Those athletes go through such things so that they may receive a perishable crown of victory, but we do it to receive an imperishable one. (26) So as I run this race of ours, I'm heading straight for the finish line; and as I box this bout of ours, I'm making every punch count. (27) I'm "pummeling my body", one might say, bringing myself under strict control so that, after having preached [the gospel] to others, I might not myself be disqualified [from receiving the prize we all seek].

1st Corinthians 9:25-27

There is no better summary of the Christian life, the Christian walk, the Christian race, the Christian fight, than the verses above. Following salvation, as believers in Jesus Christ we are still here in this world, kept here by God for a definite purpose: to honor our Lord according to His will. If we do so, great reward is ours on the other side.

To carry out the purpose Jesus Christ has for our lives requires us to keep walking, to keep running, to keep fighting. And we have every reason and every motivation to do so. That this is not necessarily easy is clear from the fact that so few, particularly in our day and age of Laodicea, manage to do so. That this is far from impossible is clear from the fact that brothers and sisters of all different ages and talents and cultures and backgrounds and widely varying circumstances do manage to do so. The difference-maker is our willingness to respond to the Spirit and follow the Lamb wherever He leads.

(5) Blessed are those whose strength is in you, whose hearts are set on pilgrimage. (6) As they pass through the Valley of Baka ("weeping"), they make it a place of springs (lit., "blessings); the autumn rains also cover it with pools. (7) They go from strength to strength, till each appears before God in Zion.

Psalms 84:5-7 NIV

We have now covered all of the major points necessary to demonstrate the necessity and the desirability of persevering in this pilgrimage to which we have been called, as well as the means, the methods, and the tactics of so doing. Nevertheless, it will be helpful to summarize here some of the basic principles to bear in mind, in order to help us keep walking forward on the high road to Zion.

Remember: This world is a battlefield, not the garden of Eden. It is ruled by the evil one at present, and we, the Church of Jesus Christ, are interlopers. We are in this world, but we are not of it (Jn.17:11; 17:16; cf. 1Cor.7:29-31; Col.1:13). It will never be friendly to us, and if we attempt to befriend it we make ourselves enemies of God (Jas.4:4; 1Jn.2:15; cf. Rom.8:7).

Remember: Everything in this world is temporary. Nothing is permanent. Therefore the things

that world strives for are folly – because they will not and cannot endure. But what we believers are striving for – what we should be striving for – is eternal: a good report from the Lord we love and eternal blessings which will thrill our hearts for all eternity. This world is filled with nothing but lust and dust and rust. No amount of money, power, celebrity, pleasure or possessions can ever make anyone truly happy – at least not for long. That is a myth – "myth happiness" – as anyone who has indulged in any of these things in a search for happiness can affirm. But the anticipation of genuine, eternal rewards for a life lived for Jesus Christ produces a happiness, guiltless and sublime, which the world cannot understand – and which, when received on that great Day to come, will know no end.

Remember: This life and the Christian walk in which we are persevering is all about choice. Avoid choosing compromise on the basic principles and truths we hold dear. Seek not be lukewarm like so many of our current generation of Laodicea. Strive instead to be "boiling in the Spirit" for the Lord (Rom.12:11), to have an undivided heart focused on Him (Ps.86:11), turning away from all double-mindedness (Ps.119:113), and keeping the Lord and His will for your life in the place of top priority.

Remember: You are not alone. The Lord Jesus Christ is in you and with you at all times, and the Father too "makes Himself at home" in those who are walking with His Son (Jn.14:23). The Holy Spirit dwells in you to empower you (Zech.4:6), guide you (Phil.2:13), and comfort you (2Cor.1:3-7). And the entire "Church militant", all believers here in the world (as well as all who have gone before), are part of your eternal family forever. So you do not have to remain in the boat – you can step out in faith and walk on the stormy sea with our Lord Jesus Christ, all the way to the other side and with no fear of sinking. He will hold you up, come what may (cf. Ps.23:1-4; 2Tim.1:14).

Remember: While nothing in this world, nothing that is of this world, has any lasting meaning for the believer in Jesus Christ, this Christian life is of immense importance when it comes to "why we are here". We are here to glorify Jesus Christ. This is not a game. This is not a training exercise (it more resembles a walk through dread darkness: Gen.15:8-17; Ps.23:4). There is no time to wait, no time to rest, no time to look back (as Lot's wife did), no time to punish ourselves with inordinate guilt for past mistakes or sit down and rest on our laurels out of satisfaction for past successes: there is no "finish line" until we "break the tape" in the presence of our dear Lord and Savior Jesus Christ (Phil.3:12-14).

Remember: This life we are living one day at a time for Jesus Christ in anticipation of His approval when it is evaluated before Him on that great day is not about what we see or hear, nor especially about what or how we may feel (1Cor.4:3-5). Rather, it is about what we know is true *by faith*. We all have emotions, and our feelings as well as our bodies do and will hurt from time to time, but whatever our disappointment, pain or trouble, it is possible to see God with the eyes of faith, even in pain and deprivation, and to understand that everything that is happening is His will for us (1Thes.5:18), and therefore it is "good" even when our feelings, our eyes and our ears tell us otherwise – because He always works everything out for the absolute good in the end . . .

for those who truly love Him (Rom.8:28).

Remember: This world is a battlefield and we are in the middle of the only *truly* important conflict ever waged in the history of the world. We are soldiers of Jesus Christ, the Lord of Hosts Himself. We are members of the most elite military unit ever formed, the Church of Jesus Christ. As such, we are constantly being opposed by an unseen enemy whose attacks we would never be able to resist without the power of God's Spirit who dwells within us. We are not here in this world to cower in our bunkers. The Church of Jesus Christ is an organization dedicated to spiritual advance, and if we are only willing to take the fight to the enemy the way our Lord intends (through spiritual growth, progress and production), then even "the gates of hell" cannot stop our offensive (Matt.16:18). That is spiritually true now, and will become literally true when we take our place in the heavenly ranks beside our Lord at the battle of Armageddon.

Remember: The unseen battle we are waging on behalf of our Master and His Church, a warfare whose rewards will be inestimably superior to all the decorations and plunder ever won on this temporary earth, is being fought out first and foremost on the unseen battlefield of our hearts. Therefore everything we think and feel is important. Therefore we must take pains not to allow ourselves to become depressed or discouraged or distracted. Therefore we must focus on the things above even as we fight it out here below (Col.3:1-4), constantly encouraging ourselves and others to keep the Lord Jesus Christ and His holy cause shining brightly in our hearts and in our minds at all times (Heb.11:27).

Remember: It is very easy to take what happens to us in this life personally – as if the devil were opposing us for individual reasons; whereas in fact he opposes us because we belong to Jesus Christ (Jn.15:18-20). Even great believers can run afoul on this point (cf. Moses: Num.20:10ff.; Samuel: 1Sam.8:7; Elijah: 1Ki.19:9-10). Since it is a very easy mistake to make, we need to take special care to remember *not* to "take it personally" when we are attacked, harassed, and subjected to various sorts of flak from the evil one and his minions. We have it from the Lord that He will deliver us from all these evil attentions (something we pray for every day: Matt.6:13; Lk.11:4). We claim to trust the Lord, but if we are knocked off of our stride by relatively minor things, how deep is our faith? If we are quick to complain, that is a testimony against our spiritual maturity rather than for it (1Cor.10:10). We need to think less about self and the circumstances we see, and more about the Lord, His Church, His truth, and the fight we cannot see, especially its glorious end.

Now we are all guilty of over-focusing on ourselves and our current troubles, trials, tribulations and disappointments – at least to some degree. As if "this" were all about us. But it behooves us as those called to witness to the power and the glory and goodness of Jesus Christ to let our faith shine through in adversity instead of immediately – or even eventually (as in Job's case) – giving into to such demonstrations of self-pity and blaming God by our attitude if not directly with our words. All such negative behavior has to do with erroneously focusing on ourselves – "taking it personally" – instead of recognizing that we are in the midst of a great spiritual conflict that is so much bigger than little us. We are blessed to be part of "the team", part of the glorious host of

Jesus Christ the Ruler of the World, the One who died to give us life eternal, the One who will reward us for every good action, including bearing up under the shot and shell of the evil one's attentions. He is not unaware of what is happening to us; He is not unaware that we are suffering because we have chosen for Him and are determined to honor Him with our lives; and He will not fail to bring us through the fire and the water whether we are smiling through our tears or griping and complaining – but the former is better than the latter in every way . . . and it carries with it a greater reward.

Remember: God knows that this is hard. And He knows very well when we are having a hard time bearing up. He sees all of our tears, even before we shed them. We have His promise from scripture that cannot be broken that He will never let things go too far, past the point of our actual capability to handle the testing that comes our way (1Cor.10:13). Our job is to *trust* Him that this is so, whenever we are feeling down, or depressed, or "ridden too hard". Our job is to remember that there is a purpose for everything we suffer and this sharing in Christ's sufferings is "the will of God for you" – and so give thanks instead of allowing ourselves to mope and complain (1Thes.5:18).

Our job is to have faith that respite will come, that deliverance will come, that He will most definitely bring us safely through the valley of the death-shadow. If we make it our determined purpose to walk through that dark valley with Him, in knowledge of Him, in trust of Him, then we most definitely will feel the comfort of His "rod and staff", the implements of the Shepherd who cares for us like no other, and who can defend us from whatever may come and bring us safely through to the other side. He has given us His Holy Spirit to comfort us in all we have to endure in this world, and that comfort is like nothing the world can offer (2Cor.2:1-7). *Our* job is to trust that the truth *is* true, and to walk and act and speak and behave as if we *actually do believe it* – which of course we do.

A Song of Ascents.

I will lift up my eyes to the hills—

From whence comes my help?

My help comes from the Lord,

Who made heaven and earth.

He will not allow your foot to be moved;

He who keeps you will not slumber.

Behold, He who keeps Israel

Shall neither slumber nor sleep.

The Lord is your keeper;

The Lord is your shade at your right hand.

The sun shall not strike you by day,

Nor the moon by night.

The Lord shall preserve you from all evil;

He shall preserve your soul.

The Lord shall preserve your going out and your coming in

From this time forth, and even forevermore.
Psalm 121:1-8 NKJV

Remember: This Christian life we are leading is not about us – it is all about Jesus Christ and honoring Him. For that reason alone it is imperative not to become overly subjective if and when we fail – and "all sin" (Rom.3:23; cf. Jas.3:2). Confession of sin leads to forgiveness immediately and in every case (1Jn.1:9; cf. Ps.32:5; 51:1-19). We certainly should not feel good about our failures or consider them of little account (and the divine discipline we receive, especially for serious breaches of our Christian witness, will suffice to eliminate the latter: Heb.12:4ff.), but we also cannot afford to let ourselves "be wearied and faint in [our] minds" (Heb.12:3 KJV); we cannot permit ourselves to allow self-pity or self-revulsion or inordinate guilt or any other emotional reaction to occasional failure stop us from moving forward spiritually.

Everyone fails. Unfortunately not everyone recovers rapidly from failure. The successful mature believer learns to leave the discipline to the Lord, even as he/she is striving to "resist to the point of blood" in the struggle against sin (Heb.12:4). Temptation is part and parcel of the "flak" we are flying through on our spiritual mission, and sin is the occasional "hit" we take. But we cannot "bail out" or "land the plane" or "turn back" every time we get hit. We have to keep on flying, accepting the fact that we are not conducting a perfect mission – no one ever does – and resolving with each failure to do better the next time, neither yielding to sin nor wallowing in despair for every mistake.

The successful mature believer takes sin seriously and makes progress in combating it at every level – but he/she is also always very quick to recover from stumbling, taking his/her lumps of discipline and getting back into the fight, back into the race just as rapidly as possible. Our time on this earth is very limited, and we most assuredly do *not* have the time to take ourselves out of action for any length of time just because we "feel bad" for some failure or other. Regardless of how we feel, we need to pick ourselves up after any breach in our wall and get back into the fight for Jesus Christ and His Church which we are here to serve. If that has always been true for believers in Christ, how much more is it not an important principle to grasp for us "upon whom the end of the ages has come" (1Cor.10:11).

Remember: Our objective in this world is therefore nothing to do with this world. Our objective is pleasing Jesus Christ. Getting nearer to Him day by day, loving Him more day by day, reveling in His Word, serving His Church, walking closer to Him with every step – that is what we should be about. This world has a way of clouding our spiritual vision and receives great help from its present ruler and from our sin natures in so doing. But even if we lost everything, having Jesus Christ is better than everything else put together. And even if we had everything this world seems to offer, it would be nothing in comparison to the eternal life we have in Him. Everything the world could ever give is absolutely nothing in comparison to the smallest reward for faithful service meted out at the judgment seat of Christ.

If we "seek first the kingdom" (Matt.6:33), that is, put the Lord and His truth in first place in our

hearts, everything else in this world will fall into place. But if we allow our priorities to be distorted, everything else will suffer spiritually. Keeping the correct priorities requires a bold, faith-filled approach, one that walks straight ahead through this temporary world, neither shunning it like monks who hide away from the world to avoid its potential entanglements, nor compromising with the world in allowing what is really important – the truth, learning it, living it, and helping others to do the same – to drop out of first place in our hearts (Rev.2:4).

Remember: The darkness of this world is passing away (1Jn.2:8; 2:17). We are not of the darkness but sons of light following Him who is the true Light of the world (Jn.1:4-9; 12:36; Eph.5:8-14; 1Thes.5:5; 1Pet.2:9). Though we now walk through a darkened valley brooded over by the shadow of death (Ps.23:4), if we keep on looking into the light of the Word (Ps.119:105), our path will shine ever brighter on this journey (Prov.4:18), and will continue to do so if we hold fast to the light of the Word, the truth of Him who is the true Light of the world, until the Morning Star rises and takes us to be with Himself (2Pet.1:19).

For God who said, "Let light shine forth from the darkness!", is He who has shone forth [His light] into our hearts to illuminate our knowledge of God's glory in the person of Jesus Christ.

2nd Corinthians 4:6

Remember: Defense against spiritual lapses, while no substitute for the offensive actions of spiritual growth, progress and production, is also important to maintain at all times.

He who walks righteously and speaks uprightly,
He who despises the gain of oppressions,
Who gestures with his hands, refusing bribes,
Who stops his ears from hearing of bloodshed,
And shuts his eyes from seeing evil:
He will dwell on high.

Isaiah 33.15-16a NKJV

(19) Nevertheless the solid foundation of God stands, having this seal: "The Lord knows those who are His," and, "Let everyone who names the name of Christ depart from iniquity." (20) But in a great house there are not only vessels of gold and silver, but also of wood and clay, some for honor and some for dishonor. (21) Therefore if anyone cleanses himself from the latter, he will be a vessel for honor, sanctified and useful for the Master, prepared for every good work. (22) Flee also youthful lusts; but pursue righteousness, faith, love, peace with those who call on the Lord out of a pure heart.

2nd Timothy 2:10-22 NKJV

Remember: This life is very short, and we are here for a very particular purpose, namely, to demonstrate the genuine nature of our faith and the intensity and quality of it. This is accomplished through the exercise of our free will in response to the truth: first, in accepting the gospel, then, after salvation, in holding fast to it, and for those who are willing to seek the Lord,

follow after Him, and serve Him with this life we have been given, reward will follow "according to our works" (1Cor.3:10-15), that is, our choices to put Him and His truth and His Church in front of our own desires.

On the day of the judgment of the Church, we will all be given a thorough evaluation by our Lord so as to demonstrate in full detail what we chose and why throughout our Christian lives. On the one hand, this is a chilling prospect. As Paul says about this judgment, in contemplating it we all "know what it is to fear the Lord" (2Cor.5:10-11), for we must all stand before Him on that day and none of us will have a perfect record. No doubt we will all have a goodly store of "wood, hay and stubble" to be burned up, wasted time and opportunities, bad choices and foolish false production (1Cor.3:12-13). On the other hand, the fire of judgment will not touch the genuinely good things we have done in growing spiritually, walking with Christ and passing the tests that came our way, and helping others to do likewise:

If anyone's work which he has built [on his foundation of faith in Christ] remains (i.e., is not burnt away by the fiery evaluation), he will receive a reward [for it].

1st Corinthians 3:14

It is not too small a thing to say that after we have been saved we are left here for this very purpose, that is, to earn a heavenly reward. For in doing so – in doing things Christ's way instead of the world's way – we honor and glorify our Master. So it is not only permissible to be ever looking towards the goal of receiving a good report and winning a good reward – the three crowns and whatever else our Lord has in store for those who respond to Him as He would have them do – it is also important and necessary to do so:

For to me, to live is Christ, and to die is gain.

Philippians 1:21

Now without faith, it is impossible to please [God]. For whoever wishes to draw nearer to God must believe that He exists, and that He will reward those who earnestly seek Him.

Hebrews 11:6

Remember: Gaining spiritual momentum is not so easy. When we are just getting into the habit of putting the Lord first or when we are recovering from a period of slackness or failure, it takes time and effort to get back into the flow, back into the race, back into the fight. Even if we do manage to do it rather quickly, there is pain involved – and more pain and effort than it takes to maintain momentum when we are in a good place spiritually and doing what we should be doing in our Christian walk day by day. For that reason, we should take pains to stay alert to the sorts of things which may have tripped us up in the past and do our best to preserve our momentum of spiritual growth, progress and production day by day as long as it is called "today" (Heb.3:13). If we keep our spiritual reward and our desire for a good report from our Lord in the forefront of our thinking, this will be easier to do when the pressures and temptations of this life sing the siren song that leads to slacking off or going astray. Being consistent in our spiritual approach is

the best way both to stay safe and also to earn a maximum reward which glorifies the Lord, blesses us, and helps our brothers and sisters in Jesus Christ. Being consistent in taking in the truth and treasuring it in our hearts is the best way to keep up our good spiritual momentum so that whatever we do for the Lord is being done from a better position, a position of strength, rather than from a worse position, a position of weakness.

Remember: When it comes to actually walking the Christian walk, there is a difference between the theoretical and the practical. It is one thing to appreciate academically and intellectually what we should be doing, and quite another to actually do it – and do it consistently. War planning is pristine; actual combat is incredibly messy. Planning is easy; doing is hard. Plans go awry – more often than they can be carried through. In this spiritual combat of ours, the enemy "has a vote" as to how things proceed. But unlike the worldly analogy, our Commanding Officer is perfect and watches out for us with analogous perfection. In this spiritual combat of ours, we are going to be allowed to hear the shot and shell and all of the other terrifying sights and sounds of this battlefield. But though a thousand may fall at our side, and ten thousand at our right hand, the disaster will not reach us (Ps.91:7) – if we are walking hand in hand with Jesus Christ. As with every such fight, there is much we cannot see or know – the fog of war – and there is much pressure from the enemy's attack, emotional as well as physical. But we do not have to fear, because God is with us (Is.26:3). We can continue to be strong and courageous (2Chron.32:7), because we trust in Him to bring us through whatever it is He is letting us go through for His glory and our spiritual growth.

Be strong and of good courage, do not fear nor be afraid of them; for the Lord your God, He is the One who goes with you. He will not leave you nor forsake you.
Deuteronomy 31:6 NKJV

Remember: Tough times now should be made the most of, knowing that experiencing them is God's way of preparing us for even tougher ones in the future – that we may better glorify Jesus Christ and earn a full reward. David dedicated himself in his youth to knowing the Lord and being close to him, and the Lord prepared David through many years of cold and damp and darkness and danger – all of which only drew David closer to the Lord through an ever more intimate reliance on Him. The result is one of the most celebrated relationships of appreciation of the Lord from this side and of great grace and blessing from above, as David's closeness to the Lord sings forth in all of his Psalms. David made a habit of setting his thoughts on the Lord and on the truth he knew to an exemplary degree, and that special "occupation with Christ" was the source of His spiritual strength which brought him through times of exceptional trouble. Today, every believer has the advantage of the Spirit permanently indwelling us so as to be able to experience that same closeness David had with the Lord – but this still requires us to respond to Him and to His truth both in learning/believing it and also in consistently applying it to the troubles we face.

But be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves.
James 1:22 NKJV (cf. Jas.1:25)

Remember: While we may be called upon to suffer in this life – and there is no serious, high-level spiritual growth without severe testing – we have to keep in mind that it is possible to have peace and even joy in the midst of the most difficult tests, and to continue to be focused on the hope of all to come. For who is our joy and our peace if not Jesus Christ our dear Lord and Savior? And what is our hope if not the resurrection and an eternity of blessing with Him? This does not mean that we will ever come to enjoy pain and trouble, personal tribulation; but it does mean that as mature believers we do have the capacity to pierce through the temporary veil of tears with the clear-eyed vision of faith, recognizing that all of our trouble is temporary, and that whatever we are suffering "is working out for us an eternal weight of glory beyond any possible estimation" (2Cor.4:17). Our suffering brings us closer to the Lord, gives us a clear sense of His power in our lives (2Cor.12:9-10), and is a pledge of His imminent, righteous intervention on our behalf – which always comes to those who truly wait on His deliverance (2Thes.1:5). For this reason, scripture is replete with examples of believers exhibiting courage and even joy under the most severe pressure and resting in His peace (e.g., Job 1:21; 2:10; Ps.126:6; Phil.4:3-7; Col.1:11-12; 1Thess.1:6; 1Pet.1:6-9; cf. 2Cor.1:3-11), anchored to the hope ahead (Heb.6:16-20; cf. Rom.5:3-4; Tit.2:13; Heb.10:23). This is a truth that all serious believers need to take pains to appropriate aggressively, because with continuing growth the time will come when we will find ourselves under serious pressure and be tempted to complain and mope rather than offering up a good witness of absolute trust in God's faithfulness and ultimate deliverance. The idea is not that we are happy because of trouble; the idea is that as those who have the Holy Spirit and sufficient reservoirs of truth in our hearts we are able to have peace and resilient joy in spite of our tears, in spite of the pain, suffering and personal tribulation we are undergoing – because we trust the Lord and are looking forward not to the things of this world but of the glories to come.

"These things I have spoken to you, that in Me you may have peace. In the world you will have tribulation; but be of good cheer, I have overcome the world."

John 16:34 NKJV

(3) And not only this, but let us glory in our tribulations, knowing that tribulation produces patience, (4) and patience produces proven character, and proven character produces hope – (5) and this hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured out in our hearts through the Holy Spirit given to us (cf. 2Tim.1:7).

Romans 5:3-5

(2) Brothers, when you are being beset with all manner of trials, take pains to be joyful.

(3) For you should keep in mind that this testing of your faith develops perseverance. (4) So let your perseverance develop fully, that you may become fully mature and entitled to a full reward, having been found lacking in no respect.

James 1:2-4

(12) Beloved, don't be amazed at the fiery ordeal of testing you are now undergoing, as if something out of the ordinary were happening to you. (13) But to the degree that you are [truly] participating in Christ's sufferings, be joyful about it, so that at His glorious revelation, you may also rejoice with great gladness.

Remember: Keeping our spiritual balance as we walk through this world requires that we maintain the divine viewpoint at all times. Looking at the world and the events around us and ordering our steps as we walk forward with the Lord requires seeing things as He sees them, not as the world sees them, and not as our emotions when motivated by the flesh are wont to see them. It is the spiritual dimension rather than the material dimension which counts to God and so that is what should also inform all of our priorities (Jn.6:63; cf. 2Pet.1:19).

If we are looking at the things above as we should be doing rather than the things below (Col.3:1-2), then our Lord's telling the paralytic that his sins were forgiven will indeed be of more import to us than His subsequent healing of the man – the thing that impressed the audience (Matt.9:2-8). If we are maintaining the heavenly perspective in our thinking, then we will be calm in the midst of the most terrible storm – because we know that the Lord is with us and will not let us sink: He does not need to wake up; we do (Matt.8:23-26). If we are truly seeing our lives and this world in the same way He sees them, then we will be focusing on the eternal tomorrow and the rewards our dear Savior has for us for living our lives for Him – and these will mean more to us than all the wealth of this temporary, corrupt world which we are inhabiting for but a brief moment.

"Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy and where thieves break in and steal; but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also."

Matthew 6:19-21 NKJV

*Remember: Everything in this terrible world is always over; no matter how difficult, it always comes to an end. This life of ours down here is not forever; we have an eternal life which will only be revealed when our Lord returns (Col.3:3-4). This country is not our ultimate country; we have a kingdom which is not of this world (Col.1:13), and our true citizenship is in heaven, not here below (Phil.3:20). This house or apartment or tent or lean-to we now live in is not our home; we have an eternal place reserved for us in the New Jerusalem (Jn.14:2). This body and all of its troubles, its weaknesses and sinful tendencies, is not the body we will inhabit forever; we have an incorruptible body waiting for us, "a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens" (2Cor.5:1). This debt with which we struggle, our lack of food or clothing or other necessities and our inability to provide for ourselves and our dependents in the manner in which we might prefer will not last forever; for we have a treasury in the heavens which cannot be touched by rust or decay or theft, a treasury filled with riches the likes of which we really have not even the glimmer of a clue at present as to their true wonders, eternal riches which will delight our hearts forever even as we glorify the Master who will bestow them on us, the least of which will outshine everything on this earth, even if we could gain it all (Matt.6:19-21; Lk.12:33-34; 1Cor.3:12-15). Therefore we do not have to be concerned about the troubles and the trials and the tribulations of this life, even though they may be riding heavy on our shoulders now and more so in the difficult times ahead. For our fight is one which has a blessed

and a glorious end, a fight that will soon be over . . . and victoriously won – if only we stay close to Jesus Christ.

(35) So do not throw away this conviction of yours – it leads to a great reward. (36) You need to keep persevering so that you may carry off *in victory* what has been promised – after you have accomplished God's will. (37) For yet a little while, how short, how [short the wait], and He who is coming shall come, nor will He delay. (38) "Then shall my righteous one live by his faith, but if he shrinks back, My heart takes no pleasure in him (Hab.2:3-4)."

Hebrews 10:35-38

(7) I have fought the good fight. I have completed my course. I have kept the faith. (8) In the future there is reserved for me the crown of righteousness which the Lord, the righteous judge, will award to me on that [great] day [of judgment] – and not only to me, but to all who have loved His appearance.

2nd Timothy 4:7-8

Knowing all these things and cherishing them in our hearts, let us resolve to put Jesus Christ first in all we do, committing ourselves to learning His truth, walking more closely with Him as we grow day by day by means of that truth, and helping others do likewise through ministering that truth. For the Christian walk is all about the truth.

(12) For the Word of God is living and powerful; it is sharper than any two-edged sword, penetrating even to the point of being able to divide the spirit from its earthly life and the marrow from its bones; [for] it (i.e., the Word when resident in our conscience) acts as a judge of our heart's intentions and emotions. (13) For there is no created thing [which can remain] invisible before Him. Everything is naked and laid bare to the eyes of Him with whom we have to do.

Hebrews 4:12-13

II. Biblical Vocabulary, Analogies and Role Models for Spiritual Growth

(1) Spiritual Growth Vocabulary

The New Testament addresses spiritual growth in a variety of ways and in a plethora of passages, using widely varying vocabulary to do so. We will have occasion below to examine some of the more prominent metaphors for growth, but it will be helpful by way of introduction to give some attention to the more prominent words and word-complexes with which the principle of spiritual growth is often directly expressed in the Bible.

(11) Christ Himself appointed some of us apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers (12) in order *to prepare* all of His holy people for their own ministry work, that the entire *body* of Christ might thus be *built up*, (13) until we all reach that *unifying* [goal] of belief in and *full-knowledge* (*epignosis*) of the Son of God,

that each of us might be a *perfect* person, that is, that we *might attain* to that standard of maturity of the fullness of Christ; (14) that we may no longer be *immature, swept off-course and carried headlong* by every breeze of so-called teaching that emanates from the trickery of men in their readiness to do anything to cunningly work their deceit, (15) but rather that we may, by embracing the truth in love, *grow up* in all respects with Christ, who is the head of the Church, as our model. (16) In this way, the entire *body* of the Church, *fit* and *joined* together by Him through the *sinews* He powerfully supplies to each and every *part*, works out its own *growth* for the *building up* of itself in love.
Ephesians 4:11-16

As is clear throughout the passage above, the basic idea or analogy behind the principle of spiritual growth is the comparison to bodily growth. A somewhat detailed look at the vocabulary used in this key spiritual growth passage above will not only demonstrate this principle but will also give us a sense of the range of terminology employed in scripture to teach this critically important doctrine.

1) "to prepare" = [*eis*] *katartismos*. The *art-* complex of words is used throughout the New Testament to teach the "fitting out" or preparation of the believer, having the essential idea of spiritual maturity as the result or purpose (Lk.6:40; 1Cor.1:10; 2Cor.13:9; 13:11; Gal.6:1; Eph.4:11; 1Thes.3:10; 2Tim.3:17; Heb.13:21; 1Pet.5:10). This expanded root and words derived from it have to do with preparing, fitting out, furnishing whatever the object may be for accomplishing the purpose for which it is meant (as in fishing nets being mended so as to be serviceable for use). In the analogy, spiritual growth, learning and believing the truth provided by the apostles, prophets, evangelists, and pastor-teachers above, is what makes the believer "fit" for use. Giving a good witness for Christ, especially under pressure, requires prior growth to spiritual maturity, and fulfilling the ministry to which one has been called by the Lord most definitely requires having first been "prepared" and made "fit and serviceable" for use in edifying the Church of Christ in turn (2Tim.2:15).

(16) All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, (17) that the man of God may be complete (*artios*), thoroughly equipped (*katartismenos*) for every good work.
2nd Timothy 3:16-17 NKJV

2) "built up" = *oikodome* (see section 2.1.C below, "The Building Analogy").

3) "might attain" = *katanteo*. The verb here represents gaining an objective as the result of effort: spiritual growth is not guaranteed; it requires consistency in Bible reading, prayer, attention to Bible teaching, believing the truth that is learned, and applying it to one's life. For more on the theme of pilgrimage see section 2.1.E below.

4) "unifying" = *enotes*. Literally, "oneness", this word is used by Paul here to refer to the goal of collective growth, a theme near and dear to his heart and returned to on many occasions and in this passage as well at the end where the Church is to "work out its own growth for the building

up of itself in love". The Body of Christ, properly functioning, is thus all about spiritual growth, a collective organism with Christ Himself as our Head whose purpose is to promote the growth of all of its parts so that by mutual support every single Christian grows up to spiritual maturity, progresses in their walk with Christ, and in turn helps (through the gifts and ministries and effects supplied by God) the rest of the Body to grow as well – ideally (e.g., Rom.15:5; 1Cor.1:10; 2Cor.13:11; Eph.4:3; Phil.2:2-4; Col.3:14; cf. 1Pet.3:8-9).

5) "full-knowledge" = *epignosis*. This key word and its cognates always represent spiritual growth, because "knowledge" or *gnosis* is only made "full" (*epignosis*) in the believer's heart by the Holy Spirit, when the truth is both taught **and** believed by the Christian hearing it (see above, section I.2.A.6. "The Holy Spirit and the Truth epistemology and *epignosis*").

6) "perfect" = *teleios*: As detailed above (in section I.2.A.7, under "The Result of the Process: Spiritual Maturity"), the morpheme *tel-* (upon which this word is based) speaks of **completion** – the realization of spiritual maturity in the inherent analogy. The *tel-* complex is by far one of the most prevalent word groupings in scripture that speak of the concept of spiritual maturity. Spiritual maturity is the goal (cf. "*teleology*") to which all believers should aspire after salvation, and it is the basis for all progress in our walk with Jesus Christ and the effective prosecution of the ministries He has for us after having progressed therein. We are not "complete / perfected in maturity" and ready to fight the fight and help others do likewise until we have taken in and believed sufficient truth so as to no longer need milk but are ready for solid food and the mature Christian life to which it corresponds (1Cor.3:2; Heb.5:12).

7) "maturity" = *helekia*: This Greek word means to be "of age" physically and so is used secularly of those who have attained responsible adulthood (Jn.9:21; 9:23). The word is being used in our passage in the sense of spiritual adulthood achieved through growth in the truth and its treasuring up in the heart through faith in sufficient quantity, so as to produce spiritual maturity.

And Jesus [continued to] make progress in His wisdom and His stature (*helekia*) and in grace with God and with men.
Luke 2:52

8) "fullness" = *pleroma*: This word group has to do with filling, fulfilling, fulfillment and fullness (as here), and sometimes is employed by Paul as a direct response to Gnostic heretics who taught the existence of a supernatural, heavenly "fullness" as a kind of materialistic Godhead. In our context, the "fullness" of maturity (*helekia*) to which believers are to aspire is defined as "belonging to" and being "from" Christ. Thus the standard of spiritual maturity to which we have been called is one which Christ sets, not the world (or some false religion), and consists of Christ – knowing Him, responding to Him, being ever more like Him – as a result (Rom.15:13-14; Phil.1:9-11; Col.1:9; 2:10; 2Thes.1:11):

(14) For this reason I bow my knees to the Father, (15) from whom His entire family in heaven and on earth has received its name, (16) that He may grant you according to the

riches of His glory to be powerfully strengthened in your inner person through His Spirit, (17) so that, rooted and grounded in love, Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith, (18) so that you may be able to comprehend with all saints what is the breadth and length and depth and height [of His love for you], (19) [that is], so that you may know the love of Christ which outstrips [human] understanding [in every way], and so that you may be **filled up** [to the brim] with the entire "**fullness**" of God.
Ephesians 3:14-19

And don't get drunk with wine which is dissipating, but instead be made [spiritually] **full** through the [Holy] Spirit.
Ephesians 5:18

9) "immature" = *nepios*: This word which literally means "infant", etymologically: "not yet able to speak", is the most common term used in the New Testament to express the opposite of spiritual maturity (covered in section 2.1.A below, "The Physical Body and Athletics Analogy").

10) "swept off course and carried headlong" = *klydonizo* and *periphero*: These are not technical terms per se but represent a common analogy, viscerally understood in the ancient world, of the dangers for a ship of being surprised at sea by stormy weather. Paul compares the immature believer to a ship caught out in gale and unable to hold course (a circumstance to which he could personally relate very well), and expresses hereby the relative **stability** and fitness for a safe journey on the part of a mature believer compared to the relative **instability** and danger of shipwreck on the part of believers who are not mature and who are thus much more vulnerable to false teaching and to being led off course thereby (cf. 1Tim.1:19; Jas.1:6).

11) "grow" = *auxano*: With this word, spiritual growth is being compared directly to bodily growth; the basic idea of spiritual growth is a comparison of the physical body's growth to the growth of our inner man (cf. Eph.3:16) on the spiritual inside (covered in section 2.1.A below, "The Physical Body and Athletics Analogy").

12) "body" = *soma*. In our context, this body is the collective "Body of Christ" who is our Head, and its growth process is being viewed here in collective rather than in individual terms (that is the sense of the rest of the passage that follows as well) – however the process is (and is meant to be seen as) directly analogous to that of individual spiritual growth as well.

13) "fit" = *synharmologeō*. The parts of the body are "harmoniously" (from the same root) married together as if by joints (*harmos*; cf. *harmozo* to join / to marry).

14) "joined" = *symbibazo*. Literally "brought together" or "walked together", but the root as used in the New Testament usually has the idea of "teaching" (as in being brought or walked through a lesson), and that is certainly in view here: "made harmonious through teaching [of the truth]" (cf. Acts 9:22; 16:10; 19:33; 1Cor.2:16; Col.2:2; 2:19) – that is the fundamental need for anyone who wants to grow up spiritually

(1) I want you to know what a great struggle I am engaging in on your behalf and on behalf of those in Laodicea and [on behalf of] as many as have not seen my face in the flesh, (2) [struggling] that your hearts may be encouraged, being instructed (*symbibazo*) in love and [led] into the entire treasury of [spiritual] understanding, confidently believed, so as to [possess] the full-knowledge (*epignosis*) of the mystery of God the Father, [namely] Christ, (3) in whom all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge are hidden.
Colossians 2:2-3

(18) Let no one gain control over your life, desiring to [enslave you to himself] through a show of false humility and the adoration of angels, basing his approach on what he has [allegedly] seen while puffed up by his own fleshly thoughts, (19) yet not embracing the Head [Christ]. For it is from this Source that the entire **body** [the Church] is [truly] supplied and instructed (*symbibazo*) through [all] its **joints** and **sinews**, and [thus] **produces the growth** that God has given.
Colossians 2:18-19

15) "sinews" = *aphe* (ligament): In the passage immediately above and also in our main context at Ephesians 4:16, these "sinews" are the various members of the Body of Christ which hold it together and give it power – through the supplying of what is needed by each individual "part" (= *meros* = body part, corresponding to individual believers) and thus producing the "growth" = *auxesis* (cf. Eph.4:16 above as well) which the Church is called upon to achieve, both collectively and individually, as a result of both collective and individual effort in the Spirit.

16) "building" = *oikodome* (see section 2.1.C below, "The Building Analogy"): The result of this godly process of attention to the truth supplied and supported by each individual member of the Body of Christ is "the **building up** of itself in love", the attainment of spiritual maturity by one and all in the Church so as to esteem each other in Christian love as we help each other to grow and to progress in our individual walk with Christ through the ministries or "body part jobs" we have severally been assigned. This, at least, is the divine perspective on what should be going on here on earth among those who belong to Jesus Christ – and all who are mature in Christ should most definitely ascribe to that view and be committed to hastening this process in hopes of a good eternal reward if we but persevere in this noble task to which we have been called.

All of us who are mature should take such a view of things. And if on some point you think differently, that too God will make clear to you.
Philippians 3:15 NIV

Perseverance must finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything.
James 1:4 NIV

(2) Spiritual Growth Analogies

A. The Physical Body and Athletics Analogy

Normal physical growth and physical training for a particular athletic objective are similar enough and treated in a similar enough fashion in scripture to be covered under the same rubric. The first thing to note is to say again that the physical growth analogy is the primary one used in scripture to describe spiritual growth.¹⁵ Just as physical growth requires certain conditions, inputs and behaviors to achieve healthy results, so it is with spiritual growth.

Spiritual growth requires God's grace mixed with knowledge of the truth:

Now **grow up** (i.e., to spiritual maturity) through the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.

2nd Peter 3:18

Continued spiritual growth has positive effects beyond the individuals so growing:

Neither do we go beyond our limits by boasting of work done by others. Our hope is that, as your **faith** continues to **grow**, our sphere of activity among you will greatly expand, 2nd Corinthians 10:15 NIV (cf. Col.1:6)

Continued spiritual growth results in the concomitant growth of Christian virtue:

We ought always to thank God for you, brothers and sisters, and rightly so, because your **faith** is **growing** more and more, and the love all of you have for one another is increasing.

2nd Thessalonians 1:3 NIV

(12) And may the Lord cause you to **increase** and **abound** in love toward one another and toward all men, just as also we have toward you, (13) that you may stabilize your hearts **blameless** in sanctification before our God and Father at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all His holy ones.

1st Thessalonians 3:12-13

Spiritual growth is, ideally, a collective effort which is mutually reinforcing:

(18) Let no one gain control over your life, desiring to [enslave you to himself] through a show of false humility and the adoration of angels, basing his approach on what he has [allegedly] seen while puffed up by his own fleshly thoughts, (19) yet not embracing the Head [Christ]. For it is from this Source that the entire body [the Church] is [truly] supplied and instructed through [all] its joints and sinews, and [thus] **produces the growth** that God has given.

¹⁵ The idea is also at least latent in the largest biblical word-complex in the New Testament used to describe spiritual growth: *telei-* "perfect/complete"; treated above in section I.2.A.7 under "The Result of the Process: Spiritual Maturity".

The means of spiritual growth is the truth of the Word, taught, learned, understood, believed, and applied by the believer in Jesus Christ:

(11) Christ Himself appointed some of us apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers (12) in order to prepare all of His holy people for their own ministry work, that the entire body of Christ might thus be built up, (13) until we all reach that unifying [goal] of **belief** in and full-knowledge (*epignosis* – truth believed) of the Son of God, that each of us might be a perfect person, that is, that we might attain to that standard of maturity of the fullness of Christ; (14) that we may no longer be immature, swept off-course and carried headlong by every breeze of so-called teaching that emanates from the trickery of men in their readiness to do anything to cunningly work their deceit, (15) but rather that we may, **by embracing the truth** in love, **grow up** in all respects with Christ, who is the head of the Church, as our model. (16) In this way, the entire body of the Church, fit and joined together by Him through the sinews He powerfully supplies to each and every part, works out its own **growth** for the building up of itself in love.

Ephesians 4:11-16

(9) For this reason we also from the [very] day we heard [of your love] do not cease praying on your behalf and asking that you be fulfilled in regard to the full acceptance of His will in all wisdom and spiritual understanding, (10) that you might walk worthy of the Lord to please Him in all things, bearing fruit in every good work, and **growing** by means of the **full knowledge** (*epignosis* – truth believed) of God.

Colossians 1:9-10

Like newborn babes, desire the milk of **the Word** which is without deceit, that by it you may **grow** in regard to your salvation.

1st Peter 2:2

Spiritual growth requires an ever deepening search for and understanding of everything in scripture:

Let us then move on from the elementary teachings about Christ and press on to **maturity**.

Hebrews 6:1

Believers who fail to comply with our Lord's mandate to grow are reprov'd for this failure – and rightly so, since while growth opens up all the positives of the Christian life, failure to respond to the truth and grow up spiritually is always associated with unwanted negatives.

(1) But, brothers [and sisters], I could not speak to you as spiritual (i.e., mature) but as carnal (i.e., controlled by the flesh rather than the Spirit; cf. Rom.8:5-14; Gal.5:16-25), as if you were [still but] **infants** in Christ (i.e., spiritually immature). (2) I gave you milk to

drink (i.e., very basic truths), not solid food (i.e., advanced teaching necessary for growing to maturity), for you were not yet able to digest it. Indeed, you are still not able to do so.

1st Corinthians 3:1-2

We have much to say about this [subject of Christ's priesthood], but it is difficult to communicate [such advanced things to you] because your ears have become lazy. And although by this time you ought to be [capable of] teaching [such things], you need someone to teach you what the basic principles of God's truth are again! You have turned [back] into [spiritual infants] who need **milk** and [can] not [yet tolerate] **solid food**! For everyone who partakes of [such] milk is ignorant of the teaching of righteousness (i.e., how to live righteously), because he is a [spiritual] **infant**. Solid [spiritual] food is for the [spiritually] **mature**, those who by [diligent] practice have trained their [moral] perceptive faculties to [properly] distinguish between good and evil.

Hebrews 5:11-14

An important subset of the physical-growth-representing-spiritual-growth analogy is that of athletic training and accomplishment, and also in particular the "struggle" in which athletes engage to win victories and achieve their goals (Greek *agon/agonizomai*: cf. Lk.13:24; 1Cor.9:25; Phil.1:30; Col.1:29; 2:1; 4:12; 1Thes.2:2; 1Tim.4:10; 6:12; 2Tim.4:7; Heb.10:32; 12:1; Jude 1:3). Believers who commit themselves not only to "walk the walk" but "run the race" (cf. Acts 20:24), putting out effort commensurate with winning the crowns of righteousness, life and glory which fall to those who gain spiritual maturity, pass significant testing, and serve the Body of Christ effectively (respectively) are compared to successful athletes. Indeed, the three crowns or *stephanoi* are equivalent to Olympic medals today, with crowns of olive leaves being awarded for athletic victory at ancient Olympia (laurel leaf crowns were awarded at the Pythian games of Delphi).

The athletic training analogy clearly links the believer's performance beyond salvation to the eternal rewards we all hope to win by following, trusting and serving Jesus Christ in this life. We have seen elsewhere that scripture strongly suggests a correspondence between the status of our eternal abode in the New Jerusalem and the rewards won by our efforts in spiritual growth, progress and production in this life.¹⁶ Thus, ultimate spiritual success requires a commitment analogous to the one necessary to become successful in professional athletics.

(24) Don't you know that all the runners in the stadium run the race, but that only one receives the prize? Run in such a way so as to achieve what you are after. (25) And again, everyone involved in competition exercises self-control in all respects. Those athletes go through such things so that they may receive a perishable crown of victory, but we do it to receive an imperishable one. (26) So as I run this race of ours, I'm heading

¹⁶ See section I.7, "The Judgment and Reward of the Church", in part 6 of the *Coming Tribulation* series.

straight for the finish line; and as I box this bout of ours, I'm making every punch count. (27) I'm "pummeling my body", one might say, bringing myself under strict control so that, after having preached [the gospel] to others, I might not myself be disqualified [from receiving the prize we all seek].

1st Corinthians 9:25-27

There are significant differences between the two realms as Paul makes clear here. While only the very talented stand a reasonable chance of great success as professional athletes, the highest rewards and honors in the Church are available to all. Any believer can earn the three crowns and all are encouraged to do so. And while the laurels of Olympic victors and world champions in any sport are fleeting and are destined to perish entirely along with this temporary world, the rewards gained by believers for following in the footsteps of our Savior last for all eternity.

For physical training is of some value, but godliness has value for all things, holding promise for both the present life and the life to come.

1st Timothy 4:8 NIV

The prospect of pleasing Jesus Christ and experiencing His good pleasure, both as we walk with Him along the road to Zion here and now and also at His judgment seat where our fondest hope is to hear a "Well done, faithful servant!" from our dear Savior, is motivation to run this Christian race the way He would have us to run it, with sanctification, with consistency, and with courage.

You were running well! Who knocked you off your stride so as not to believe the truth?

Galatians 5:7 (cf. Gal.2:2; Phil.2:16)

(12) [It is] not that I have already gotten [what I am striving for], nor that I have already completed [my course]. Rather, I am continuing to pursue [the prize] in hopes of fully acquiring it – [this prize for whose acquisition] I was myself acquired by Christ Jesus. (13) Brethren, I do not consider that I have already acquired it. This one thing only [do I keep in mind]. Forgetting what lies behind me [on the course] and straining towards the [course] ahead, (14) I continue to drive straight for the tape, towards the prize to which God has called us from the beginning [of our race] in Christ Jesus. (15) So as many as are [spiritually] mature, let us have this attitude (i.e., of focusing on our spiritual advance and reward and not getting hung up on what lies behind: vv.13-14), and if in any matter your attitude is off-center, God will reveal that to you (i.e., assuming you are mature and are advancing as you should). (16) But with respect to the progress you have made, keep on advancing in the same way!

Philippians 3:12-16

Likewise if anyone engages in athletic competition, he does not win a crown if he fails to compete according to the rules.

2nd Timothy 2:5

(1) Since then we too [just like the believers of chapter 11] have such a large audience of witnesses surrounding us [men and angels], let us put off every hindrance – especially whatever sins habitually affect us – and **run with endurance the race set before us**, (2) turning our gaze unto Jesus, the originator and completer of our faith, who, for the joy set before Him endured the shame of the cross, treating it with despise, and took His seat at the right hand of the throne of God. (3) Keep in mind all the terrible opposition He endured against Himself at the hands of sinful men, so as not to grow sick at heart and give up. (4) You have not yet resisted to the point of [having to shed your] blood in your struggle against sin. (5) And you have forgotten the encouragement scripture gives us as to the sons we are: "My son, do not treat the Lord's punishment lightly, and do not lose heart when you are rebuked by Him. (6) For the Lord punishes those He loves, and flays everyone He receives to Himself as a son." (7) So take your punishment in this spirit – God is behaving towards you as to sons. For what son has never been punished by his father? (8) And if it should be that you are not receiving punishment (in which all [true sons] share), then you are illegitimate and not sons at all. (9) Now we all had human fathers who punished us and we respected them for it. How much the more then shall we not submit ourselves to the Father of our spirits and live? (10) For while our human fathers meted out our punishment for a relatively short time according as they saw best, when He punishes us it is definitely for our own good – that we might partake of His holiness. (11) Now no punishment is a cause of rejoicing as it is being experienced, but rather of regret – only later does it bear fruit for those who have been trained through it – the fruit of [personal] righteousness that makes one whole and complete. (12) Therefore, [going back to our **race analogy**] pick up those hands hanging slack at your side, put some strength back into your weak knees, (13) and make straight tracks for your feet, so that [even though you fell down] what you sprained might not be twisted completely out of joint, but might instead work its way back to health.

Hebrews 12:1-13

Let us resolve, therefore, to run a good race, to box a good bout, to wrestle a good match, striving day by day as long as we are left here in the world to honor Jesus Christ, remembering the blessed end of all of our godly efforts – far more valuable than even the most grueling athletic preparation and competition – ever keeping in mind that the real opponents are not the ones we see, but the ones that cannot yet be seen.

For our battle (lit., "**wrestling match**") is not against flesh and blood, but against [angelic] princes, against [angelic] authorities, against the cosmic powers of this [present] darkness, against evil spirits in the heavenly realms.

Ephesians 6:12

For the rewards for our determined sacrifices for the Lord are by no means insubstantial.

(7) I have fought the good fight. I have completed my course. I have kept the faith. (8) In the future there is reserved for me **the crown of righteousness** which the Lord, the righteous judge, will award to me on that [great] day [of judgment] – and not only to me,

but to all who have loved His appearance (i.e., who have exercised consistent love for Jesus Christ in anticipation of His return).

2nd Timothy 4:7-8

Blessed is the man who stands firm in temptation, because when he has been [tested and] approved he will receive *the crown of life* which [God] has promised to all who love Him.

James 1:12 (cf. Rev.2:10)

And when the Chief Shepherd appears, you will carry off in victory *the crown of glory* which will never fade.

1st Peter 5:4

B. The Plant Analogy

I planted you, Apollos watered you, but God made you grow.

1st Corinthians 3:6

It would be difficult to cover all of the plant life, farming, and agricultural analogies in scripture, many of which deal with spiritual growth because of the natural comparison between the way in which plants grow and the way in which we grow spiritually. Believers grow by being planted first (given the gospel to which we respond so as to be born again), then by being watered (fed with the truth of the Word of God, taught in a doctrinal, orthodox and substantive way), with the result that God gives us growth (when we believe and apply the truth we have been "watered" with).

(31) Another parable He put forth to them, saying: "The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed, which a man took and sowed in his field, (32) which indeed is the least of all the seeds; but when it is grown it is greater than the herbs and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and nest in its branches."

Matthew 13:31-32 NKJV

This is a critically important parable for understanding spiritual growth. Being born again is wonderful, and we all rejoice when we see others brought to the Lord with the same enthusiasm we ourselves felt when first we were saved. But that is not the end of it. The seed within us has to grow in order for us to achieve the purpose for which the Lord has left us here after salvation. If we do respond in the correct way, consistently taking in the water of the Word of God, ever turning toward the brilliant light of the truth, consistently believing that truth so that it becomes an integral part of our hearts by faith, and consistently applying it to our lives more and more day by day, passing whatever tests come our way, we will eventually find that the seed which started small has grown to become a massive tree. The Word of God and the Son of God and the Kingdom of God – all one and the same in truth – now define every aspect of our lives on this earth, and to such a degree that those lives have now been completely transformed for all the world to see: there is a massive tree present where before there was nothing, one that provides

good fruit to all passers-by.

(26) And He said, "The kingdom of God is as if a man should scatter *seed* on the ground, (27) and should sleep by night and rise by day, and the seed should sprout and grow, he himself does not know how. (28) For the earth yields crops by itself: first the blade, then the head, after that the full grain in the head. (29) But when the grain ripens, immediately he puts in the sickle, because the harvest has come."

Mark 4:26-29 NKJV

(22) Having now sanctified your hearts by means of obeying the truth, love one another resolutely so that your brotherly love may be without hypocrisy. (23) [For you] have been born again not from corruptible *seed* but through the **Word of God** which lives and abides forever. (24) Because [as it says (Is.40:6b; 40:8)], "All flesh is like grass, and all of its glory is like the flowers grass produces. Grass dries up and its flowers fall to the ground. (25) But the Word of the Lord [is a seed which] abides forever." This is the Word of good news which has been given to you.

1st Peter 1:22-25

No one who has been born of God continues in [a life of] sin, since **His seed** (i.e., the Word of truth in which we believe) remains in him, and [so] he is not able to continue in [a life of] sin since he has been born of God.

1st John 3:9

The Word of God is the seed through which the plant of our faith sprouts. Our belief in the Word of truth, the Gospel of Jesus Christ, is what occasions our new birth and eternal life. Describing the Word as "seed" tells us much about the process of salvation and spiritual growth, because we know from observing the growth of plants that certain conditions are necessary for a seed to sprout, to grow and not be destroyed by heat or drought, not to be overcome by competing weeds, but to produce a good crop instead. Seeds need good soil to grow – the responsive heart of the Christian in question. This is the picture behind the parable of the Sower.

1) The seed which is planted beside the road represents the unbeliever who is given the Word but whose heart is resistant to letting it in. This type is "hard packed" against the seed of the Word to the degree that he/she never lets it penetrate, that is, never receives it through faith. And whenever the truth is rejected, the lie is always accepted in its place, so that it is easy for the devil to lull such a person back into his worldly system of thought, taking away the seed of truth before it is able to sprout:

"Whenever anyone hears the message (lit., "word", *logos*) of the kingdom but does not let it [penetrate fully] in[to his heart], the evil one comes and snatches away what was sown in his heart. This is the one sown beside the road."

Matthew 13:19 (cf. Rom.1:28)

"And these are the ones beside the road where the Word is sown. And when they hear it,

Satan comes immediately and removes the Word which has been sown into them."
Mark 4:15

"And the ones [sown] beside the road are those who have heard [the truth of the gospel], then the devil comes and removes the Word from their heart, so that they might not believe and be saved."
Luke 8:12

2) The seed falling on rocky ground represents the person who does accept the seed of the Word through believing it and letting it into his/her heart – but the reception is superficial and the commitment is not complete. As a result, just as a seed which is not able to sink its roots deep into the ground will wither in the heat of summer, so this type allows the plant of faith sprung from the seed of the Word of God to die out when the pressure is on. This is apostasy, the turning away from the Lord on the part of those who once believed.

(20) And he who was sown on the rocky places, this is the one who hears the Word and immediately receives it with joy. (21) He has no roots [to his faith], however, but lasts only a short time. So when tribulation or persecution occurs on account of the Word, he is immediately tripped up (i.e., he apostatizes).
Matthew 13:20-21

(16) And these [second types] who are sown on the rocky places are similar. Whenever they hear the Word they immediately receive it with joy, (17) although they have no root [of faith] in themselves, but are only temporary [believers]. When tribulation or persecution because of the Word comes [their way], they are immediately tripped up (i.e., they apostatize).
Mark 4:16-17

And those [whose seed of faith fell] on the rock do receive the Word with joy when they hear it. However these [types] have no root [to their faith]. They believe for a while, but in time of testing they apostatize.
Luke 8:13

3) The seed planted among the thorns represents that category of believers – the largest one in our day and age – who do accept the seed of the Word, the gospel of Jesus Christ, who do believe so as to be saved, and who do maintain their faith without turning away from Christ . . . but who allow the distractions of this world to choke the growth of their faith plant. As a result, instead of growing like the mustard seed into a great tree which fills the whole of their heart, their faith's growth is stunted and they never come to maturity so as to produce the crop which the Lord meant them to produce: they do not grow to spiritual maturity, they do not progress in testing and their walk with the Lord, and they do not come into fullness of ministry so as to help others do likewise.

"And he who was sown among the thorns, this is the one who hears the Word, but the

worries of this life and the deceptiveness of wealth stunt the [productive power of the] Word so that he becomes unproductive."

Matthew 13:22

(18) "And others were sown among the thorns. These are those who heard the Word, (19) but the worries of life and the deceptiveness of wealth, and the lust for other things grow up [over them like thorns and weeds] and stunt the [productive power of the] Word so that they become unproductive."

Mark 4:18-19

"And as to that [seed] which fell among the thorns, these are they who have heard the Word, but who are stunted by worries and by wealth and by the pleasures of this life with the result that they do not bear a full crop to harvest."

Luke 8:14

4) The seed planted in the good soil represents the believer who has received the Word and proves receptive to it, not only in terms of being saved but in responding to the Lord ever after, learning and believing the truth, walking with Jesus Christ, bearing up under the pressures of life sent to refine one's faith, and ministering to others according to the gifts given. There are relative levels here – thirty, sixty, and a hundred-fold – but this type has in common the fulfillment of the purpose for which we are left here on earth by our Lord after salvation – just as all crops are planted for a definite purpose and meant to mature and produce.

And he who received seed into the good ground, this is the one who hears the Word and lets it in [so as to understand it], [and] who then produces a crop, with one netting a hundred-fold, one sixty-fold, one thirty-fold.

Matthew 13:23

And those [last ones] are they who received seed into the good ground who hear the Word and accept it, and [then] produce a crop, one thirty-fold, one sixty-fold, one a hundred-fold.

Mark 4:20

And in respect to the [seed] which was sown in the good ground, these are they who in a good and worthy heart hear the Word and retain it, then produce a crop in perseverance.

Luke 8:15

As this parable makes clear at every point, just as seeds are planted for the express purpose of having them grow and produce, so also is this true in the case of the seed of the Word of God. Bearing fruit is something that can only happen if the seed is accepted (not rejected by a hard-packed heart), allowed to take root (not minimalized or quickly abandoned with the inevitable result of shriveling as in the case of the rocky heart), and given sufficient water and light (not allowed to be choked by weeds as in the case of the compromising heart), with the result that the faith-plant sprung from the seed of the gospel grows up to produce its intended crop.

(1) I am the true vine and my Father is the vine-dresser. Every branch [that is] in Me which does not **bear fruit** (2) He removes, and every branch which does **bear fruit** He prunes so that it might **bear more fruit**. (3) You have already been pruned because of the Word I have spoken to you. (4) Stay part of Me, and I will [stay] part of you. Just as the branch cannot **bear fruit** by itself unless it remains part of the vine, so you too cannot [bear true fruit] unless you stay part of Me. (5) I am the vine, you are the branches. If a man remains in Me and I in Him, he will **bear much fruit**; apart from Me you can do nothing. (6) If anyone does not remain in Me, he is like a branch that is thrown away and withers; such branches are picked up, thrown into the fire and burned.

John 15:1-6

So then, my brothers, you also have been put to death in respect to the Law through the body of Christ in order to belong to Another, even to One who has been raised from the dead, so that you may **bear fruit** to God.

Romans 7:4

(9) For this reason we also from the [very] day we heard [of your love] do not cease praying on your behalf and asking that you be fulfilled in regard to the full acceptance (*epignosis*) of His will in all wisdom and spiritual understanding, (10) that you might walk worthy of the Lord to please Him in all things, **bearing fruit** in every good work, and growing by means of the full knowledge (*epignosis*) of God.

Colossians 1:9-10 (cf. Col.1:6)

We are not independent actors in this world. We are the Lord's own planting, His crop, His field of grain, His vineyard, and He is our Planter, Sower, our Husbandman (cf. Matt.13:24-30; 21:34-43; Mk.12:1-9; Lk.20:9-18). It is our responsibility, therefore, to hand our will over to Him to allow Him to bring about the maximum growth in us so as to produce the maximum possible crop.

"You did not choose Me but I chose you (for salvation) and have established you (in spiritual growth and maturity from being taught the truth), in order that you may progress (spiritually) and **bear fruit** and that your fruit may remain (fulfillment of earthly ministry for the highest possible eternal rewards), so that whatever you ask the Father in My Name, He will give it to you (highest possible level of functioning in ministry while yet on earth)."

John 15:16

(6) I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the increase. (7) So then neither he who plants is anything, nor he who waters, but God who gives the increase. (8) Now he who plants and he who waters are one, and each one will receive his own reward according to his own labor. (9) For we are God's fellow workers; **you are God's field**, you are God's building.

1st Corinthians 3:6-9 NKJV

Our status as those who belong to the Lord, believers who are true plantings of the Savior sprung from the seed of the Word of God, is obvious to all by the good fruit which we bear – just as those who are not of Christ are also known by their bad fruit.

(43) "For a good tree does not bear bad fruit, nor does a bad tree bear good fruit. (44) For every tree is known by its own fruit. For men do not gather figs from thorns, nor do they gather grapes from a bramble bush."

Luke 6:43-44 NKJV

"Either make the tree good and its fruit good, or else make the tree bad and its fruit bad; for a tree is known by its fruit."

Matthew 12:33 NKJV

(16) "You will recognize [these false prophets] from their fruit (i.e., their words, teachings, personal behavior and modus operandi). People don't collect grapes from thorn bushes or figs from thistles, do they? (17) Just so every good tree produces good [serviceable] fruit, but the rotten tree produces bad fruit. (18) A good tree cannot produce bad fruit, nor can a rotten tree produce good [appealing] fruit. (19) [For] every good tree which doesn't produce good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. (20) So then, you will recognize [those false prophets] from their fruit."

Matthew 7:16-20

Believers bear the fruit of sanctification (Rom.6:22), a crop of goodness (Eph.5:9), a harvest of righteousness (Phil.1:11; Jas.3:17-18; Heb.12:11), a blessed increase obvious to all that redounds to our eternal account now and forever (Eph.4:17; cf. Rom.1:13; 15:28; Phil.1:22). God gives us that result of growth even as He gives it to the edible plants and fruit trees He created (cf. Matt.6:28-30), so that for those who are responding to His truth, growth and production is a natural process, happening day by day so that we even escape our own notice in drawing closer to the Lord.

(26) And He said, "The kingdom of God is as if a man should scatter seed on the ground, (27) and should sleep by night and rise by day, and the seed should sprout and grow, he himself does not know how. (28) For the earth yields crops by itself: first the blade, then the head, after that the full grain in the head. (29) But when the grain ripens, immediately he puts in the sickle, because the harvest has come."

Mark 4:26-29 NKJV

Our responsibility is to allow the process to take place, even as we allowed the seed to enter our hearts, even as we did not prevent it from sinking its roots to a permanent depth, so also we must keep the weeds cut back and give ourselves over to the natural process of growth that comes from receiving and believing and responding to the truth, until that original seed grows into a massive tree of faith that fills the entire empty space of our hearts.

(30) Then He said, "To what shall we liken the kingdom of God? Or with what parable

shall we picture it? (31) It is like a mustard seed which, when it is sown on the ground, is smaller than all the seeds on earth; (32) but when it is sown, it grows up and becomes greater than all herbs, and shoots out large branches, so that the birds of the air may nest under its shade."

Mark 4:30-32 NKJV (cf. Matt.13:31-33; Lk.13:18-19)

That is our obligation, the commitment we have made as those who have preferred Jesus Christ to this world. But if we do not respond to His Word of truth so as to grow, progress and produce as He intends . . .

(6) He also spoke this parable: "A certain man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard, and he came seeking fruit on it and found none. (7) Then he said to the keeper of his vineyard, 'Look, for three years I have come seeking fruit on this fig tree and find none. Cut it down; why does it use up the ground?' (8) "But he answered and said to him, 'Sir, let it alone this year also, until I dig around it and fertilize it. (9) 'And if it bears fruit, well. But if not, after that you can cut it down.' "

Luke 13:6-9 NKJV (cf. Matt.3:8-10; 21:19; Mk.11:14; Lk.3:8-9)

Producing the crop the Lord intends does involve hard work and sacrifice on our part, giving up the putting of ourselves and our own welfare and concerns first, and putting the kingdom of God in first place instead.

"Most assuredly, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the ground and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it produces much grain."

John 12:24 NKJV

But patience and perseverance will ever have their good results.

So be patient, brothers, until the coming of the Lord. Consider: the [good] farmer waits for the earth [to yield its] precious crop, waiting patiently for it until it receives the late and early rains [which make it grow].

James 5:7

So let us resolve to make it our first priority every day – as long as it is called "today" – to grow as from the good seed the Lord has planted that we may produce and reap a bountiful crop on that day of days to come.

(5) He who, in spite of weeping, goes forth in resolution, carrying seed to sow, (6) will doubtless return rejoicing, bringing in his sheaves.

Psalms 126:5-6

(35) "Haven't you been saying, 'There are still four months until the harvest comes.'? Behold, I tell you, lift up your eyes and look at the fields, for they are already ripe for harvesting. (36) He who reaps is receiving a reward and gathering grain for eternal life

(i.e., bringing those who respond into God's family), so that the sower and the reaper may rejoice together."

John 4:35-36 (cf. Matthew 9:37-38; Luke 10:2)

(9) And [so] let us not grow weary of doing the good [work of God], for at [the appointed] time we will reap [our reward], provided that we do not give up.

Galatians 6:9

The hard-working farmer ought to be the first to receive his share of the crops.

2nd Timothy 2:6 NASB

Therefore by Him let us continually offer the sacrifice of praise to God, that is, *the fruit of our lips*, giving thanks to His name.

Hebrews 13:15 NKJV

C. The Building Analogy

(4) [It is Jesus] to whom you have come, a Living Stone, rejected by men, but, in the eyes of God [the Father], elect and highly honored. (5) And you yourselves [too] are being *built up* (i.e., by the Holy Spirit) into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood for the offering of spiritual sacrifices well-pleasing to God through Jesus Christ. (6) That is why it says in scripture, "Behold, I am placing a stone in Zion, a cornerstone which is select and costly, and the one who believes in Him will most definitely not be put to shame".

1st Peter 2:4-6

(11) Christ Himself appointed some of us apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers (12) in order to prepare all of His holy people for their own ministry work, that the entire body of Christ might thus be *built up*, (13) until we all reach that unifying [goal] of belief in and full-knowledge of the Son of God, that each of us might be a perfect person, that is, that we might attain to that standard of maturity of the fullness of Christ; (14) that we may no longer be immature, swept off-course and carried headlong by every breeze of so-called teaching that emanates from the trickery of men in their readiness to do anything to cunningly work their deceit, (15) but rather that we may, by embracing the truth in love, grow up in all respects with Christ, who is the head of the Church, as our model. (16) In this way, the entire body of the Church, fit and joined together by Him through the sinews He powerfully supplies to each and every part, works out its own growth for the *building up* of itself in love.

Ephesians 4:11-16

Christ [was faithful] as a Son over His house – *whose house we are*, if indeed we hold fast to the hope [in which we] boast firm until the end.

Hebrews 3:6

The Church collectively is a temple, a spiritual house whose Foundation and Cornerstone is Jesus Christ Himself. We are being "built up" into one complete and solid edifice whose

consummation is on the cusp of fulfillment. Analogously, just as the entire Church has had to be painstakingly constructed on the solid foundation of Jesus Christ one believer at a time until it reaches perfection with not a single believer missing in the entire building, so also our individual "edification" ought to proceed "from faith to faith" (Rom.1:17), stacking one brick of truth on another until our personal and individual "house of truth" is complete, "lacking nothing" (Jas.1:4). For there can be no spiritual edification without the knowledge and acceptance of the truth: that is true "wisdom".

Wisdom has built her house,
She has hewn out her seven pillars.
Proverbs 9:1 NKJV

Through wisdom a house is built,
And by understanding it is established;
By knowledge the rooms are filled
With all precious and pleasant riches.
Proverbs 24:3-4 NKJV

Every structure, moreover, must have a firm foundation to be secure, and for the truth, there is one and only one such foundation: the bedrock of the Gospel, faith in our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

(24) "Therefore everyone who hears these words of Mine and acts on them, may be compared to a wise man who ***built his house on the rock***. (25) And the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and slammed against that house; and yet it did not fall, for it had been founded on the rock. (26) Everyone who hears these words of Mine and does not act on them, will be like a foolish man who built his house on the sand. (27) The rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and slammed against that house; and it fell – and great was its fall."
Matthew 7:24-27 NASB (cf. Lk.6:46-49)

The "rock" here, Greek *petra* means "massive rock" or "bedrock" and refers of course to our Lord Jesus Christ (cf. the Rock, Jesus Christ, upon which the Church is founded [as opposed to the "stone", Peter: *petros* not *petra*); He is our One and only Foundation of faith:

For no one can lay [any] other foundation (i.e., for salvation, spiritual growth and production) [other] than the One which has [already] been laid, namely, Jesus Christ.
1st Corinthians 3:11

If we put our faith in Jesus Christ, making Him the basis, the bedrock, the foundation of our lives, whatever winds may blow, whatever flood may come, our "spiritual house" will stand – because we have given Him our lives in this world that we might have life eternal with Him in the next world. And just as the Church needs every individual "living stone" to be complete, so ideally every believer will build on the foundation of faith in Jesus Christ with all of the truths of

the Bible, learning them, believing them, living them, standing up to the tests of life through them, and in time ministering them to others (or helping and supporting those who do). That is the proper sort of construction regarding which no workman needs to be ashamed (2Tim.2:15; contrast Lk.14:28-30):

(10) According to the grace of God given to me like a wise architect I have laid down a foundation, and another is building upon it. ***But let each one take care how he builds upon it.*** (11) For no one can lay another foundation except the One that has been laid down: Jesus Christ. (12) And if someone builds upon his foundation with gold, silver, and precious stones, [or] with wood, hay, and stubble, (13) [in either case] his work will be made manifest [as to its true quality], for the Day [of judgment] will make it clear [for what it truly is], because it will be revealed (lit., uncovered) with fire. And the fire will evaluate (lit., "assay") the work of each person as to what its [true] quality is. (14) If anyone's work which he has built [on his foundation of faith in Christ] remains (i.e., is not burnt away by the fiery evaluation), he will receive a reward [for it]. (15) If anyone's work is burnt up, he will suffer the loss [of any potential reward for it], but he himself will be saved – but in this way [just described] as through fire [which evaluated his false works as worthless and burnt them up].

1st Corinthians 3:10-15

Good construction, as the passage above makes clear, leads to good results: a worthy reward at the judgment seat of Christ. But shoddy construction – and/or the lack of anything good built upon the foundation – not only results in a lack of reward over and above basic salvation (blessed as that surely is) at the judgment seat of Christ, but is also very dangerous in this life because in such cases there is nothing to withstand the winds and floods of personal tribulation which eventually come into nearly every Christian life. For these reasons, proper spiritual "edification" (literal, "building up" or "construction" from the Greek *oikodomeo*, literally, "house-construction"; cf. "edifice") is consistently expressed as one of the main purposes of all ministry – since all godly ministry always has to do with growing through the Word of God:

Now I commend you to God, and to ***His Word of grace***, which is able ***to build you up*** and give you an inheritance among all those who are sanctified.

Acts 20:32

Therefore let us pursue the things which make for peace and the things by which one may ***edify*** another.

Romans 14:19 NKJV

Now concerning things offered to idols: We know that we all have knowledge.

Knowledge puffs up, but love ***edifies***.

1st Corinthians 8:1 NKJV

Everything is permissible for me, but not everything is beneficial. Everything is permissible for me, but not everything ***edifies*** (i.e., contributes to spiritual growth).

1st Corinthians 10:23

(3) But he who prophesies speaks **edification** and exhortation and comfort to men. (4) He who speaks in a tongue **edifies** himself, but he who prophesies **edifies** the church. (5) I wish you all spoke with tongues, but even more that you prophesied; for he who prophesies is greater than he who speaks with tongues, unless indeed he interprets, that the church may receive **edification**.

1st Corinthians 14:3-5 NKJV

In the same way you also, since you are [so] desirous of spiritual gifts, seek that you may abound [in them] for the purpose of the **edification** of the Church.

1st Corinthians 14:12

For you indeed give thanks well, but the other is not **edified**.

1st Corinthians 14:17 NKJV

Let all these things (i.e., the functioning of the various spiritual gifts) be done for the purpose of **edification**.

1st Corinthians 14:26b

For even if I should boast somewhat more about our authority, which the Lord gave us for **edification** and not for your destruction, I shall not be ashamed.

2nd Corinthians 10:8 NKJV

Again, do you think that we excuse ourselves to you? We speak before God in Christ. But we do all things, beloved, for your **edification**.

2nd Corinthians 12:19 NKJV

Therefore I write these things being absent, lest being present I should use sharpness, according to the authority which the Lord has given me for **edification** and not for destruction.

2nd Corinthians 13:10 NKJV

Let no corrupt word proceed out of your mouth, but what is good for necessary **edification**, that it may impart grace to the hearers.

Ephesians 4:29 NKJV

(6) So then, exactly as you [originally] received Christ Jesus as [your] Lord, be walking in Him [in the very same way], (7) rooted and **built up** in him, established in the faith just as you were taught, overflowing with thanksgiving.

Colossians 2:6-7

Therefore encourage one another, and **edify** one another (i.e., contribute to the spiritual growth of each other), just as you are doing.

1st Thessalonians 5:11

But you, beloved, ***building yourselves up*** on your most holy faith, praying in the Holy Spirit, keep yourselves in the love of God, looking for the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ unto eternal life.

Jude 1:20-21 NKJV

When we are properly "edified", having constructed a spiritual "house of the truth" inside of our hearts, the blessed end result is fellowship with our dear Lord and with our dear heavenly Father even while we are still in this world.

Jesus answered and said to him, "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 NKJV

(19) So then, you are no longer strangers and hangers-on, but you are fellow citizens and fellow members of the household of God, (20) established upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Himself the cornerstone, (21) in whom the entire ***structure*** is in the process of being joined together and is growing into a holy temple in the Lord, (22) in whom you too are being ***built up*** into a ***dwelling place*** of God by the Spirit.

Ephesians 2:19-22

D. The Military Analogy

The Christian life is a fight against all manner of opposition, internal and external, seen and unseen, and in many respects the comparison of our life after salvation to battle and military campaigning is both confirming and illustrative of what we all know to be the case – since we all have the battle scars to prove it. This analogy is ubiquitous in scripture; a complete rehearsal of the passages where military metaphors are to be found is thus beyond the scope of this treatment. But it will be beneficial to list and comment here upon some of the key passages which use this picture to teach us about the texture of the Christian life and the Christian walk.

For the weapons of our warfare are not fleshly, but are powerful for God, for the destruction of strongholds, destroying sophistries and every presumption that raises itself up against the knowledge of God, and taking every thought prisoner so as to obey Christ.

2nd Corinthians 10:4-5

So do not give the devil an opening (lit. "place" to attack).

Ephesians 4:27

For our battle is not against flesh and blood, but against [angelic] princes, against [angelic] authorities, against the cosmic powers of this [present] darkness, against evil spirits in the heavenly realms.

Ephesians 6:12

Believers face an enemy who cannot be seen and who cannot be touched or physically rebuffed. That is a critical thing to remember whenever we find ourselves being assaulted and made subject to tribulation great or small. Job forgot about the spiritual dimension and that self-inflicted weakness was the beginning of his failure – not that he could be expected to know the details of why all the troubles were befalling him, but surely he had to know that this world is a battlefield for believers precisely for the reasons that these disasters came upon him. We who have the book of Job to read at our leisure should certainly not be shocked, therefore, when we are beset by attacks – as if it were not the normal order of things in this conflict in which we are involved (1Pet.4:12). If we resist spiritually (Jas.4:7), we will win the victory (1Jn.5:4).

(31) So what shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who is against us? (32) He who did not spare His own Son, but handed Him over for our sake, how will He not also graciously give us everything [we need] along with [that gift of] Him? (33) Who will [dare to] bring charges against God's elect? God is the One who is pronouncing [us] justified. (34) Who is he that condemns [us]? Christ Jesus is the One who died [condemned in our place], and the One, moreover, who was raised from the dead [for us], who is [seated] at the right hand of God, who is also making petitions on our behalf. (35) What will separate us from Christ's love? Tribulation? Or privation? Or persecution? Or hunger? Or destitution? Or danger? Or violence? (36) As it is written, "For your sake we are being put to death all day long. We were accounted as sheep for slaughter". (37) But in all such things we are decisively *victorious* through Him who loved us [enough to do what He did for us]. (38) For I am persuaded that neither death nor life, neither angelic nor human authorities, neither things present nor things to come, neither heavenly powers, (39) be they the highest [of the elect] or the lowest [of the fallen], nor any other created thing [on this earth] will be able to separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Romans 8:31-39

We thus have nothing to fear from this unequal contest – because in fact, the inequalities are actually all on our side and to our advantage (1Jn.4:4).

I give you this command, Timothy my child, in accordance with the prophecies that were made long ago about you, that you conduct a good campaign, one that is in keeping with them.

1st Timothy 1:18

Fight the good fight of the faith.

1st Timothy 6:12a

Endure hardship with me like a good soldier of Christ Jesus. No one on military campaign becomes involved in the affairs of normal life. [He avoids such things] that he may please the one who enlisted him.

2nd Timothy 2:3-4

Viewing our life here on earth as a military campaign is a helpful point of view to preserve. And it is in fact more than just a point of view in light of Ephesians 6:12 and other such passages. The Church is attacking the devil's kingdom, and his strongest defenses will not prevail against it (Matt.16:18). And individually we are attacking too – when we grow, when we walk with the Lord and pass the fiery tests and survive the blistering counterattacks that come our way, when we help others through the ministries we have been given. Satan's rebellion against our Lord, our "commanding general", the "Lord of Hosts", is, after all, a military action, and our Lord is going to bring it to a conclusion in a martial way at the battle of Armageddon. We, the Church, will participate in that final battle in a direct and "hands on" way.¹⁷ Until then, we are invaders of the devil's kingdom, so that the hostility we are receiving should come as no surprise. This life for Christians is a battlefield, both metaphorically in regard to what we can see, and literally in regard to what we cannot see. That said, it behooves us to be good soldiers of Jesus Christ, to keep the objective always in view, and to refrain from taking the flak we receive in a personal way – of course the enemy is going to shoot at us; why wouldn't he? Our overall goal ought to be, as the last passage quoted above says, to make our commanding officer as happy with our battlefield performance as we possibly can.

Now we encourage you, brothers, caution those who are [walking] disorderly (*ataktos*).
1st Thessalonians 5:14a

For we hear that there are some who walk among you in a disorderly (*ataktos*) manner, not working at all, but are busybodies.
2nd Thessalonians 3:11 (cf. 2Thes.3:7)

Just as in combat and military life generally not all are heroes in battle and not all soldiers behave as they should. So also in the Church not all are advancing in ranks side by side with those of us who are following Jesus Christ. The walk of some is "disorderly" (*ataktos*), literally, "out of ranks" or "out of step", we might say, a much bigger danger in the combat of the ancient world where maintaining the integrity of the battle line was essential for victory whereas disorderly lines were easily defeated.

The important take-away here from these two passages is that being a bad Christian harms not only ourselves but the entire unit. We may think of ourselves as independent actors, and we certainly all are endowed with individual free will, but the Church is a Body and it suffers as each part suffers (1Cor.12:26). When that suffering is caused by disgraceful conduct, the disorder in the ranks sets us all back. So whenever we are tempted to do that which we know is wrong, or to avoid that which we know is right, we should remember that we are not only letting down ourselves and the Lord but also all of our fellow believers who are counting on us to hold our place in the battle line.

¹⁷ See part 6 of the *Coming Tribulation* series, section I.4, "The Incarceration of Satan and his Demons".

For you yourselves know how you ought to follow us, for we were not disorderly (*ataktos*) among you.
2nd Thessalonians 3:7

In the verse above, Paul uses himself as an example of someone who is the opposite of being "out of ranks", working with his own hands so as not to burden his hosts with the need of supporting him. The individuals he criticizes in the context here for being disorderly (2Thes.3:11) were sponging off of the other believers in Thessalonika, refusing to work to support themselves and exploiting the good intentions of others in the church – that is the definition of leaving a hole in the ranks for the enemy to exploit.

I urge you, brethren – you know the household of Stephanas, that it is the firstfruits of Achaia, and that they have devoted (*tasso*) themselves to the ministry of the saints – that you also submit to such, and to everyone who works and labors with us.
1st Corinthians 16:15-16 NKJV

In contrast to the negative example of some of those in Thessalonika, Paul commends those in Corinth who "arranged themselves in the ranks" to minister to other believers ("devoted" = a form of *tasso* from the same root as *ataktos* in the previously quoted passages above), filling the gaps in the line on the day of spiritual battle. It goes without saying that as Paul commands we should seek to be like the latter – those who plug the holes in the line – rather than the former . . . those who desert and cause them. This is all the more true in our Laodicean day where the gaps are many and those willing and prepared to "stand in the gap" and fill them are few (cf. Ezek.22:30). For those so willing, the opportunities to win glory on the Christian battlefield are many indeed, and seizing these will not be regretted when our "rank" is called to be evaluated by the Lord on that Day (cf. 1Cor.15:23).

[A]nd that they may come to their senses, [escaping] from the devil's trap, though they have now been taken captive by him to do his will.
2nd Timothy 2:26

Failure to comport oneself as a "good soldier of Jesus Christ" (2Tim.2:3) can result in becoming a POW of the evil one – and not only that, but also being "turned" into one of his own. The end result of capture, taken to that extreme, will be apostasy or the sin unto death, absent "coming to one's senses". Far better to stay alert to the dangers of this battlefield on which we are maneuvering. For if we do stay alert, and if we do continue to follow our Commanding Officer up the high hill to Zion, we are in no danger of capture at all. Unlike the worldly analogy where soldiers are sometimes captured through no fault of their own, the Lord of Hosts is the perfect Commander and would never allow such a thing to happen – unless we invite it by turning away from following Him.

(1) Where do these conflicts, where do these fights [that are being waged] among you come from? Isn't it from your [desire for] pleasures which do battle in your [bodily] members? (2) You lust [for things], and yet you do not have [them]; you commit murder

[in your hearts]; you are filled with envy, and yet you are not able to obtain [what you are envious for]; you fight and wage war – yet you do not get [what you want] because you're not asking [for it]. (3) And when you do ask [for it], you don't receive [it] because you are asking with evil intent with the purpose of squandering [what you ask for] in your pleasures (i.e., under the control and in the service of lust).

James 4:1-3

Beloved, I entreat you as fellow sojourners and temporary residents [on this earth] to refrain from the fleshly lusts which are waging war against your [very] lives.

1st Peter 2:11

Giving in to a life of sin is one such way that soldiers of Christ fall out of ranks. Seeking one's own purposes to the detriment of spiritual growth, progress and production inevitably leads to a loss of sanctification as well. If we stop following the Lord closely, we are much more prone to following the flesh instead, and the end result of that is that the sin nature will gain the upper hand in the internal warfare we all must wage against the lusts and weaknesses which the Spirit otherwise opposes (Gal.5:16-25).

(8) Stay sober and stay awake [on guard]. Our adversary the devil roams about like a roaring lion, looking for someone he can devour. (9) Resist him, strong in your faith, remembering that your fellow believers in this world are undergoing the exact same sort of suffering [that you are].

1st Peter 5:8-9

As we have had occasion to discuss many times (with many other studies devoted to the point directly or indirectly), the evil one is our chief adversary (along with his followers), and his revolt against the Lord is the backdrop for all that has happened in human history and all that is now happening in this world. We are combatants in the struggle, and the sooner we come to internalize this important truth the sooner we will leave off taking all the minor (and major) misfortunes that befall us "personally" – as if this were "all about us", when in fact it is "all about Jesus Christ".

(20) Remember this principle I taught you: A servant is not greater than his master. If they persecuted Me, they will also persecute you. (21) And all these things they will do to you because of My Name – because they do not accept the One who sent Me.

John 15:20-21

Blessedly, our Lord has provided us with all the tools and resources we need to fight this fight in which we are engaged, preeminent among which is the invincible combination of the Holy Spirit and the Bible:

. . . and gird on the sword of the Spirit – which is the Word of truth.

Ephesians 6:17

Spiritual growth, an effective walk with the Lord, and our production for Him all always come down to our search for, response to, and application of the truth in the power of the Holy Spirit: the truth found in scripture is the weapon with which we address the forces of the evil one through doing what the Lord would have us to do in spiritual advance, and the Spirit is the one who empowers that application of the truth from its initial ingestion into our hearts through faith to its motivation of us in walking with the Lord and helping others do the same. We cannot fight this battle without the Spirit, and the Spirit's tool, His fulcrum, His weapon, His sword is the truth we have sought out and made our own by believing it.

For the Word of God is living and powerful; it is sharper than any two-edged sword, penetrating even to the point of being able to divide the spirit from its earthly life and the marrow from its bones; [for] it (i.e., the Word when resident in our conscience by faith) acts as a judge of our heart's intentions and emotions.

Hebrews 4:12

Moreover, this sword of truth vivified by the Spirit cuts both ways. Not only does it "reduce fortresses" as we push forward in this world with Jesus Christ – for while we are not waging war "according to the flesh" because "the weapons of our warfare are not of the flesh, but divinely powerful for the destruction of fortresses" so that we "are destroying speculations and every lofty thing raised up against the knowledge of God" and "are taking every thought captive to the obedience of Christ" (2Cor.10:3-5 NASB) – but this sword of truth empowered by the Spirit also slashes away all false motivations we may have, and cuts us to the quick whenever we stray from the ranks in our hearts (Heb.4:12), as long as we deign to listen to the Spirit's still, small voice, reminding us of our training, of our commitment, of the Commander we have pledged to serve, and of our fellow Christian soldiers who need our whole-hearted support at all times. For our Lord surely knows our true motives (1Chron.28:9; Ps.7:9) and uses the Spirit and the Word to reveal them to us when they are ill-founded (Phil.3:15).

(10) So come what may, draw strength from the Lord and be strengthened through His powerful might. (11) Put on the full armor of God, so that you may be able to stand firm against the tricks of the devil. (12) For our battle is not against flesh and blood, but against [angelic] princes, against [angelic] authorities, against the cosmic powers of this [present] darkness, against evil spirits in the heavenly realms. (13) Keeping that in mind, put on God's complete set of armor so that you may be able to resist attack on the day evil surrounds you, and stand your ground – once you have done all that it is your responsibility to do (i.e., prior spiritual growth and present spiritual application). (14) So stand your ground, having girded your loins with truth and having put on the breastplate of righteousness, (15) and having dressed your feet in preparation for [sharing] the gospel of peace (i.e., reconciliation with God as the result of faith in Christ). (16) And at all times take up the shield of faith, with which you will be able to quench all the fiery missiles of the evil one. (17) And [in this spiritual warfare] put on the helmet of salvation and gird on the sword of the Spirit – which is the Word of truth.

Ephesians 6:10-17

As this passage reminds us, our resources for confronting the satanic opposition against us and giving a good account of ourselves in this fight are immense and all-sufficient. And for those who are being consistent in fighting this good fight, there is every justification to look forward to a generous reward in eternity.

(7) I have fought the good fight. I have completed my course. I have kept the faith. (8) In the future there is reserved for me the crown of righteousness which the Lord, the righteous judge, will award to me on that [great] day [of judgment] – and not only to me, but to all who have loved His appearance (i.e., who have exercised consistent love for Jesus Christ in anticipation of His return, fighting the good fight as Paul has done).
2nd Timothy 4:7-8

So let us stay on guard (Mk.13:33), that He may guard and protect us (Ps.46:1-3; 2Thes.3:3); let us finish this campaign we have started, advancing to the bitter end no matter what befalls (Lk.14:31-32); let us ever take up the armor of light (Rom.13:12), the breastplate of faith and love, and the helmet of our confidence in ultimate deliverance (1Thes.5:8), arming ourselves with the Word of truth in the power of God, for these are our weapons of righteousness in the right hand and in the left (2Cor.6:7), not fleshly ones, but divinely empowered ones which no force on earth, seen or unseen, can resist (2Cor.10:3-6). For we know that we are supported in this fight by an innumerable army of invisible allies (2Ki.6:17; cf. Ps.91:11-16), and that the Angel of the Lord encamps around those who fear Him and rescues them from every trial (Ps.34:7); and that though a thousand fall at our sides or even ten thousand at our right hands, our Commander is able to ward off from us whatever disaster may threaten (Ps.91:7) – if we make Him our Fortress (Ps.91:9): He will protect us come what may (Ps.121:1-8); He will guard us through the power of His Name (Jn.17:11-12); He will bring us safely through the valley of the death-shadow into the glorious light beyond (Ps.23:4-6). And if we continue the fight, faithful to the end, He will reward us with our due share of the spoils (Is.33:23b; 53:12; cf. Ps.110:1-7; Lk.11:21ff.; Eph.4:7-8; Rev.2:26-27; 3:21), and as with David's mighty men (2Sam.23:8ff.; 1Chron.11:10ff.), give us a name of renown whose glory will never fade (Rev.2:17; 3:5; 3:12; cf. Rev.21:14). For our victory in Jesus Christ has already been secured by His victory at the cross.

Now the God of peace will quickly crush Satan under your feet.
Romans 16:20

But thanks be to God! He gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.
1st Corinthians 15:57 NIV

E. The Pilgrimage Analogy

"I am the light of the world. He who follows Me shall not *walk* in darkness, but will have the light of life."
John 8:12b

The Christian life is often compared to a journey, walking with Jesus Christ day by day and

following Him to the end. The prevalence of this analogy in scripture is the reason for the title of this study, "Peripateology", the study of the Christian walk, with the coinage being based upon the most common word for walking in the New Testament, *peripateo* (cf. English "peripatetic"). And while this Greek word can and often does refer to literal walking, more often than not it is used in the Bible in a metaphorical way to describe our behavior in this world. Sometimes this relates to unbelievers or lapsed believers (Mk.7:5; Jn.6:66; Eph.2:2; Col.3:7), but usually it is employed to guide Christians in the way in which we ought to be walking in this world (cf. 2Cor.10:2-3; 12:18):

We should walk in the light and not in the dark so as not to stumble (Jn.11:9-10).

We should walk in the light while we still can before the darkness comes (Jn.12:35).

We should walk in newness of life (Rom.6:4).

We should walk according to the Spirit and not according to the flesh (Rom.8:1-4).

We should walk in a seemly way as in the day, and not in revelry, drunkenness, lewdness, lust, strife and envy (Rom.13:13).

We should walk in love so as not to grieve our brothers and sisters in Christ (Rom.14:15).

We should walk as spiritual (following the Spirit) and not as carnal (following the sin nature) in envy and strife (1Cor.3:3).

We should walk being satisfied with the gifts, provision and circumstances the Lord has given us (1Cor.7:17).

We should walk in the Spirit, by means of the Spirit (Gal.5:16).

We should walk in the accomplishment of the good works that the Lord has prepared for us to do (Eph.2:10).

We should walk worthily of our calling in Jesus Christ (Eph.4:1).

We should not walk as unbelievers do in futility of mind, darkened understanding, alienation from God, ignorance of the truth, hardness of heart, insensitivity to the Spirit, being abandoned to lewdness, uncleanness, greediness (Eph.4:17).

We should walk in love (Eph.5:2).

We should walk as children of the light (Eph.5:8).

We should take care how we walk, not as fools but as those who are wise (Eph.5:15).

We should walk as the godly walk, not like the ungodly (Phil.3:17-18; cf. Ps.1:1).

We should walk worthy of the Lord pleasing Him, with good works, increasing knowledge of God, strengthened in all His might, and in all patience, longsuffering and joy, ever giving thanks (Col.1:10-12).

We should continue walking now just as we received Jesus as our Savior, rooted and built up in Him, established in faith with thanksgiving. (Col.2:6-7).

We should walk in wisdom towards those who do not believe (Col.4:5).

We should walk worthily of God (1Thes.2:12).

We should walk as we have been taught to in order to please God (1Thes.4:1).

We should walk in a decent manner towards those who are not believers (1Thes.4:12).

We should avoid those who walk in a disorderly way (2Thes.3:6; cf. 2Thes.3:11).

We should walk in the light (1Jn.1:7), not in the darkness (1Jn.1:6; 2:11).

We should walk as Jesus walked (1Jn.2:6).

We should walk in the truth (2Jn.1:4-6; 3Jn.1:4-5).

In other words, we believers in Jesus Christ are not to be walking about aimlessly; rather we are to be ever walking with Jesus Christ through this dark world, progressing along a definite track in a specific direction for a certain purpose: to cross the finish line of this life and enter into the presence of the Lord, pleasing Him with our walk here and now and reaping the corresponding rewards when we finally see Him face to face. And **how** we walk in this world before that time makes all the difference.

(9) For this reason we also from the [very] day we heard [of your love] do not cease praying on your behalf and asking that you be fulfilled in regard to the full acceptance of His will in all wisdom and spiritual understanding, (10) that you might **walk worthy** of the Lord to please Him in all things, bearing fruit in every good work, and growing by means of the full knowledge of God.

Colossians 1:9-10

Times may be hard. But we keep moving. There may opposition. But we keep moving. All manner of things may happen which seem to conspire against us so as to knock us off the high road to Zion, but we persevere, fighting our way back onto the road, a narrow one which leads

upward in only one, positive direction, and making it our dearest desire to walk worthily of our Lord on this journey as the passage above exhorts us to do.

(5) Happy is everyone whose strength is in You. Their hearts are set on the highways [of pilgrimage to Zion]. (6) As they pass through the [dry] valley of Bachah (lit., "weeping"; i.e., the wilderness of life), they make it a place of springs. Even the early rains enwrap it with [their] blessings. (7) They go from strength to strength, until they appear before God in Zion.

Psalm 84:5-7 NIV (cf. Is.35:8-10; Is.55:11; Jer.31:12; 31:6; 50:5)

In this pilgrimage of ours, wonderfully symbolized by the passage above, we are treading a narrow road (Matt.7:13-14; cf. Lk.13:24), taking pains not to turn to the left (after pleasures and personal interests) or the right (out of fear or worry) but to head straight to Zion so as to please our Lord. We are following the Spirit's guidance (Gal.5:16), listening to His "still, small voice" (1Ki.19:12), so as to keep close to the dear Shepherd who is guiding us, the One who is leading us to good pasture (provision for physical needs on the journey), to clear, cool water (provision for spiritual needs on the journey), leading us ever on the right and righteous way, and keeping us safe even from darkness of death by ever-present protection (Ps.23:1-4).

We are walking through the desert of this world to the land of promise that awaits us, confident that our feet will not swell nor our shoes or clothing wear out, confident that our every need will be met until we cross Jordan's river into the glory that awaits (Deut.8:4; Neh.9:21). We move forward day by day, one day at a time, carrying our crosses toward our final day in emulation of the Lord who bought us (Matt.10:38; 16:24-26; Mk.8:34; Lk.9:23; 14:27), and merely sojourning in this world in the meantime, being strangers to it just as all our spiritual fathers were (1Chron.29:15; Ps.39:12; 1Pet.1:1-2; 1:17; 2:11), looking forward to the promised goal of the calling to which we have been called, and not to the temporary lust, dust and rust of this wicked world – and never looking back (Lk.17:32).

(13) These all died [while still walking] in faith, though they had not received the [fulfillment of their] promises. But [while they lived] they did catch sight of [these promises] from a distance and salute them, [so to speak], thus making it plain [to all the world] that they were [in effect] strangers and sojourners on the earth. (14) For people who express [their faith] in this way make it quite evident that they are eagerly in search of a homeland [other than the place they now occupy]. (15) Indeed, if these [believers'] hearts had yearned for the [land] from which they had departed, they would have had [ample] opportunity to turn back. (16) But they were zealous for a better place, a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God. He has, in fact, prepared a city for them (i.e., the New Jerusalem).

Hebrews 11:13-16

(3) Biblical Role Models

Our objective as believers in Jesus Christ is to walk through this world with Him in an acceptable

way, drawing closer to Him in our Christian walk day by day so as to grow, progress and produce. Closeness to God the Father and to our dear Lord Jesus Christ in our brief sojourn here in this world is an important aspect of our Christian walk.

Blessed are those you choose and bring near to live in your courts!
Psalm 65:4a NIV

But as for me, it is good to be near God. I have made the Sovereign Lord my refuge; I will tell of all your deeds.
Psalm 73:28 NKJV

The Lord is near to all who call upon Him, to all who call upon Him in truth.
Psalm 145:18 NKJV

"For who is the one who has devoted his heart to come close to Me?", says the Lord.
Jeremiah 30:21b

"Jesus answered and said to him, "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 NKJV

For the law made nothing perfect, but the bringing in of a better hope did; by the which we draw nigh unto God.
Hebrews 7:19 KJV

Come closer to God, and He will come closer to you.
James 4:8 (cf. Is.55:6-7; Zech.1:3; Mal.3:7)

Closeness to God means turning our back on the world (Jas.4:4; 1Jn.2:15-17), and the desires of the flesh (Rom.6:6; 7:5-6; Eph.4:22; Col.3:9; 1Pet.4:3), and results in greater joy of fellowship with Him as we progress through the truth on our spiritual journey (1Cor.1:9; 1Pet.1:8; 1Jn.1:3-4). Nearness to the Lord and close fellowship with Him is the result of walking our Christian walk in a way that pleases Him. That has always been the case:

We do not want you to become lazy, but to imitate those who through faith and patience inherit what has been promised.
Hebrews 6:12 NKJV

Remember your leaders, who spoke the word of God to you. Consider the outcome of their way of life and imitate their faith.
Hebrews 13:7 NKJV

Brothers and sisters, as an example of patience in the face of suffering, take the prophets who spoke in the name of the Lord.
James 5:10 NKJV

Dear friend, do not imitate what is evil but what is good.
3rd John 1:11 NKJV

As these verses remind us, good role models go a long way towards showing us how to walk in this world. When we imitate someone truly worthy of imitation, it has a tendency to cut through all doctrinal and theological complications and demonstrate for us "the entire package" so as to be able to "go and do likewise" immediately. For that reason, there are worse things a believer could do than to set him/herself to emulating the lives of the great believers of the Bible (their spiritually positive qualities, that is). Such can be a valuable way of encouraging ourselves and empowering our Christian walk, shining a bright light upon our defects and reinforcing the good we are doing.

(32) Now what shall I say more? For time would fail me, were I to go on and relate the stories of Gideon, Barak, Sampson, Jephthah, David, Samuel and the prophets, (33) who through their faith defeated kingdoms, accomplished acts of righteousness, received the fulfillment of promises, shut the mouths of lions, (34) quenched the power of fire, fled the mouth of the sword, were made strong in weakness, were made powerful in war, defeated enemy armies – (35) women even received back their dead. (36) Some [of these great believers of the past] were tortured, refusing release, that they might obtain a better resurrection (i.e., worth more to them than their lives; cf. Ps.63:3). Others endured ridicule and beatings, and even chains and imprisonment. (37) They were stoned, sawed in half, killed by the sword. They went about in sheepskins and goat hides. They were deprived, persecuted, abused. (38) The world was not worthy of them. They wandered the deserts and the mountains, making their homes in caves and fissures in the earth. (39) And through their faith, all of them though they became witnesses [to the world] (lit., "were martyred"), yet they did not receive the promise (i.e., resurrection and reward), (40) since God was looking forward for our sakes to something better, so that they might not be made perfect (i.e., resurrected and rewarded) without us.

Hebrews 11:32-40

In the spirit of this passage, the list below is offered only by way of example, lest "time should fail us". Investigating the life of David would require a book; considering the example of our Lord, an encyclopedia – for He is the ultimate example to us all. It is hoped that as the principles taught throughout this study are learned and digested through faith, the strengths and positive qualities of all the greats of scripture will be seen ever more clearly as the Bible is read daily, and that the positive attributes of these believers, demonstrated in the effectiveness and rich texture of their individual walks with the Lord, will be more easily and more joyously adapted to our own. For there is much to emulate even in a very brief perusal of some of the more outstanding believers of the Bible.

Enoch

Enoch made a practice of walking [diligently] with God – then he was no more, because God took him [to Himself].

Genesis 5:24

By faith Enoch was taken away so that he did not see death, “and was not found, because God had taken him”; for before he was taken he had this testimony, that he pleased God.
Hebrews 11:5

We know very little about Enoch, but we know all we need to know. Both in the genealogy of the line of faith in Genesis and in the catalog of great believers in Hebrews he is included for his consistency of spiritual growth, walking with God closely, diligently and persistently, so much so that he is recorded by the Spirit as having "pleased God", and was rewarded with an early release from the troubles of this world in a unique manner (i.e., transmutation rather than conventional physical death). Enoch is in for a great eternal reward, no doubt. Let us emulate his efforts in making our walk with the Lord more constant and closer each day.

Noah

These are the generations of Noah. Noah was a righteous man, and perfect in his generations. Noah, moreover, made a habit of walking with God.
Genesis 6:9

Noah did everything just as God commanded him.
Genesis 6:22 NIV

The Lord then said to Noah, "Go into the ark, you and your whole family, because I have found you righteous in this generation."
Genesis 7:1 NIV

And Noah did all that the Lord commanded him.
Genesis 7:5 NIV

Noah's walk with God is described in Hebrews in the very same terms as was that of Enoch. Moreover, Noah was called upon by the Lord to do things no one had ever done before – and he did them, *all* of them, consistently, and in precisely the way in which the Lord commanded him to do them. Nor does scripture give us any indication that he was hesitant or complained in any way. That would be a marvel of obedience and spiritual consistency at any time, but in the midst of a generation so perverse that "all flesh" outside of Noah and his family had "corrupted their way" (Gen.6:12), Noah's example is truly amazing. Difficult times are coming for us too. A flood of sorts, and a worldwide one too. And we too are called upon to build an ark to survive that coming flood, not a literal wooden boat, but a vessel of truth in our hearts capable of staying afloat no matter what storms and swells the riptides of tribulation bear us into. Like Noah, let us be consistent in our obedient preparation that we may not only survive that flood but spiritually thrive in its midst, offering the refuge of truth to all who come to our light (cf. Ezek.14:14; 14:20; 1Pet.3:20-21).

By faith, Noah, when divinely informed about things which were not yet visible, in reverent piety constructed an ark for the deliverance of his family, through which [same] faith [by responding to God] he condemned the world and became heir to the righteousness which is [awarded] according to faith.

Hebrews 11:7

Abraham

(8) By faith, Abraham, when He was called [by God], obeyed and went forth into the place he was destined to receive as an inheritance. He went forth, moreover, in ignorance of where [exactly] he was heading. (9) By faith, he sojourned as an alien in the land he had been promised, dwelling in tents with Jacob and Isaac, coheirs of [this same] promise. (10) For he was waiting for the foundation of that city (i.e., the New Jerusalem) whose architect and builder is God.

Hebrews 11:8-10

(17) By faith Abraham offered up Isaac when he was tested, and was on the point of offering up [in sacrifice] his one and only son, the one who [about whom he] had received the promises, (18) about whom it had been said, "In Isaac shall your seed be called", (19) [for Abraham was] reckoning that God was able to raise [him] from the dead, whence (i.e., from the dead) he did receive [Isaac] back even metaphorically (i.e., Isaac was as good as dead but God delivered him through the substitute of the ram, a type of Jesus Christ).

Hebrews 11:17-19

In many important ways, Abraham is *the* example for believers. He obeyed the Lord, even when it was hard, even when he had no clear idea of where he was going (the land of promise) or what he was doing or why (sacrificing Isaac). He was not perfect, but he always recovered from his mistakes, and demonstrated his true, solid and deep faith in the Lord by his patience, waiting until he was a hundred years old for the birth of the heir he so longed for. And without hesitation and in complete faith in the Lord in spite of the rending of his heart, he was willing to offer that heir up as a sacrifice – because he *trusted* the Lord no matter what. Therefore when it comes to faith, Abraham "is the father of us all" (Rom.4:16), and the perfect model of resilient, consistent, obedient faith that trusts in the Lord and in His promises regardless of what the eyes may see or the ears hear or the emotions feel. Let us resolve to follow in his footsteps of dynamic faith whatever this life brings, because, like Abraham, we too are "waiting for the foundation of that city whose architect and builder is God" (Heb.11:10).

Jacob

Then the man said, "Your name will no longer be Jacob, but Israel, because you have struggled with God and with humans and have overcome."

Genesis 32:28 NIV

Unwilling to cross the river into Canaan without the Lord's blessing, Jacob hung onto the Lord for

dear life, even to the point of being rendered partially lame for refusing to let go. This action, which gains him the name "Israel", or "he who wrestles with God", is an apt reminder of the "wrestling faith" of the father of the twelve patriarchs. Jacob had a difficult life, as he himself attests (Gen.47:9), and his name "Jacob" is often invoked in referring to Israel when in difficulty and under pressure (as in the Tribulation being referred to as "the time of Jacob's trouble": Jer.30:7). But the patriarch Israel never let go of the Lord, and that is precisely the type of "wrestling faith" we all have need of when times are tough – and especially if it be our lot to endure the toughest time of all, the Great Tribulation. Let us therefore resolve like Jacob to hold onto the Lord in faith for all we are worth, never even thinking of letting Him go until He likewise touches us and releases us and brings us home to be with Him.

Joseph

How can a young man keep his way pure? By guarding it according to your word.
Psalm 119:9 ESV

While not referencing Joseph personally, the verse above perfectly exemplifies his life as we are given to know it from scripture. Joseph served his father Israel with purity and integrity, even when it aggravated his brothers (to ultimate near-fatal effect). He told his brothers and his father the truth about his dream, even when it made him appear arrogant in their eyes. He served Potiphar with diligence even as a slave, and with loyalty, even when tempted by his wife, refusing to have anything to do with her, though it landed him in prison as a result. And instead of becoming sullen and blaming God – as so many have done in this life, even many who should know better – Joseph continued to act with purity of character while in prison, serving faithfully in all he was given to do. And in the end, God delivered him and made him ruler over all of Egypt.

If we read carefully, we can see how the Lord was preparing Joseph, teaching him deep humility and giving him multiple opportunities to refine his administrative skills, and multiple tests too, to remind him to trust the Lord and to be a good witness to the Lord even when things were going oh so wrong – from the human point of view. But we have the benefit of historical hindsight, and, indeed, we are meant to use it – that is the entire purpose of scriptures such as this (Rom.15:4). And we know the end of the severe testing and difficult course of preparation the Lord put Joseph through . . . but it is good to consider that it all would have been for naught if Joseph had not held tight to his purity and integrity, doing what was right in the eyes of men – and, even much more importantly, doing what was right in the eyes of God, trusting in Him no matter what.

"But as for you, you meant evil against me; but God meant it for good, in order to bring it about as it is this day, to save many people alive."
Genesis 50:20 NKJV

Let us then resolve to follow in Joseph's footsteps, holding fast to a pure way of life and serving with integrity in all we have been given to do, whether in worldly things or spiritual ones. For while there may be trouble along the way, the end of trusting the Lord deeply as Joseph did is all for the good, the absolute, divine good.

And we know that everything works together for good . . . *for those who love God.*
Romans 8:28a

Moses

He was raised as the son of Pharaoh's daughter, "educated in all the wisdom of the Egyptians" (Acts 7:22), and when in later years he saw an Egyptian persecuting one of his countrymen, he slew the offender (Ex.2:12), an act which led to his exile (Ex.2:15). These may not seem to be the actions of a humble person, but on that point we have the definitive testimony of scripture:

Now the man Moses was very humble, more than all men who were on the face of the earth.
Numbers 12:3 NKJV

True humility is not for show but resides in the heart. Moses was a man who more than any other of his generation – and perhaps of all time – deeply understood the infinite disparity between God's greatness and his own comparative nothingness. This is of course something all Christians should and even all unbelievers do understand intellectually (early in life before they begin to harden their hearts). But Moses actually believed it, understood it therefore through faith by the Spirit, and continually acted upon it. While this humility sometimes comes out in a negative way (e.g., Ex.4:10-14 – none of us is perfect, after all), it is a hallmark of most everything scripture tells about Moses, a man who seldom confronted God with his own ego, accepting completely instead the wisdom and the power and the authority of the Lord.

"And in the morning you shall see the glory of the Lord; for He hears your complaints against the Lord. But what are we, that you complain against us?"
Exodus 16:7 NKJV

Few believers in history have been willing to put "You, Lord" before "I, Lord" in the way that Moses consistently did. But that, after all, is the fundamental principle of trust and faithful obedience through which we are saved and with which we grow and pass tests and minister to the people of God. Let us follow Moses' example and be determined to put more "You" and less "I" into our daily lives for the glory of Jesus Christ and the edification of His Church.

Job

(10) My brethren, take the prophets, who spoke in the name of the Lord, as an example of suffering and patience. (11) Indeed we count them blessed who endure. You have heard of the perseverance of Job and seen the end intended by the Lord—that the Lord is very compassionate and merciful.
James 5:10-11 KJV

As James affirms and as we all know quite well, Job's patience is proverbial. And it is good to remember that while in the end he succumbed to the misguided reproaches of his comforters, the

trials that had come upon him were neither accidental nor punishment from God. Indeed, they came upon him precisely because he *was* walking so closely with the Lord as to be an example for Him to throw in Satan's face.

Then the Lord said to Satan, "Have you considered My servant Job, that there is none like him on the earth, a blameless and upright man, one who fears God and shuns evil? And still he holds fast to his integrity, although you incited Me against him, to destroy him without cause."

Job 2:3 NKJV

Let us resolve not only to be like Job, fearing God, shunning evil, walking closely to the Lord in an upright and blameless way, but also to do the things Job did to become the great man of faith he truly was: putting the Lord, His Word, and His people first in everything we think and say and do. If we do that, then we need have no fear of anything that may befall us in this life – not even the trials and troubles of Job – because we have "seen the end intended by the Lord" (Jas.5:11).

David

Here is another great man of God about whom books could be written (and certainly have been). What can we say about a man so great in his faith that he was given to have in his lineage an even greater Son, the Messiah Himself (2Sam.7:11-16; Ps.2:1ff.; 110:1ff.; Matt.1:1; 12:35; Lk.1:32)? A man whose kingship presages and prefigures the millennial reign of Christ? A man who was given to write some of the most beautiful passages in all of scripture? While there is much we could say, our focus here is on David as an exemplar, as a model for us to imitate in our Christian walk. And while we all, no doubt, admire his courage in slaying Goliath, his constancy in bearing up under some of the most difficult trials when Saul was hunting him down, and his righteous reign (with one notable exception) over God's people Israel, the one salient characteristic of David which stands out beyond the others is his exceptional joy in the Lord and love for the Lord.

You have put gladness in my heart,
More than in the season that their grain and wine increased.

Psalm 4:7 NKJV

But let all those rejoice who put their trust in You;
Let them ever shout for joy, because You defend them;
Let those also who love Your name
Be joyful in You.

Psalm 5:11 NKJV

O Lord, our Lord,
How excellent is Your name in all the earth!

Psalm 8:9 NKJV

I will be glad and rejoice in You;

I will sing praise to Your name, O Most High.
Psalm 9:2 NKJV

But I have trusted in Your mercy;
My heart shall rejoice in Your salvation.
Psalm 13:5 NKJV

Therefore my heart is glad, and my glory rejoices;
My flesh also will rest in hope.
Psalm 16:9 NKJV

I will love You, O Lord, my strength.
Psalm 18:1 NKJV

David was unloved as a child for reasons scripture never discloses. He was the youngest, yet his mother is never directly mentioned. If she died in childbirth with him, that would explain his father's hard attitude against him (e.g., 1Sam.16:11). Instead of living a pampered life, David was set to watching the family's flock from an early age, and while some react to harsh treatment by becoming sullenly self-reliant, David responded to it by putting His trust in the Lord, and finding in the Lord the love and the joy that the world denied him.

From birth I was cast on you; from my mother's womb you have been my God.
Psalm 22:10 NIV

(6) I have leaned on you since birth; you pulled me from my mother's womb. I praise you continually. (7) Many are appalled when they see me, but you are my secure shelter.
Psalm 76:6-7 NET

Through many lonely days and lonelier nights, David spent the time he had to spare not in day-dreaming but in contemplating the truth he knew, in praying to the Lord and fellowshiping with Him, in remembering and applying the scriptures to everything he was experiencing, not just learning and considering the Word, but in actually living the Word – and so much so that the Lord truly became His joy and His one true love. David did this without many – or perhaps any – of the advantages we have today. So he stands as a premier example of what can be accomplished spiritually if the will is there, if the joy is there. This love and joy for the Lord with which David was thoroughly imbued sustained him even in times of the most severe testing (e.g., 1Sam.30:6), and even on those rare but notable occasions when David was in the wrong. For we see Him pouring out his heart to the Lord when forgiveness is needful too, not in cowardly fear but in great confidence of the grace and mercy of the One He knew so well, our dear Lord and Savior. Truly, this was a man after the Lord's own heart (1Sam.13:14), one who perhaps came closer than any other believer to loving the Lord with all the joy He is due.

"And when He had removed [Saul], He raised up for them David as king, to whom also He gave testimony and said, 'I have found David the son of Jesse, a man after My own heart,

who will do all My will.' "

Act 13:22 NKJV

Let us then like David make it our daily purpose never to forget the joy of our salvation (Ps.51:12; Is.12:3; Hab.3:18), won for us by the One we love more than life, our dear Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

To the Chief Musician. A Psalm of David.
The king shall have joy in Your strength, O Lord;
And in Your salvation how greatly shall he rejoice!
Psalm 21:1 NKJV

What more shall we say then about all the great host of witnesses who went before us and now watch our progress in this world? For time would fail us if we sought to speak of them all, of Elijah and his zeal for the Lord and fervency in prayer (1Ki.19:10-14; Jas.5:16b); of Daniel and his faithfulness, courage and wisdom (Dan.1:8; 6:5; 6:23; 9:23); of Peter and the resiliency of his faith (Lk.22:31-32); of John and his great love for the Lord and His Church (Jn.20:2; 21:7; 21:20); of Paul and his dedication to Jesus Christ despite immense suffering (Acts 9:16; 1Cor.4:8-13; 2Cor.4:7-12; 6:3-10; 11:16-33; Phil.3:7-11), and of the great women of scripture too, of Sarah, Rebecca, Rahab, Deborah and Jael, Ruth, Tamar, Hannah, Elisabeth, Mary, Phoebe, and Prisca the wife of Aquila – and so many more, some named but many more unknown to us, yet whose names are written in heaven along with ours (Lk.10:20). They ran this race, they finished this course, they fought this fight, they drank this bitter cup called life right down to the dregs, but in whatever they had to suffer, they never renounced Jesus Christ our dear Lord and Savior. And so like us, they have in store a resurrection and life eternal which is better to a yet unknowable degree than anything the human heart can yet imagine (Heb.11:35; cf. Heb.11:16).

(22) But you have come [not to Mount Sinai but] to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, [that is, you have come to] the Heavenly Jerusalem, and to myriads of [elect] angels in assembly [before God], (23) and to the Church of the firstborn enrolled [as its citizens] in heaven, and to God the Judge of all, and to the spirits of justified [believers] [who have now] completed [their tasks], (24) and to Jesus, the Mediator of a better covenant, and to sprinkled blood (i.e., the work of Christ in bearing our sins) which speaks [far] more powerfully than that of Abel[’s sacrifice].

Hebrews 12:22-24

All these died not having received the promise, having lived out their lives in faithful pilgrimage (Heb.11:13), waiting for the return of the One they loved just as we are doing (1Cor.1:7). Let us then as all the faithful witnesses of the past have done set our hearts on the resurrection, on the reward, and on the return of our dear Lord and Savior Jesus Christ whom we love more than life, following in **His** footsteps so as to be pleasing to Him now, in hopes of hearing "well done!" from

Him on the great day to come – for **He** is our ultimate model and example.¹⁸

"If anyone wants to follow Me, let him [first] deny himself, then pick up his cross and follow Me."

Matthew 16:24

"I have given you an example that you may do as I have done."

John 13:15

. . . that we may, by embracing the truth in love, grow up in all respects with Christ, who is the head of the Church, as our model.

Ephesians 4:15

(5) You too should have this attitude which Christ Jesus had. (6) Since He already existed in the very form of God, equality with God was [certainly] not something He thought He had to grasp for. (7) Yet in spite of this [co-equal divinity He already possessed], He deprived Himself of His status and took on the form of a slave, [and was] born in the likeness of men. (8) He humbled Himself, becoming obedient to the point of death, even [His] death on [the] cross [for us all].

Philippians 2:5-8

(1) Since then we too [like the believers of Heb.11] have such a large audience of witnesses surrounding us [both men and angels], let us put off every hindrance – especially whatever sins habitually affect us – and run with endurance the race set before us, turning our gaze unto Jesus, the originator and completer of our faith, who, for the joy set before Him, endured the shame of the cross, treating it with despise, and took His seat at the right hand of the throne of God. (3) Keep in mind all the terrible opposition He endured against Himself at the hands of sinful men, so as not to grow sick at heart and give up.

Hebrews 12:1-3

(21) For it is to this [sharing in the sufferings of Christ] that you have been called, for Christ also died on your behalf, leaving you an example so that you might follow in His footsteps: (22) He committed no sin, nor was any guile found in His mouth. (23) He did not return slander when He was slandered, did not threaten when He suffered, but entrusted Himself to the One who judges righteously.

1st Peter 2:21-23

He who says that he is abiding in Him, [Jesus Christ], just as that One walked [through this world], so he himself ought to walk in the same way.

1st John 2:6

¹⁸ See section I.3.D.3.d above, "The Example of Christ".