

WEEK 49, DAY 1: TODAY'S READING: 1 CORINTHIANS 7-11

OVERVIEW:

Marriage and divorce (chapter 7); Christian liberty (chapter 8); the purpose of our liberty (chapter 9); lessons from Israel (chapter 10); issues regarding communion (chapter 11).

HIGHLIGHTS & INSIGHTS:

In today's reading, we begin the section of 1 Corinthians in which Paul answers the questions the Corinthians had sent to him. The first issue he addresses is regarding the extremely controversial subject of marriage and divorce. One of the biggest issues perplexing the Corinthian church was in marriages where one partner had come to Christ, and the other hadn't. Evidently, they had concluded that divorce was a "possible" solution—if not "the" solution.

Paul's instruction is essentially this: "No! Stay in the marriage! If your partner is pleased to stay with you after your conversion to Christ—hang in there, and seek to see them come to Christ! If, however, because of your connection to Christ and the transformation He is continuously making in your life—they choose to abandon the marriage, let them depart. The Lord will release you from the marriage bond, and you are free to remarry."

This venue does not allow for an exhaustive look at every verse or subject in chapter 7, but there are a few key principles God establishes in this chapter that do need to be noted:

- 7:2-5 – Intimacy in marriage is not an option. Very simply, Paul says that the husband and wife are to give themselves to each other. A marriage that lacks intimacy distorts the picture of Christ and the church revealed in Ephesians 5:25-33, and leaves the couple vulnerable to unnecessary temptation.
- 7:10-15 – Do not seek divorce. If you're married, stay married. If for some reason there is a divorce not based on biblical allowances, Paul is clear that REMARRIAGE is not an option—only RECONCILIATION to the former spouse. However, if an unbelieving spouse departs, Paul is also clear that the believer is free—meaning, free from the marriage, and free to remarry.

In chapter 8, the next question in which the Corinthians sought Paul's advice had to do with eating meat that had been offered to idols. Though this particular issue is not applicable to most cultures in the world today, the principles Paul lays out to address it become extremely applicable to believers in every culture on how to approach what might be called "gray areas." In other words, those areas that are, biblically, neither black or white—meaning that the Bible doesn't come right out and CONDEMN the particular activity, nor does the Bible come right out and CONDONE it. And so, through the discussion of eating meat offered to idols, God provides for us His mind (1 Cor. 2:16) when it comes to matters of Christian liberty. And what becomes apparent in this section, is that God doesn't want us to simply focus on our LIBERTY when dealing with a gray issue. There is another issue that He says needs to be considered—and that is the issue of LOVE! Love for our brother or sister.

Because this is such an important issue in the 21st century, let's take the time to set the HISTORICAL CONTEXT of the Corinthian situation of eating meat offered to idols, so we're able to glean the principles we need to help us in how God wants us to deal with the gray issues we face within our own culture.

From an historical standpoint, realize that in the extremely pagan and idolatrous city of Corinth, virtually any meat the Corinthians would purchase in the market had at some time been offered to idols. It would appear by Paul's response to them in chapter 8, that they had posed the question about their liberty to eat this meat in such a way, so they would be sure to get the answer they wanted. Almost like, "Hey Paul, since we have knowledge that there's really only one God anyway, eating meat that has been offered to idols isn't really that big of a thing for us, right? I mean, surely it would be okay if we ate it, right? What could possibly be the harm in it?"

Basically, Paul's answer is, "Sure, your knowledge is exactly right! But the real issue here isn't about KNOWLEDGE—it's about LOVE! And the real issue here isn't about YOU—it's about OTHERS! And KNOWLEDGE, as wonderful as it is, PUFFS "US" UP—in contrast to LOVE, which BUILDS "OTHERS" UP! And sure, we certainly have liberty to eat meat offered to idols, but we have to ask ourselves: 'Is it right for me to satisfy my flesh with this meat, if by doing so, I become a stumbling block to a brother or sister who doesn't possess the knowledge I have?'" Paul lets us know that for us to have no regard for our weaker brother in this matter should be all the proof we need to let us know that our real concern is the satisfaction of our own sinful flesh—and by eating, we not only sin against our BROTHER, we sin against our SAVIOR! (8:12)

In chapter 9, Paul illustrates from his own life, the principle of chapter 8. Verses 1-14 establish the authority and right that Paul and Barnabas had to be compensated for their work in the Lord. Paul lets the Corinthians know, however, that for the sake of the gospel, they had chosen to willingly set this "liberty" or this "right" aside—because the most important thing in their lives was the cause of Christ! It was bigger and more important than their own rights, their own satisfaction, or their own personal benefit. Obviously, Paul is admonishing the Corinthians (and us!) to do the same! When it comes to our liberty in Christ, perhaps we should ask ourselves two very basic questions:

- "Am I more concerned about my rights and my liberty than I am the spiritual well being of my weaker brothers and sisters for whom Christ died?"
- "Am I more concerned about my rights and my liberty than I am the souls of people who desperately need to be reached with the gospel of Jesus Christ?"

Then, in chapter 10, verses 14–22, Paul takes the discussion about eating meat offered to idols to another level. You see, some of the Corinthians probably thought that since an idol is nothing, what would be wrong with them going to their neighbor's religious service and participating with him? Paul lets us know that though there is really only one true God, and that idols are "nothing," demon spirits actually masquerade behind those "gods," so that idol worship actually becomes the worship of demons!

Paul then goes on to address the issue of whether or not it was biblically permissible for the Corinthians to eat the meat that had been offered to these idols. He concludes that they did have liberty to eat it, as long as they did not defile their conscience in the process—or the conscience of one of their brothers or sisters. (And please allow me to add a quick word about this thing of our conscience. Practically speaking, many times when our conscience seems to limit us from an activity that is not condemned in Scripture (even though other Christians seem to have no problem participating in it), God may well be using our conscience to keep us from that activity because He is trying to spare us from the next thing that participating in that activity might lead us to be involved in that God does forbid! The activity may not necessarily be wrong in and of itself, and it may not be wrong for others—but it may be wrong for us. In areas such as this, don't judge others who may exercise their liberty in that area, and never violate your own conscience!)

And then in chapter 10, verses 23 and 24, Paul reiterates the fact that when dealing with gray issues, we may be free to do what we want regarding a certain thing, but just because we're free to do it, doesn't necessarily mean we should! We must always prioritize our brothers and sisters. This is also the context for 10:31-33. The glory of God is what should be the motivation for all we do—not our own selfish interests and desires.

And then in chapter 11 and verse 1, Paul tells these immature and carnal believers in Corinth: "Be ye followers of me, even as I also am [a follower] of Christ." You see, God knows that sometimes we need a model to follow. The fact is, sometimes young or immature believers need a mature Christian that is following Christ to model for them what following Jesus looks like in real life. However, God's desire is not for that scenario to continue indefinitely. As a believer matures, they need to learn to "stand" (Gal. 5:1), and "walk" (Gal. 5:16) on their own two spiritual feet.

In chapter 11, verses 2–16, Paul brings up the subject of women wearing a covering on their head in their private and corporate worship. Paul surfaces too many things in this passage to adequately expound in this venue, but allow me to make just two very simple, yet, very important observations...

First of all, as Paul makes completely clear in verse 16, he does not intend to institute any biblical requirement concerning head coverings on the Corinthians—or us, for that matter! And secondly, notice that the actual "covering" Paul is discussing in this passage is HAIR! As you work through this passage, allow those two simple realities to guide you.

As Paul continues on in chapter 11, he rebukes them for their abuse of the Lord's Supper. They were coming to the Lord's Table with aught against their brothers and sisters and we're using it as a time to exercise their carnality in eating and drinking—instead of remembering our Lord's sacrifice for us. God uses this passage as a reminder of the purpose of communion, and shows us:

- This is a very important and meaningful time to God. (11:27)
- We should examine ourselves before participating. (11:28)
- There are extreme consequences to partaking in the Lord's Supper without exercising judgment upon the areas of sinfulness that have been revealed to us. (11:30)

WEEK 49, DAY 2: TODAY'S READING: 1 CORINTHIANS 12-16

OVERVIEW:

The body of Christ (chapter 12); the priority of charity (chapter 13); the boundaries for spiritual gifts (chapter 14); the resurrection of the dead (chapter 15); structure for orderly giving (chapter 16).

HIGHLIGHTS & INSIGHTS:

As we move into chapter 12, Paul begins to address the ignorance of the Corinthians regarding spiritual gifts. (12:1) Remember the context—according to chapter 4 and verse 10, they think they've got it all together when it comes to this subject. They certainly didn't think they were "ignorant" about spiritual gifts! I mean, after all, they were using their gifts... they were even having services where the "Spirit" was literally overwhelming people! (12:2–3) The only problem was, it wasn't the Spirit of God that was overwhelming them! That's what has prompted this entire discourse in chapters 12–14. It's important to keep that in mind as we navigate through this section. This whole subject concerning gifts is actually Paul's rebuke of how the Corinthians were abusing both the Spirit of God—and His gifts!

God establishes three keys to spiritual gifts in verses 4–6:

1. There are DIVERSITIES of gifts. (12:4)

(God never intended for everybody in a church to have the same gift. For the church to function as ONE body, it necessitates DIVERSITY of gifts amongst the members!)

2. There are different ADMINISTRATIONS of the gifts. (12:5)

(Even when God gives people the same gift, the way He dispenses (administrates) that gift to them is different.)

3. There are different OPERATIONS of the gifts. (12:6)

(Even though people may have the same gift, the way the Spirit of God operates through that gift in various individuals is different.)

Verse 7 lets us know, however, that there is one overarching principle guiding spiritual gifts. The Spirit always intends to use the individual spiritual gifts through individual believers to "profit withal," or, for the "common good." In other words, the purpose of our spiritual gift is not our own personal edification or benefit—it is for the spiritual benefit of others in the body of Christ. Remembering this principle will be vital in understanding spiritual gifts in general, but even more specifically when we get to chapter 14 when Paul instructs us concerning how tongues were being abused in Corinth in the 1st century, and all over the world in the 21st century—by people thinking they could use that particular gift for their own edification in what is often called a "prayer language."

God then illustrates the point of how our gifts are not for us but for others, by using the example of our human body. For example, the purpose of our hand is not the benefit of our hand—it is for the benefit of the rest of our body, as it works in conjunction with all of the other members of our body. Through this illustration, God is emphasizing the importance of the placement of every believer in a local church. Sometimes believers can mistakenly get the idea that they aren't as important as other members of the body. And sometimes believers can mistakenly get the idea that other members of the body aren't as important as them—or not as important as other members of the body. But the point of the passage is that every member of the spiritual body of Christ is just as vital to Him—as every member

of our own physical body is to us! Because of that fact, Paul admonishes us to exercise equal care and concern for every member of Christ's body. We're to rejoice with those who rejoice... and we're to weep with those who weep... regardless of their gifts—and regardless of their function in the body.

Pay close attention to the questions being asked in 12:28-31. The obvious answer to each of the questions in these verses is, "No!" No, we don't all have the same gifts! In fact, for the body to function as a body, we CAN'T all carry out the same function by all of us exercising the SAME gift! That's why God sovereignly gives each of us DIFFERENT gifts. Our UNITY in the body of Christ is not manifested by all of us fulfilling the same role—it is manifested in our DIVERSITY! It's manifested in each of us doing different things! And, in light of that, look back at what Paul said in 12:7-11. Did we get to choose the gift or gifts the Spirit of God imparted to us? Again, the answer is "No!" The Holy Spirit imparts our gifts to us as He sees fit so each of us may carry out our God-given role in the body of Christ.

Paul concludes chapter 12 in verse 31 with a sarcastic rebuke. Rather than humbly and joyfully exercising the gifts the Corinthians were graciously given by the Spirit's sovereign distribution, they were coveting what they deemed the "best gifts"—what might could be called the "showy," or "up front" gifts. At the end of verse 31, God begins to introduce the fact that there is what He calls, "a more excellent way." The question is, "a more excellent way" than what? And quite frankly, the answer to that is—a "more excellent way" than the one the Corinthians were following as they were pretentiously seeking to obtain gifts they felt would give them more prominence, preeminence and recognition in the church! And the "more excellent way" is what Paul discusses in the next chapter (chapter 13)—because the "more excellent way" is actually the way of charity... or love!

If we fail to make the connection that the "way of charity" in chapter 13 is actually the "more excellent way" that he's referring to at the conclusion of chapter 12, it would appear that chapter 13 is an interruption to Paul's train of thought regarding spiritual gifts. The placement of chapter 13 and the entrance of the subject of love into this discourse on the gifts, however, is actually critical to understanding and exercising spiritual gifts. (Note: this becomes a great reminder to us as we make our way through the Bible in our 52 Weeks of Pursuit, to always remember the importance of the principle of keeping verses, passages, and even chapters in the Bible in their context.) Because, you see, while the Corinthians were being proud, self-absorbed and only considering themselves when it came to their pursuit and use of spiritual gifts, Paul is letting them (and us!) know that the "excellent thing" God wants us to pursue is charity. And one of the key inherent characteristics of charity is that its focus is always on the needs of others—not our own! And the fact is, if we live our entire Christian life without ever really completely being able to identify our spiritual gifts, but we live a life of charity, God will be completely okay with that! Because, again, the "way of charity" is the "more excellent way!"

Then, in verses 4–7, God describes what biblical charity looks like in real life. We would do well to place our life next to his description of what charity "does" in these verses to see how we measure up. Paul's point is, these are the ways true spirituality is measured—not by our flamboyant use (or misuse!) of spiritual gifts.

God completes this chapter by reminding us that exercising charity is superior to the gifts themselves. In fact, He says there's going to come a time when the "showy" gifts the Corinthians were so preoccupied with and zealous for (tongues, healing, miracles, etc.) would actually cease to have a function in the Church Age. Again, this is not the venue for presenting a doctrinal treatise of all the reasons the sign gifts have ceased—but in a nutshell, it goes like this...

At the time of transition when God was no longer functioning according to the Old Testament, but prior to the completion of the written record of the New Testament, God used miraculous gifts given as signs for the purpose of authenticating both the messenger and his message. (See Heb. 2:3-4) After the New Testament had been completed, however, these "sign gifts" ceased to have a continuing role or a biblical purpose in the church. The record of history confirms that fact. Once the New Testament was complete, all that was necessary to determine

whether the message the messenger was proclaiming was from God is—“Does it line up with the revealed Word of God?”

As was previously mentioned, Chapter 14 as a whole is often lifted out of its context (chapters 12-13)—along with many individual verses in the chapter that are also lifted out of their context to form faulty doctrine. May I offer a few things to notice as we make our way through this chapter...

Notice in verse 1 how God separates the term “spiritual gifts” from “prophecy.” There is certainly a spiritual “gift of prophecy,” but it is not the specific “gift of prophecy” that he's referring to in this chapter. Rather, Paul is talking here about the ability of every believer to prophesy (i.e. to proclaim the truth of God and His Word). Remember Paul's earlier question—“Does every believer have the gift of prophecy?” As we saw, the implied answer was “no,” but Paul wants to make certain we understand, however, that every believer CAN and SHOULD prophesy (proclaim the truth of God)! Perhaps it would help us to understand that point by applying it to a couple of other gifts. We understand that though there is a specific “gift of giving” and a specific “gift of faith,” every believer, regardless of their gift, is commanded to give—and every believer, regardless of their spiritual gift, is commanded to exercise faith! In that same way, all of us have been commanded to prophesy, whether we have the “gift of prophecy” or not.

It's also important to recognize that contrary to popular opinion, Paul is not seeking in this chapter to elevate TONGUES—he's actually seeking to elevate PROPHECY! In other words, he's not championing the cause for all of us using our tongue to speak words about God that nobody understands to no profit, but rather, to use our tongue to speak words that people do understand so they can be edified!

Notice, also, that in the places in this chapter where it appears that Paul is promoting tongues, that it is simply the set-up to show the superiority of prophecy—which again, is simply proclaiming the truth of the Word of God. Despite the fact that many verses in this chapter are used by charismatic pastors and teachers to validate the use of tongues, there is actually not a single verse in this entire chapter that is a positive reference to tongues! God spends the first half of chapter 14 showing the priority of speaking His truth in a manner that people can understand, rather than trying to show off some spectacular gift. The second part of the chapter deals with the proper use of gifts within the body. The basic principle in verse 40 is that things are to be done “decently and in order.” In other words, a church service is to have a sense of freedom, but it is not intended to be a free-for-all! Any gathering of believers that is conducted in a manner that breeds chaos and/or confusion (which is often the case in some charismatic churches) is directly disobeying God's Word. Even at the time of the writing of 1 Corinthians when God was still using these sign gifts to authenticate the messenger and his message, there was a specific prescription they were to follow to maintain “decency” and “order”...

- In the gathering of the believers for corporate worship, only two, and at the most three, were permitted to speak in tongues in any one service. They were also to speak “by course,” or in other words, not more than one person speaking at any one time. (14:27)
- Someone was permitted to speak in tongues (languages) only if there was also someone present with the gift of interpretation of tongues. Without someone to interpret, tongues were forbidden. (14:27-28)
- Prophecy, likewise, was to be exercised one person at a time. There were no restrictions, however, on the amount of people who could prophesy (proclaim the truth) in any particular gathering of the church. (14:29-31)
- Women were not permitted to speak in tongues or prophecy in the service. (14:34-35)

Interestingly enough, much, if not most of the so-called “tongues speaking” that takes place in churches in the 21st century is done by women!

As we've already discussed, the New Testament is now complete, so the sign gifts are no longer necessary. But even if they were operative today, I know of no churches that follow the clear instructions given for their use in this chapter. I would imagine that there are churches that do, I'm simply saying that I personally know of none. It's one thing to believe all the gifts are still operating today—but it's quite another not to follow God's clear instructions for their use!

But not only were the Corinthians misguided and ill-informed on spiritual gifts, in chapter 15, Paul shows that they had also been misdirected concerning the biblical teaching of the resurrection. In this chapter, Paul clearly lays out the priority of Christ's resurrection. He very passionately and eloquently presents the fact that everything our faith is built upon as believers in Jesus Christ is predicated on the reality of Christ physically rising from the dead. Paul is trying to get us to see that if Christ didn't rise from the dead, certainly, none of us will rise from the dead—and we become the most deceived, disillusioned, pitiful and miserable people on this planet!

The fact is, however, Christ did rise from the dead! And just as in Adam—we were all born sinners; in Christ—we are all born righteous. As in Adam, all die—in Christ, we are all made alive. As in Adam, we were all born in his image—in Christ, we are all born in His image. As in Adam, we were all born with a body like his—in Christ, at the Rapture we will all receive a glorified body like His.

Paul concludes the discussion of the resurrection of Christ and its subsequent benefits and promises by letting us know that the resurrection should be the motivation that keeps us continually abounding in the “work of the Lord.” (15:58) Are you “abounding” in the work of the Lord, or have you grown complacent and weary? If so, perhaps you have misplaced the importance and/or the implications of the resurrection.

In verses 1–4 of chapter 16, God instructs the Corinthians concerning the best way to receive the offerings they were collecting to relieve the saints in the church at Jerusalem. This instruction has become the prescription for how offerings have been received in local churches ever since.

Verse 9 of chapter 16 reveals a fact of ministry we must never lose sight of: open doors and adversaries go hand-in-hand! Fulfilling our mission on this planet is not a walk in the park. It is a battle. Expect resistance. Expect trials. Expect difficulties. Expect adversaries, but, by all means, expect victory! By God's grace, press on! Be strong in the Lord and in the power of His might!

WEEK 49, DAY 3: TODAY'S READING: 2 CORINTHIANS 1-7

OVERVIEW:

The KEY to Ministry (Chapter 1); the SPIRIT of Ministry (chapter 2); the PROOF of Ministry (chapter 3); the DEFINITION of Ministry (chapter 4); the PERSPECTIVE of Ministry (chapter 5); the FELLOWSHIP of Ministry (chapter 6); the COMFORT of Ministry (chapter 7).

HIGHLIGHTS & INSIGHTS:

Paul had been used of God to plant the church in Corinth during his second missionary journey. (Acts 18:1-17) The believers there had grabbed his heart. He says in 2:4, "For out of much affliction and anguish of HEART I wrote unto you with many tears..." In 6:11, he says to them, "O ye Corinthians, our mouth is open unto you, our HEART is enlarged." But, because of his deep love for them, there was also the potential for deep hurt. And the reality is, through many of their unjust accusations, snide insinuations and contemptuous allegations, Paul felt betrayed by them— and it had impacted him immensely.

We have a tendency to think that "the great Apostle Paul" was somehow above discouragement—but the fact is, Paul was as human as any of us. He even confesses to the Corinthians in 1:8, "For we would not, brethren, have you ignorant of our trouble which came to us in Asia, that we were PRESSED OUT OF MEASURE, above strength, insomuch that we DESPAIRED EVEN OF LIFE." I think that means, his sorrow was so great that he was afraid it was going to kill him... and yet at the same time, his sorrow was so great that he was afraid it wasn't going to kill him! To put it plainly, Paul was not only discouraged—he was depressed. Of all of Paul's letters to the churches in the New Testament, 2 Corinthians is by far the most personal. In this letter, Paul opens his chest and reveals who he really is. At times he exudes incredible spiritual power and strength— and yet at other times, he exhibits his human frailty and weakness. There are occasions in the Book when he is expressing great sympathy and tenderness, and other times when his approach is with great sternness—and even sarcasm! Because of the nature and nuances of the content of this letter, it becomes for us, a HANDBOOK for MINISTRY. Whereas 1 and 2 Thessalonians, as we will see, is a "How-To Manual" for Christian LIVING, 2 Corinthians is a "How-To Manual" for Christian MINISTRY. It is perhaps the greatest and most practical Book in the Bible to teach us how to invest our lives in ministering to people. A great example are his words to the Corinthians in 12:15: "And I will very gladly spend and be spent for you; though the more abundantly I love you, the less I be loved." May God give us that kind of selfless heart in ministering to others!

As we make our way through this "Handbook For Ministry," notice how this theme unfolds in the various chapters:

- Chapter 1— The KEY to Ministry: SUFFERING
- Chapter 2— The SPIRIT of Ministry: FORGIVENESS
- Chapter 3— The PROOF of Ministry: TRANSFORMATION
- Chapter 4— The DEFINITION of Ministry: GLORY
- Chapter 5— The PERSPECTIVE of Ministry: JUDGMENT SEAT

- Chapter 6– The FELLOWSHIP of Ministry: SEPARATION
- Chapter 7– The COMFORT of Ministry: JOY
- Chapters 8-9– The HEART of Ministry: GIVING
- Chapter 10— The MIND of Ministry: OBEDIENCE
- Chapter 11– The ENEMY of Ministry: SATAN’S MINISTERS
- Chapter 12– The HUMILITY of Ministry: GRACE
- Chapter 13– The POWER of Ministry: WEAKNESS

WEEK 49, DAY 4: TODAY'S READING: 2 CORINTHIANS 8-13

OVERVIEW:

The grace of giving (chapters 8-9); Paul defends his ministry (chapter 10); the false religious system (chapter 11); Paul's final defense to the Corinthians (chapters 12); Paul's final appeal to the Corinthians (chapter 13).

HIGHLIGHTS & INSIGHTS:

Today's reading provides the clearest and most complete principles on giving in the entire New Testament (chapters 8-9). The Corinthians had committed to supplying funds to help the church in Jerusalem, but at the time of the writing of this letter, had not yet followed through on their commitment. Paul writes to exhort them to fulfill their promise, and in the process, is used of God to lay out the New Testament pattern for giving. Note some of the principles gleaned from these two chapters:

- It is the grace of God that allows us to give sacrificially. (8:1-3)
- Giving should result from us having already first given ourselves to the Lord. (8:5)
- By God's grace, we shouldn't just give—but abound in giving! (8:7)
- Giving is the proof of the sincerity of our love. (8:8)
- Jesus Christ is the ultimate picture of giving. (8:9)
- We should be a generous giver. (9:6)
- We should purpose in our hearts to give the amount the Lord wants us to give. (9:7)
- We should give cheerfully. (9:7)

(In other words, we should give, not because we have to—but because we want to!)

We also find one of the simplest biblical explanations of God's grace in 8:9, that we could express in these terms...

- **G**—God's
- **R**—Riches
- **A**—At
- **C**—Christ's
- **E**—Expense

The ultimate gift is the grace that God has bestowed upon us. Perhaps grace is best understood by comparing it to justice and mercy.

- JUSTICE is God giving us WHAT we deserve.
- MERCY is God NOT giving us what we deserve.
- GRACE is God giving us what we DID NOT deserve.

As we move into the last section of the Book (chapters 10-13), Paul begins to challenge the rebels in the church that were questioning his AUTHORITY, as well as the false teachers ("Judaizers") that had infiltrated the church and were

attacking Paul's GOSPEL. In addressing these problems, Paul teaches us two significant lessons concerning the warfare we face as believers (10:3-5):

1. Our battle is not with PEOPLE— but with the spiritual POWERS that are often at work THROUGH people. (See also Eph. 6:12)
2. We cannot win in this SPIRITUAL WARFARE using CARNAL WEAPONS. (10:4)

As we come into chapter 11, Paul talks further about the spiritual powers that were working through the human false teachers in the 1st century in Corinth. Note that it is the same spiritual powers that are working through the human false teachers in the 21st century! Paul tells us in 11:15 that they are actually "Satan's ministers!" Don't miss that! Satan has "ministers!" And contrary to how easily we might think it would be to recognize them, Paul tells us that in the same way that Satan transforms himself into an "angel of light," his ministers likewise transform themselves as "ministers of righteousness." (11:13-15) In other words, they live impeccable lives, present a good, godly demeanor, and even use "Christian" terminology as they present their message! Back in verse 4 of this chapter, Paul says that they preach "Jesus"... they preach the "gospel"... and they preach about receiving the "spirit." The only problem is, it's not the Jesus of the Bible—it's "ANOTHER Jesus!" It isn't the gospel that Paul preached—it's "ANOTHER gospel!" It isn't the "HOLY Spirit"—but "ANOTHER Spirit!" (11:4) Just as Paul was admonishing the Corinthians, we must wise up! We must be discerning! As John urged us in 1 John 4:1, "Beloved, believe not every spirit, but try the spirits whether they are of God: because MANY false prophets are gone out into the world."

As Paul comes to the end of this epistle, he makes his final defense of his apostleship in chapter 12, through the vision God gave to him of the third heaven. The experience was so unbelievably incredible, God not only forbade him to write about it—but felt it necessary to give Paul "a thorn in the flesh" to keep him humble!

By the time Paul gets to his final appeal to the Corinthians in chapter 13, he has not only very calculatedly opened his very soul to them, but has provided a thorough explanation of his ministry, giving detailed answers to all of their accusations and objections, as well as confirming his deep affection and love for them. In this closing section, Paul pleads with the Corinthians to make sure that his third visit to them was not laden with drama (for him or for them!)—like the previous visit had been.

WEEK 49, DAY 5: TODAY'S READING: GALATIANS 1-6

OVERVIEW:

The priority of grace in Paul's message and life (chapter 1); the priority of grace in Paul's ministry (chapter 2); the preeminence of grace over law (chapters 3 and 4); the priority of standing in liberty and walking in the Spirit in grace living (chapters 5 and 6).

HIGHLIGHTS & INSIGHTS:

Understanding the key issues facing the churches in Galatia causes the six chapters of this Book to be some of the most practical in the entire New Testament. The fact is, the 1st century "Galatian" problem is alive and well in Christianity in the 21st century!

Let's begin with a little background information. Whereas the other letters written by Paul to local churches were addressed to one specific local church in one specific city (i.e. Rome, Corinth, Ephesus, Philippi, Colossae, and Thessalonica), this letter was written to a group of local churches in a particular region. That region, known to us as modern-day Turkey, was known in the 1st century as Galatia. It was this area that was settled by the Gauls of France, and thus, became known as Galatia, or "Gaulatia," if you will. The local churches in this region were established by Paul and Barnabas on their first missionary journey. The specific churches were the churches in the cities of Derbe, Lystra, Iconium and Antioch of Pisidia. (See Acts 13:14–14:23)

Obviously, these churches were comprised of Gentile believers who had responded to Paul and Barnabas' proclamation of the gospel which they received by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone. After receiving Christ, Acts 14:22–23 lets us know that Paul and Barnabas spent time "confirming the souls of the disciples" in each of these churches, making sure that "they had ordained them elders in every church." Not long after Paul and Barnabas had grounded these churches in the truth, however, false teachers began infiltrating these churches with what Paul called "another gospel." (1:6) Much to Paul's utter shock and dismay, the "disciples" (Acts 14:22) and "elders" (Acts 14:23) in these churches dropped Paul and his gospel like a hot potato, for a false, powerless, and even damnable "gospel." (1:6-9) Paul, literally, could not believe it! He writes to rebuke and to correct these churches using some of the strongest language found in any of his letters.

These false teachers are known historically as "Judaizers" or "legalists." They were Jews, who like Paul before his conversion, were incredibly zealous for Judaism (the Jewish religion), and thus, the title, "Judaizers." Their basic point of attack upon these Galatian believers was that if they, as Gentiles, really wanted to BE saved... and/or, if they really wanted to STAY saved... and/or, if they really wanted to "be SPIRITUAL," they would have to "become like them." In other words, they would first have to become Jewish proselytes, and live under the requirements and ramifications of the law, and thus, the title, "legalists" (the word "legal" being connected to "law"). Luke summarizes their basic false teaching in Acts 15:1: "Except ye be circumcised after the manner of Moses, ye cannot be saved."

Paul's reaction to this false teaching is what actually prompted the writing of this scathing letter to the Galatian churches. Paul is absolutely livid with these false teachers—not to mention the Galatian believers themselves! In chapter 1, verses 8–9, he says that those who preach this false gospel give evidence that they are worthy of hell (1:8-9), and he goes on to say that those who are swayed by them give evidence that they have not only been misinformed or deceived, but actually, "BEWITCHED!" (3:1) Wow! What a strong word! Paul is letting them know that they were acting as if they were under some sort of a Satanic spell!

The content of this letter is of utmost importance because the Judaizers of the 1st century were not the last preachers and teachers to infiltrate churches, and even lead churches, who propagate that there is something "MORE" that you need to "DO" in order to...

- BE saved.

(i.e. "You must be baptized," or "You must keep the sacraments," etc.)

- STAY saved.

(i.e. "You must hold out faithful to the end.")

- Be SPIRITUAL.

(i.e. "You must be like us. You must dress like this—not like that. You must wear your hair like this—not like that. You must listen to this kind of music—not that kind. You can go to these places—but not those. etc, etc, etc.")

Understanding Paul's simple message through the Book of Galatians is vital in keeping us off of the endless treadmill of legalism.

What the Galatians didn't understand, as is the case with most believers today, is that they were already as SAVED as they would ever be, and already as SPIRITUAL as they would ever be! And that incredible standing before God isn't based on anything WE DO or DO NOT DO, it is based solely and wholly upon WHO CHRIST IS, and what He has DONE! Paul said in 2 Corinthians 5:21 that we were "MADE the righteousness of God in Him" the moment we were saved! And it's impossible to get more righteous than that! Quite simply, our righteous standing before God isn't ACHIEVED... it is RECEIVED! Paul said in Ephesians 1:6 that we were "MADE accepted" with God the moment we were placed "in Christ!" That means that God accepts us in the very same way He accepts Christ, His beloved Son! And it's impossible to be more accepted than that! And again, don't miss the fact that this is all totally apart from anything WE DO or DO NOT DO!!! That lesson is foreign to most believers, and typically comes long and hard! The difference, however, is the difference between legalism and a life of walking in the flesh—and true, genuine biblical Christianity and a life of walking in the Spirit! And quite honestly, it is the difference between a life of bondage and a life of freedom.

The message of the Holy Spirit through Paul to the Galatian believers—and to believers today is simply this: Christ, through His death, set us free from the law! In chapter 3, verses 2–3, Paul asks, "This only would I learn of you, Received ye the Spirit by the works of the law, or by the hearing of faith? Are ye so foolish? Having begun in the Spirit, are ye now made perfect by the flesh?" The obvious answer is that it was through faith and by His Spirit that we were saved, and were placed on the road to maturity. Based on that reality, Paul admonishes us, first, to learn to STAND: "Stand fast therefore in the liberty wherewith Christ hath made us free, and be not entangled again with the yoke of bondage." (5:1) So that, secondly, we can learn to WALK: "Walk in the Spirit, and ye shall not fulfill the lust of the flesh." (5:16)

Understanding the practical teaching and ramifications of the Book of Galatians for new believers cannot be overemphasized. It will literally save 20 years (conservative estimate) of frustration, as the flesh tenaciously seeks and strives to produce what can only be produced by the Spirit (5:22-23) through the faith of Christ. (2:16, 20. See also Phil. 3:9; Rom. 3:20-22.) Pray that God will open your eyes to the wondrous and freeing truths found in this incredible little Book of Galatians.

WEEK 49, DAY 6: TODAY'S READING: EPHESIANS 1-6

OVERVIEW:

The believer's position in Christ (chapter 1); the believer's salvation by grace through faith (chapter 2); the revelation of the mystery of the church (chapter 3); the believer's walk in the world (chapters 4-6).

HIGHLIGHTS & INSIGHTS:

There are so many things that could and should be said about the Book of Ephesians, but again, this is simply not the venue for exhaustive commentary. We will only be able to establish the "big picture" of the Book at best. And perhaps the best way to see the big picture of this Book, is by applying it to one of the most controversial passages, not only in this Book, but in the entire Bible. That passage is found in chapter 1, verses 4 and 5, where Paul says: "According as he hath chosen us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and without blame before him in love: Having predestinated us unto the adoption of children by Jesus Christ to himself, according to the good pleasure of his will."

Now, based on where you land on the interpretation of these verses (and verses such as these), you are labeled either a "Calvinist" or an "Arminian." Several hundred years ago, one position was popularized by John Calvin, and the other, sometime later, by a man named Jacob Arminius. The basic Arminian position when it is used today, is that in terms of salvation, "whosoever will may come." (Rev. 22:17) The basic Calvinist position as it is expressed today, is that only the quote-unquote "elect," will be saved—meaning that the only ones who will actually come to Christ are those who, in eternity past, God chose, according to His sovereign grace, to be saved.

There are many others, however, who if were asked whether they were an Arminian or a Calvinist, would answer "yes," meaning that they believe both. Their reasoning is that in their minds, there's no doubt about it, the Bible teaches that "whosoever will may come." And yet, they would also say that there's no doubt about the fact that the Bible also teaches that believers were "chosen in him before the foundation of the world." (Eph. 1:4) When asked how they reconcile these two seemingly contradictory statements, they may answer, as did Charles Spurgeon, "Friends don't need to be reconciled!" They believe God put both in the Bible, and conclude, therefore, that both must be equally true, and though they don't come together in the human mind, they certainly must come together in the mind of God, so rather than force them to come together, let's just allow God to be God, because after all, His ways are not our ways, and His thoughts are far above our thoughts (Isa. 55:8-9), and the secret things belong to the Lord (Deut. 29:29), so let's just accept it, and go on! This reasoning is usually followed with the illustration that goes something like: as we approach the gates of heaven, there's a sign over the gates that says, "Whosoever will my come." As we walk through the gates on into heaven, and we look back above them, however, the sign says, "Chosen before the foundation of the world." That "middle-of-the-road" approach is rather convincing, and sounds pretty SPIRITUAL, and even humble, but none of those things are the real issue! The issue is always the same: Is it BIBLICAL?

So we come to verse 4 of Ephesians 1, and what does it say? It says, "According as he hath chosen us in him before the foundation of the world." And there are many people who will say to us, "C'mon! I mean, how clear can it be? My goodness, just let the Bible be the Bible!" Okay! Well, let's do that!

First of all, let's be sure that we recognize that if this verse is teaching that sometime before the foundation of the world, God had already chosen each of us who would be saved, then what the verse is teaching is that we we're actually "IN CHRIST" before the foundation of the world—because the verse says, "According as He hath chosen us

in Him before the foundation of the world." Now, if we were placed "IN HIM before the foundation of the world," it obviously poses a huge problem! Because the Bible clearly states that prior to our salvation, we were:

- "IN Adam!" (1 Cor. 15:22)
- "IN trespasses and sins!" (Eph. 2:1)
- "IN the lusts of our flesh!" (Eph. 2:3)
- "IN the world!" (Eph. 2:12)

Are we to believe, then, that in eternity past ("before the foundation of the world"), God placed us "IN Christ," and then, somehow we got OUT of Christ, and were found "IN Adam, IN trespasses and sins, IN the lusts of our flesh, and IN the world," only so that sometime later He could put us back "IN CHRIST" again? Wow! I can't find a way for that to make any biblical sense!

The fact is, folks, Ephesians 1:4–5 must be understood within the very first principle of Bible study: CONTEXT!

I would submit that most pastors, teachers and commentators come to these verses without putting them into the context of the Book of Ephesians, or even the chapter in which the verses are found. And so, leaving the context, they read, "He hath chosen US in him," and assume that the "US" means "INDIVIDUALS" God chose to salvation.

In the CONTEXT of the Book of Ephesians, and even more specifically in chapter 1, however, Paul is introducing to us something that no believer in Christ had actually understood prior to the writing of the Book of Ephesians—and that was "the mystery of the church." Or, in other words, the fact that the church, spiritually, is as much the "body of Christ" as was the physical body that Christ lived in during His 33 years on this planet! Listen, that's the "US" to whom Paul is referring in Ephesians 1:4! It is "the Church," in a collective sense, which chapter 1 and verse 23 goes on to reveal "is His BODY!" Again, that's what the whole Book of Ephesians is about and why God placed it in His Bible! To teach "US" (as in, all of "US" who have called upon His name!) that "WE," collectively, are the Body of Christ!

Notice, that Paul says in chapter 1 and verse 10: "That in the dispensation of the fullness of times he might gather together in one all things IN CHRIST." And to what time period is that referring? The "CHURCH" Age, right?

So it goes like this....

Yes, Ephesians 1:4 clearly teaches that God made a very definite DECISION "before the foundation of the world." But what was it that He was actually "CHOOSING?" Does the verse actually say that He was choosing INDIVIDUALS to salvation? Absolutely not! What the verse says is that before the foundation of the world, God chose that the "CHURCH," the Body of Christ (all of "US" who exercise our will—and by faith, call upon Him to save "US!") would be different than any people who have ever lived! God CHOSE before the foundation of the world that our salvation would place us "IN CHRIST!" And HOW did God make that CHOICE? The end of the very next verse (verse 5) says that the choice was made "according to the good pleasure of His will!" In other words, He did it because He is God, and that's what He sovereignly chose to do! And WHY did God the Father CHOOSE to give us that standing? Verse 4 goes on to tell us! It was so we could constantly—regardless of our attitude, our disposition, our sin, or anything we DO or DO NOT DO, "be holy and without blame before Him in love!" Listen, the only way that could ever possibly be a reality is for God to have chosen to place us "in Christ," so that when He looks at us, He sees His Son—who has always, even before the foundation of the world, constantly been "holy and without blame before Him in love!"

Listen, do you realize that the only people who have ever possessed the spiritual position of being "IN CHRIST," are the people who are saved in the Church Age? Do you realize that as wonderful as God thought Noah, Daniel and Job were (Ezekiel 14:20), they were never "IN CHRIST" a day in their lives?! That exclusive standing was something God decreed before the foundation of the world that would be totally unique to believers when God was carrying out His plan on the earth through this extraordinary thing called the "CHURCH!" Read carefully in Ephesians 3:1–12, and you will see that "the eternal purpose which he purposed IN CHRIST Jesus our Lord" (3:11), was that it would be the "CHURCH" that would know "the manifold wisdom of God," having been placed "IN CHRIST!"

Again, make sure you understand that what God is actually trying to communicate in and through the Book of Ephesians is that those of "US" who are believers in the Church Age are the only ones who have ever had the distinct privilege of being "holy and without blame before him in love!" (1:4) And do we have that standing before Him because we're just so much more "holy and blameless and lovable" than all of the Old Testament saints? A thousand times "No!" It's simply because of this supremely wonderful CHOICE that God made in eternity past, to immediately place those of us who exercise our will in the Church Age by calling upon the name of His Son to save us—"IN Christ!" And then, to secure that position, "SEAL US in Him, until the day of redemption"—or in other words, until the day we receive a glorified body that is incapable of sinning! (Eph. 1:12–14; 4:30; Phil. 3:21) And all I can say to that is, HALLELUJAH!"

And moving further into Eph. 1:5, do you realize that the only ones who have been "predestinated unto the adoption of children" (1:5), are those of "US" who are believers in the Church Age? And again, notice that what the verse actually says is that God wasn't predestinating WHO WOULD BE SAVED, but rather, the fact that those of us who ARE SAVED in the Church Age—would have the glorious privilege as a benefit of our salvation, to be ADOPTED as God's CHILDREN! Yeah, let's just let the Bible be the Bible, folks! Let's hear what these verses are actually saying in their CONTEXT, without reading something into them that just isn't there!

And do you now see why it is that believers in the Church Age are eternally secure, and why that was not true for Old Testament saints, and will not be true for Tribulation saints? (Matt. 24:13) It's because we are the only ones who have ever been or will ever be placed "IN Christ!" We are the only people who have ever or will ever have their righteousness and acceptance with God, not based on WHO WE ARE or WHAT WE DO, but based on WHO CHRIST IS, and WHAT HE HAS DONE! (2 Cor. 5:21; Eph. 1:6)

You see, folks, this really isn't hard. In fact, it's really very simple when we simply place the verses in their context, and stop reading into them things that aren't there! I agree with Paul, "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who hath blessed us with all spiritual blessings in heavenly places in Christ!" (Eph. 1:3)

WEEK 50, DAY 1: TODAY'S READING: PHILIPPIANS 1-4

OVERVIEW:

Christ our LIFE (chapter 1); Christ our PATTERN (chapter 2); Christ our RIGHTEOUSNESS (chapter 3); Christ our SUFFICIENCY (chapter 4).

HIGHLIGHTS & INSIGHTS:

As we get started in the Book of Philippians, let's take a few minutes to talk about the THEME of the Book. What is this Book really about? What was God's purpose in putting the Book of Philippians into the canon of scripture? And just how are we to determine that?

One of the best pieces of advice I've ever received in terms of Bible study is simply, "Learn to emphasize what God emphasizes." You see, God doesn't have a volume control on His voice (i.e. His Word) that He uses when He wants to accentuate a particular principle or concept. Nor does He provide a highlighter to accentuate His major themes or points of emphasis to the men He was inspiring who actually wrote His words down. What God uses to emphasize His point—is REPETITION! I said, what God uses to emphasize His point—is REPETITION! (I thought that if it works for God, maybe it would work for me!) It is amazing the things that can be gleaned in the Word of God by simply observing the repeated words, phrases, ideas and/or concepts in a passage, a chapter or an individual Book of the Bible.

A great case in point, is the Book of Philippians. In this short Book, the word "rejoice" (or some form of the word—rejoice, rejoiced, rejoicing), is found 12 times, and the word "joy" is found six times. As we're reading it today, recognize that this is an incredibly positive Book! It is obvious that Paul had an extremely positive attitude when he wrote this letter. In fact, so positive that we might get the idea that he's in about the third month of a six month sabbatical, and he's just "chillin'-out" at some incredible five-star oceanfront condo in some resort city along the Mediterranean coastline—with the sun brightly beaming down upon the beautiful terrain, while he's leisurely sipping Frappuccinos and eating pistachio nuts out of a hammock!

But there's also another word that keeps popping up in this Book that lets us know that that isn't the case. It's the word "bonds." Paul keeps referring to his "bonds." In fact, he talks about them four times in chapter one alone! And what he's referring to is the fact that far from being in some resort hotel on the beach in some Mediterranean city, he's actually in prison, in "bonds," or in other words, chained to a Roman guard! And what's interesting about Paul's "sunny disposition" that shines all the way through this Book, is that he was not in prison for doing something wrong. I mean, if that would have been the case, at least Paul could just face the reality that there are always consequences for wrong behavior, and he would just have to make the best of his self-inflicted consequences. But you see, that wasn't the case at all. The fact is, Paul hadn't done anything wrong. He was actually in bonds because of a false charge!

And it wasn't that Paul had been able to keep this incredibly cheery and positive attitude because he had only been there a couple of days, and so he was still able to keep himself psyched up, not to mention the fact that this would be an incredibly cool story for his monthly missionary letter! No, check this out... by the time of the writing of this letter, Paul had been in bonds for five whole years!

And we might also want to factor into Paul's impeccable attitude, that it also wasn't that Paul was over-the-hill, and had already passed his window of effectiveness anyway, so where he rode out his waning years was of no real consequence. No, when he was cast into this prison, his ministry was at its absolute pinnacle! These five years he had been in prison should have been the best and most productive years of his entire ministry! And yet, day after day,

he's in bonds, chained to a Roman guard. And don't miss this—it wasn't that he was in prison because that dirty, nasty devil had caused lost people to lie about Paul, and orchestrate some devious plot to have him cast into prison. No, do you know why he's there? He's there because of GOSSIP! That's right, gossip. Gossip that began and spread amongst Christians, nonetheless! (You can read all about it in Acts 21.) He is in prison because of a rumor that was being spread by believing Jews, who were still hanging on to and were zealous for the law. Wow! Knowing he was there because of gossiping Christians would seem to make his situation even more difficult to come to grips with!

But that's why he's there! And I'm going through all of these things to make sure we understand that there was absolutely no human explanation for Paul to have the attitude of rejoicing that he has as he's writing this letter! He has every right, humanly, to be bitter, angry, disillusioned, frustrated, depressed and worried. And I think that's very important to note, because chances are real good, that in some way, shape, or form—every one of us feels, at least to some degree, that we're in a prison. Not necessarily a prison with bars, as in Paul's case, but a "prison" nonetheless. Perhaps there are things that have taken place in your life that have left you feeling that you are "locked in." They've "hindered" you, or "restricted" you in some way. They've "tied your hands," so to speak. The bars are invisible; the chains can't be seen with physical eyes—but they're just as real as the ones that were restricting Paul!

Perhaps you're in a job you absolutely hate, but you see no other options, and it's a ball and chain to you every weekday of your life. Or maybe you don't have a job at all, and feel that you're in a prison of a dull, unfulfilled life. Or maybe yours is a prison of loneliness. You feel imprisoned because you're single. Or maybe on the opposite extreme, you feel imprisoned because you're married! Or maybe like Paul, you've been the victim of gossip, and the hurt you have inside of you has left you feeling that your freedom has been taken away, and you find yourself bound by your own emotions. Or perhaps you've been the victim of some injustice, and your mind keeps you behind bars because you can't stop thinking about it.

I don't know what kind of prison you may be in with its invisible bars, but both the human writer and the divine Author of the Book of Philippians want to let you know that it is possible to be in a prison, and yet find freedom and joy in life and ministry, regardless of your circumstances, and no matter who was responsible for making them that way—and even if they never change!

And the key to living in that kind of victory is the other key point of emphasis God makes through repetition in this Book: our ATTITUDE! The word "mind" is found 10 times in this little Book. The word "think" is found five times, and the word "remember" is found once. In all, 16 times God is trying to get us to see that JOY is a CHOICE we make because of right thinking. And that's actually the theme of this Book.

Some of us have faced circumstances in our lives like those mentioned above. They have left us discouraged, depressed and/or imprisoned. But watch how God ministers through the inspired words of this Book...

In chapter 1, He tells us that we can find joy in our CIRCUMSTANCES because Christ is our LIFE. And the key verse in the chapter is verse 21, where Paul says, "For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain."

Some of us have had people who have injured us in some way, and we wrestle with bitterness and anger. In chapter 2, God says that we can find joy in our RELATIONSHIPS because Christ is our PATTERN. And the key verse in this chapter is verse 5, which says, "Let this mind be in you, which was also in Christ Jesus."

Some of us wrestle with our flesh: worldliness on one hand, and good deeds on the other, but both driven by the same carnal source—the flesh! And in chapter 3, Paul says, we can find joy in our WALK because Christ is our RIGHTEOUSNESS. And the key verse in this chapter is verse 9 where Paul says, "[That I may (v.8)] be found in him, not having mine OWN righteousness, which is of the law, but that which is through the faith of Christ, the righteousness which is of God by faith."

And then, some of us are gripped by worry and fear. In chapter 4, Paul says that we can find joy in our ADVERSITIES because Christ is our SUFFICIENCY. And the key verse in this chapter is verse 13, where Paul says, "I can do all things through Christ which strengtheneth me."

As you can see, the Book of Philippians is an extremely practical Book that addresses real-life issues, and points us toward the joy that is found in and through Christ alone. Oh, may it be ours as God ministers to us through this powerful Book today!

WEEK 50, DAY 2: TODAY'S READING: COLOSSIANS 1-4

OVERVIEW:

The preeminence of Christ (chapter 1); four warnings (chapter 2); putting off and putting on (chapter 3); real relationships (chapter 4).

HIGHLIGHTS & INSIGHTS:

In Revelation 2 and 3, our Lord dictated to the Apostle John seven letters to seven churches in Asia Minor. They were seven churches that actually existed historically at the time of the writing of the Revelation, and addressed actual situations that these churches were facing at that time. Students of the Bible have noted for centuries, however, that beyond just the historical aspect of these letters, there is also a prophetic aspect, or a future application. When placed into the context of the whole of the Book of Revelation, the seven letters also provide for us a panoramic view of the seven stages of church history that pick up where the Book of Acts leaves off in the history of the early church, and takes us all the way up to the Rapture of the church—which “coincidentally” enough, is found in the Book of Revelation immediately following the conclusion of the seventh and final letter to the churches. (See Rev. 4:1).

But there is also another amazing “coincidence” that should be noted. Not only did our Lord write letters to seven churches, but the Apostle Paul also wrote letters to seven churches, or groups of churches (the church of the Romans, Corinthians, Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians and the Thessalonians).

And what’s even more “coincidental,” is that if we were to take the seven letters to the churches to whom our Lord wrote, and lay them next to the seven letters to the churches to whom Paul wrote, we would find an amazing similarity of content. Certainly the most obvious connection would be our Lord’s letter to the Laodiceans, and the letter we’ll be looking at today—Paul’s letter to the Colossians. In fact, the only time other than Revelation 3:14-22 that the word “Laodicea” is found in the Bible is the Book of Colossians, where it just happens to be found five times! The thing to take away from this observation is that though the Book of Colossians was written to address specific situations taking place in that church when the Spirit of God inspired Paul to write it, and though it has certainly had application for every local church in every period of church history, there is also a very specific application of that letter to the church of Jesus Christ in the Laodicean Church Period (approximately 1901 to the Rapture).

Interestingly enough, when we observe the issues that the Spirit of God inspired the Apostle Paul to address when writing to the church that existed historically in Colossae in approximately 62 A.D., they could not possibly have a more specific and direct application to the issues the church of Jesus Christ has dealt with during the Laodicean Period. And you may want to just make a mental note to yourself, that when dealing with doctrinal and/or practical issues in the church in the last days, a good place to begin looking for answers is the Book of Colossians!

But to understand some of the historical context of this letter, recognize that as Paul writes to the Colossians, he is sitting in a prison cell in Rome. This is the first of two times he would be imprisoned in Rome—the second time would end in his death.

Something interesting about this letter is that it is addressed to a church to which Paul had not personally planted—in a city to which he had never personally been. You’ll notice in chapter 1 and verse 4, Paul says to the Church in Colossae, that he and Timothy “heard of your faith in Christ Jesus.” In chapter 2 and verse 1, Paul says to them, “For I would that ye knew what great conflict I have for you, and for them at Laodicea, and for as many as have not seen my face in the flesh.” That surfaces, then, these obvious questions:

- How did the church in Colossae get planted then? And...
- Why was Paul writing to them?

Well, even though Paul had never spent any time in Colossae or Laodicea, he had spent a great amount of time in a city about 100 miles away—a city that served as one of the three main bases for his ministry—the city of Ephesus. Paul went to Ephesus on his third missionary journey, and spent three years preaching and teaching there (Acts 20:31). It was here that Paul's ministry actually began to explode. So much so, that when Luke wrote about this time in Paul's ministry in Acts 19:10, he says that in the first two years of being there, "all they which dwelt in Asia heard the word of the Lord Jesus, both Jews and Greeks." That's pretty astounding!

Obviously, as these people from all over Asia Minor would come to Ephesus to hear the gospel, many would then carry it back with them to their home towns. And during this time, there was evidently a group of men from the city of Colossae who had come to Ephesus and had received the Lord under Paul's ministry, and had gone back to home to be used of God to start the church in Colossae. A man named Epaphras (1:7; 4:12), a man named Philemon (Phm. 1), along with two other men, Apphia and Archippus (Phm.2). And from the things Paul says concerning Epaphras, it is obvious that he was the one who served as the pastor of this young church. Paul says in 1:6 and 7 that the Colossians had come to faith from what they "learned of Epaphras, our dear fellow-servant, who is FOR YOU A FAITHFUL MINISTER OF CHRIST." Later in chapter 4 and verse 12, Paul writes to the church in Colossae and says, "Epaphras, who is one of you, a servant of Christ, saluteth you, always laboring fervently for you in prayers, that ye may stand perfect and complete in all the will of God."

And it would appear that as this young pastor was seeking to shepherd this young flock, that even in the midst of all of the wonderful blessings of God upon the church in the lives of the Colossians (1:4-6, 8), there were also some things that were extremely troubling and unsettling to him. They were of such magnitude in Epaphras' mind, that he felt it necessary to make the 1000 mile journey to Rome where Paul was imprisoned to learn from him how to address these dangers that were threatening the spiritual well-being of the church.

And evidently, Paul felt that the issues that Epaphras had informed him about that had arisen in the church were significant enough to receive apostolic attention, and so he immediately commences the writing of the letter to the church, sending it with Tychicus and Onesimus (4:7-8)—while Epaphras remained in Rome with Paul for further tutelage and discipleship. And basically, in chapters 1 and 2, Paul writes to the church and says, "Your pastor has told me about some of the incredible things that are happening in your lives and in your church, and I'm blessed beyond measure! But let me warn you about some things..."

2:4 – 'Don't allow 'any man [to] beguile you with enticing words.'

2:8 – 'Beware lest any man spoil you through philosophy and vain deceit, after the tradition of men, after the rudiments of the world, and not after Christ.'

2:16 – 'Let no man therefore judge you in meat, or in drink, or in respect of an holyday, or of the new moon, or of the sabbath days.'

2:18 – 'Let no man beguile you of your reward in a voluntary humility and worshipping of angels, intruding into those things which he hath not seen, vainly puffed up by his fleshly mind.'"

After addressing these DOCTRINAL issues in chapters 1 and 2, Paul then addresses PRACTICAL issues in chapters 3 and 4. The overarching theme of these two chapters is RELATIONSHIPS.

3:1-17 – Our RELATIONSHIP with the LORD.

3:18–21 – Our RELATIONSHIP with those in our FAMILY.

3:22–4:1 – Our RELATIONSHIP with those with whom we WORK.

4:2–6 – Our RELATIONSHIP with the LOST WORLD.

4:2– Our RELATIONSHIP with those in the CHURCH.

For those of us who know the Lord, note that the relationships Paul addresses in these two chapters encompass every relationship we have—and provides us the practical principles we need for maintaining these relationships biblically.

WEEK 50, DAY 3: TODAY'S READING: 1 THESSALONIANS 1-2 THESSALONIANS 3

OVERVIEW:

A model church (1 Thess. 1); a model of discipleship (1 Thess. 2); a model of faith (1 Thess. 3); a model walk (1 Thess. 4-5); comfort in tribulation (2 Thess. 1); clarification in teaching (2 Thess. 2); content on various topics (2 Thess. 3).

HIGHLIGHTS & INSIGHTS:

As we noted yesterday, there is a definite connection between the seven letters our Lord wrote to the seven churches in Revelation 2–3, and the seven letters to the seven churches to whom Paul wrote. The most obvious, of course, is the connection between Paul's letter to the church of Colossae—and our Lord's letter to the church of Laodicea. We saw that the things Paul addressed in his letter to the church in Colossae, have a very relevant and pertinent application to the church of Jesus Christ during the Laodicean church period (from approximately 1901 until the Rapture).

And what is obviously more than a coincidence is the fact that immediately following the Book of Colossians (again, the letter with specific application to the church in the last days), God placed into the canon of Scripture the two letters to the Thessalonians. And do you know what these two letters “just happen” to specifically address? The two key events of the last days: the Rapture and the Second Coming! It is the exact sequence that is followed in the Book of Revelation! Because in the Book of Revelation, as soon as our Lord concludes His letter to the Laodiceans in chapter 3, immediately in chapter 4, heaven opens, there is a sound of a trumpet, a voice saying, “Come up hither,” and John is catapulted forward in time to experience the Rapture. As he is caught up into heaven, in chapters 4 and 5 he describes the scene of the raptured church in heaven, and then in chapters 6 through 19, he describes the events on the earth following the Rapture, and provides us four accounts of the Second Coming of Christ!

As we put all of these details together, what becomes apparent is that the Books of 1 and 2 Thessalonians are the letters the Holy Spirit inspired to teach the church about HOW TO BE PREPARED FOR THE LORD'S COMING. In fact, notice that each of the five chapters of 1 Thessalonians end with a reference to the coming of the Lord! (1:10; 2:19; 3:13; 4:13-17; 5:23)

But what also becomes very clear as we read through the content of these letters is that though they deal with the PROPHETIC EVENTS concerning the last days, Paul wants to be sure that we don't approach the Rapture and the Second Coming of Christ as mere doctrines to contemplate or to discuss in a Bible Study, or truths that we simply allow to tantalize our intellect or imagination—but as biblical realities that affect the way we LIVE! He wants to be sure that we allow these PROPHETIC events to be translated into PRACTICAL spiritual living! Based on the content of the letters of 1 and 2 Thessalonians, we could actually refer to these Books as a “How-To Manual” for how we're to live our lives in the last days. They provide us the practical things we need to make sure we're emphasizing in these last days; as well as how we're approaching the Lord's work so that we can be as effective as possible.

It's also worth noting that whereas each chapter of 1 Thessalonians ends with a reference concerning the Lord's coming, each chapter of 2 Thessalonians ends with a reference concerning grace. (1:12; 2:16; 3:18) Obviously, the practical point Paul is making is that as we labor in these dark last days prior to our Lord's coming, we need to be sure that we both apply and rely upon the grace of God that He promised would be “sufficient” through “infirmities, in reproaches, in necessities, in persecutions, [and] in distresses.” (2 Cor. 12:9-10)

Two other things worth noting from the biblical CONTEXT and CONTENT of these two Books have to do with:

1. Our Philosophy of Leadership.

It is interesting to note that the letters written to teach the church about effective ministry in the last days as we prepare for the Lord's coming just happen to be the only letters in the New Testament that were written as a TEAM EFFORT. Did you realize that the Books of 1 and 2 Thessalonians were actually written by three human authors: Paul, Silvanus (Silas) and Timotheous (Timothy)? (1 Thess. 1:1; 2 Thess. 1:1) In Paul's other letters to the churches, he will mention those who are with him in his greeting, but he will immediately kick into the first person singular, and use the personal pronoun "I" throughout the remainder of the letter. And as we read through 1 and 2 Thessalonians, there's certainly no getting around the fact that it is the obvious writing style of Paul. These Books definitely reflect his personality and vocabulary, but what's unique about these two Books is that after mentioning that Silas and Timothy are with him in the greeting, as he gets into the body of the letters, he consistently writes in the first person plural, using the plural pronouns "we" and "us." There are a few places in the midst of these two letters where his apostolic authority surfaces and he uses the word "I," but by and large, all throughout 1 and 2 Thessalonians, Paul models for us what is the most effective PHILOSOPHY of LEADERSHIP in the last days, and that is, LEADING as a part of a TEAM! Paul, Silas and Timothy were a unit. Paul was definitely the leader of the leaders, but they were committed to teamwork. What we need to learn from their example is that if we're going to be effective in carrying out the job the Lord has for us in the last days through our local churches, we must work together as a team, and that teamwork must flow out of the leadership. Not only does a team approach to ministry provide accountability (Pro. 11:14), it also provides wisdom and safety. (Pro. 15:22; 24:6)

2. The Priority of Lordship.

It's also interesting to note that 1 and 2 Thessalonians begin very similarly: "Paul and Silvanus, and Timotheous, unto the church of the Thessalonians which is in God the Father and in the LORD JESUS CHRIST." (1 Thess. 1:1; 2 Thess. 1:1) Notice, he doesn't simply say "in Jesus Christ"—but "in the LORD Jesus Christ." Now, certainly, the phrase "the LORD JESUS CHRIST" is not an unfamiliar phrase, or a phrase that is unique to 1 and 2 Thessalonians. In fact, the phrase is actually used 81 times in the New Testament. What is noteworthy, however, is that 20 out of the 81 times that this title is used, it is in the Books of 1 and 2 Thessalonians! 20 times! Far more than any other Book of the New Testament, or pair of Books in the New Testament. Interestingly enough, almost 25% of the time the phrase is found, it is found in the eight chapters of these two little Books!

Now, from the HISTORICAL context, Acts 17:7 makes clear why Paul so emphasizes this phrase. Jesus being presented as the "Lord," or "King" was the very issue that got the city of Thessalonica so stirred up when Paul, Silas and Timothy came there to present Christ and His gospel in the first place! It would only stand to reason that when they wrote back to them, they would continue to emphasize that theme.

But in the BIBLICAL context, remembering that these are the Books that the Spirit of God inspired to teach us about how to be the most effective in the last days, it becomes obvious that God is trying to let us know that it is now more important than ever that people understand WHO Jesus Christ is, and the position He wants to have in His church collectively and in our lives personally—as LORD! Revelation 3:14-22 lets us know that Christ's Lordship in the church in the last days is so far from a reality that He is actually standing on the outside of the church knocking, waiting for us to open the door.

As we read these two incredible Books today, two questions we may need to consider asking ourselves:

- Does my life reflect the fact that I am submitted to Christ's LORDSHIP? And...
- Am I a part of the ministry TEAM of my local church?

WEEK 50, DAY 4: TODAY'S READING: 1 TIMOTHY 1-6

OVERVIEW:

The proper use of the Law of God (chapter 1); the power of prayer and the place of women in the local church (chapter 2); the qualifications for church leaders (chapter 3); the contrast between false and faithful teachers (chapter 4); the responsibilities of the members of a local church (chapter 5); sound advice from God to servants, false teachers, the rich, and the educated (chapter 6).

HIGHLIGHTS & INSIGHTS:

The Book of 1 Timothy is the first of three New Testament Books referred to as "Pastoral Epistles," the others being 2 Timothy and Titus. These Books are obviously called "Pastoral Epistles" because they are addressed to pastors of local churches, and have to do with conducting the affairs in the church as the "under-shepherds" of Christ's flock—the Lord Jesus Christ, of course, being the Chief Shepherd. (1 Peter 5:1–3) The instruction in these letters is very specific, and most certainly deals with situations pastors will encounter in carrying out their biblical office. But whether we're a pastor or not, don't miss that these letters have incredibly practical ramifications for all of our lives and ministries! Just as surely as these letters have tremendous application for those who hold the office of a pastor in a local church, recognize that God intends every member of every local church to have a "pastoral mindset" toward the other members of the church, as well as toward the work of Christ in and through the church!

Recognize also that the Pastoral Epistles also present a great model for understanding the relationship God intends to exist between a disciple and discipler. Paul's relationship with Timothy, and Timothy's relationship with Paul, paint one of the most graphic pictures of real discipleship in the entire New Testament. Sure, Timothy had been given the responsibility of holding the office of pastor in the church at Ephesus, but it's also important to recognize that he was also an individual member of the body of Christ. He is a real person, with real weaknesses, real problems, and real struggles just like everybody else. So, understand, God placed the books in the Bible that we refer to as the Pastoral Epistles not just to provide information for pastors, but to provide every believer practical instruction concerning being a follower (disciple) of Christ—from either side of a discipling relationship.

As we move into 1 Timothy today, keep in mind that Timothy was the son of a father who was a Greek—and a mother who was a Jew. (Acts 16:1-3) His mother's name was Eunice and his grandmother's name was Lois. (2 Tim. 1:5) He resided in Lystra (Acts 16:1-2; 20:4) where he was raised in the knowledge of the scriptures. (2 Tim. 3:15)

Upon visiting Timothy's hometown of Lystra on his second missionary journey, Paul was impressed with Timothy's testimony in his local church, and felt impressed to invite him to join he and Silas as a part of their missionary team. Keep in mind that this invitation was extended to Timothy immediately following Paul's conflict with Barnabas concerning the fact that Paul didn't want John Mark to be included on his missionary team because he was too young, too fearful, and because he still had quite a ways to go in the process of discipleship. (Acts 15:36-41) Because God is sovereign, and because He obviously has a sense of humor, He turns right around and gives Paul a fearful young man who still had quite a ways to go in the process of discipleship to be a part of his missionary team! Just file into your head, that when we refuse to learn the lessons from the situations God has placed in our lives, He will simply recreate similar circumstances until we learn them!

To catch the real heart of this letter, recognize a few pertinent details...

- Paul most likely led Timothy to Christ when he and Barnabas came to Lystra on their first missionary journey. (Acts 14:5-7; 1 Tim. 1:2, 18; 2 Tim. 1:2, 2:1; 1 Cor. 4:17)
- Timothy became Paul's most trusted companion and friend, and Paul used him for some of the toughest assignments in dealing with various situations that arose in various churches. (1 Thess. 3:1-7; 1 Cor. 4:16-17)
- Paul goes on in scripture to describe Timothy as a selfless individual, one with whom he was completely likeminded, and viewed serving with him as a father would with his own son. (Phil. 2:19-22)
- Timothy struggled with the problem of fear (1 Cor. 16:10; 2 Tim. 1:7), which probably led to his stomach problems and other physical infirmities that Paul mentions in chapter 5 and verse 23.
- Paul wrote this letter because he felt the need to give young Timothy some encouragement to stay in the battle as a good soldier and to war a good warfare (1:18) in the midst of false teachers and backsliding believers in the church at Ephesus. (1:3-4, 19-20) Keep in mind, Paul himself had invested three solid years in this church at Ephesus (Acts 20:31) and had an intense love for them. (Acts 20:37-38) Paul writes to Timothy to encourage him to stay at Ephesus, and fulfill his role and responsibility as the church's pastor, in spite of the difficulties he faced. Paul had warned the Ephesian elders that false teachers would both enter and arise out of the church, and now that it had happened, Paul felt confident that Timothy was the man for the job of shutting the mouths of the false teachers and protecting the flock of God in that church. (1:3; 4:7; 6:17)

This letter was written from Laodicea (see AV 1611 postscript) and sent to Timothy in Ephesus between Paul's two imprisonments in Rome. It is interesting to note that Paul desired Timothy to stay in Ephesus—a place that was "fully purposed" to do God's work (note that the word Ephesus means "fully purposed"—Rev. 2:1-2) rather than join him in Laodicea (where the Christians felt they had "rights"—Rev. 3:14-18). Paul knew where God's work could most effectively be accomplished. Practically speaking, we would do well in this age if we would just "stay in Ephesus," as opposed to "living and loving Laodicea".

Note some other additional highlights from Paul's first letter to young Timothy:

- 1:1-2 reveal that Christ is four things to those of us who know Him. He is...
 - * Our SAVIOR.
 - * Our HOPE.
 - * Our FATHER.
 - * Our LORD.
- 1:8-10 reveal that the lawful use of God's law is two-fold:
 - * To reveal what sin is. (Rom. 5:20, 7:7)
 - * To bring us to Jesus Christ. (Gal. 3:21-24).
- 1:16 reveals that Paul's life of longsuffering is the pattern for our lives. (2 Cor. 11:23-28)
- 1:18-20 reveal that standing for truth will sometimes require the politically incorrect practice of naming the names of those who are disobedient and that teach false doctrine.
- 2:1 reveals that as believers, prayer is the "first" thing we should do to maintain a close relationship with God.

- 2:5 reveals that no mediator (“middle-man”) other than CHRIST can bring us and/or our prayers to the Father. Not Mary. Not the saints. Not a priest. ONLY Christ!
- 3:16 reveals that God was manifest (i.e. shown to us; revealed) in the flesh and it is “WITHOUT CONTROVERSY!” The way we might say that today is that there are “no ifs, ands or buts about it!” Or, “You can take that to the bank!” (1 Cor. 15:1-8)
- 4:11–12a reveal that we should refuse to be intimidated by those who insinuate that perhaps we’re too young to be doing God’s work. Regardless of our age, we are to preach and teach God’s truth with charity, purity, humility—and authority!

6:5–9 reveal that th

- 6:20 reveals that we are to “avoid oppositions of SCIENCE falsely so called.”

Note: Evolution is called “science,” but it’s actually a religion:

* By faith, Christians believe, “In the beginning GOD...”

* By faith, evolutionists believe, “In the beginning DIRT...”

WEEK 50, DAY 5: TODAY'S READING: 2 TIMOTHY 1-4

OVERVIEW:

Important reminders regarding faith, fear, and holding fast sound words in the last days (chapter 1); responsibilities of believers in the last days (chapter 2); the realities of living in the apostasy of the last days (chapter 3); the Apostle Paul's final charge to preach the Word in the last days (chapter 4).

HIGHLIGHTS & INSIGHTS:

This second letter to Timothy records the last words that Paul ever communicated under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. It was written from a prison in Rome (Mamertine Prison) where Paul was being held as he awaited execution for preaching Christ during the reign of the cruel Roman Emperor, Nero, who hated Christians and Christianity!

Paul had obviously been arrested again since the writing of his first letter to Timothy in 65 A.D. The New Testament gives little detail as to Paul's ministry between these two imprisonments, but what we can conclude from scripture is that he went to Nicopolis (Titus 3:12) and then to Troas (4:13), where he had left his cloak, some books, and the parchments (i.e. the scriptures) because of an apparent need for a quick exit. At the time of the writing of this final letter to Timothy, the time of his execution was drawing near. (2 Tim. 4:6) Every one of Paul's trusted companions with the exception of Luke had forsaken him. (2 Tim. 4:11) He is lonely, but he is not in despair. (2 Tim. 4:17; 2 Cor. 4:8-10) He has a longing in his heart to see his beloved son in the faith one last time, so he writes this letter to Timothy asking him to come to Rome as soon as possible. (4:9, 21). The thrust of this letter is Paul encouraging Timothy not to be afraid of stepping in to assume role of leadership in the ministry of the gospel and discipleship once he had been executed. (1:7-8; 2:2) We should all have at least one person to whom we could write such a letter when we are on our death bed!

Additional highlights from Paul's second letter to Timothy:

- 1:7– Any time we're experiencing fear doing the work of the Lord, we can be assured that its source is not God! It's either our own foolish insecurities and lack of faith—and/or the work of our adversary, Satan! (4:18)
- 1:12– True believers are eternally secure because they know whom they have believed (Jesus Christ), and it is He who keeps them saved until that day, not themselves!
- 2:15– We are commanded to “study” the Word of God to make sure that we “rightly divide it.” Without diligent study, it is possible to make “wrong divisions” when interpreting the scripture, and end up twisting it to our own destruction. (Also see 2 Pet. 3:16)
- 2:24–26– It is imperative that we display genuine meekness when seeking to reach lost people with the gospel, realizing that they have been taken captive by Satan himself and are being held in his snare. Their only hope is through the message of the gospel that has been committed to our trust. (Also see 1 Thess. 2:4)
- 3:15–17– Paul clearly calls the Old Testament “scriptures” that Timothy had as a child “holy,” and even though they were not the “original manuscripts,” but obviously, copies of copies of copies, the “scriptures”

Timothy held in his hands was the very inspired Word and words of God that had the supernatural power to “perfect” and “throughly furnish” a man or woman of God “unto all good works!”

- 4:2–4– We have many “TEACHERS” of the Bible all over the world today just as the Bible predicted, but so few “PREACHERS” of the WORD! What’s the difference between teaching and preaching? From a general standpoint it is simply this: the purpose of teaching is imparting “information.” The purpose of preaching is initiating “transformation.” From a specific biblical standpoint, according to 2 Timothy 4:2–4, true biblical preaching includes four key things:
 - 1) Preaching declares **“THE WORD of GOD”** to the listeners!
(Preaching is not simply imparting information “from” the Word, “using” the Word, or “about” the Word. It is imparting “THE WORD” itself! It has to do with the CONTENT of the message.)
 - 2) Preaching **“REPROVES”** the listeners!
(Preaching is intended by God to be CONVICTING.)
 - 3) Preaching **“REBUKES”** the listeners!
(Preaching is intended by God to be CONFRONTING.)
 - 4) Preaching **“EXHORTS”** the listeners!
(Preaching is intended by God to be CHALLENGING.)

In a nutshell, we could say that biblical preaching in the 21st century is politically incorrect. May God give us a few fearless men to declare the light of His glorious Word—even in these dark last days! And by God’s grace, may He empower us to be in that number!

WEEK 50 DAY 6: TODAY'S READING: TITUS-PHILEMON

OVERVIEW:

Titus: Order and authority in the local church (chapter 1); sound doctrine for the people of the local church (chapter 2); the biblical way to deal with heretics (chapter 3). Philemon: The Apostle Paul's letter to his friend Philemon regarding his unfaithful slave Onesimus, asking him to forgive and accept Onesimus back into his house, not just as a slave, but as a brother in the Lord.

HIGHLIGHTS & INSIGHTS:

Titus was a man that the apostle Paul often relied upon in clutch situations because he possessed two tremendous character qualities: he was trustworthy and faithful. Oh, may God help us to possess those simple but wonderful characteristics! In fact, in 2 Corinthians 8:23, Paul referred to Titus as his "partner and fellow-helper" in the work of the Lord. Coming from Paul, those are very powerful words of affirmation.

This letter from Paul to Titus was written to give instruction on how to strengthen and establish the young churches on the island of Crete. Paul wanted to make sure that Titus dealt with the Cretians, who Paul says, were known for being liars, evil and lazy. (Titus 1:11) How's that for political correctness?!

One of the key things we learn in this letter is the qualifications for leaders in the church. It should be noted that every believer has been commanded in other places in the New Testament to possess each of these character qualities that Paul lists in 1:6–9. What Paul is demanding here, though, is that a man who holds the office of a bishop (pastor) not only "SHOULD" possess these qualities—he "MUST" possess them! They are the biblical requirements and prerequisites for holding the office, and we must be certain that these biblical qualifications are upheld in the local church. A church is destined to become carnal and spiritually deficient when the leaders do not meet their biblical qualifications, and/or do not walk in "true holiness" (Eph. 4:23) as an example to the flock.

This letter also teaches us the absolute necessity of teaching sound doctrine. Paul gives a very sobering reason: "For there are many unruly and vain talkers and deceivers." We would do well to recognize that if there were "many" deceptive carriers of false doctrine in the 1st century, just how "MANY" there must be in the 21st century! Paul clearly taught us that "evil men and seducers shall wax worse and worse!" (2 Tim. 3:13) In other words, false teachers would progressively increase throughout the course of history, not decrease!

It's also interesting to note Paul's answer to the dilemma of false teachers. It is that pastors "hold fast the faithful word as they have been taught, that they may be able by sound doctrine both to exhort and to convince the gainsayers." (Titus 1:9) Paul even goes on to say that the mouths of these false teachers "must be stopped!" Oh, how we desperately need the men who lead our churches to be able to do that themselves—and equip the flock to do the same! (Titus 1:11).

The sound doctrine of which Paul was referring that pastors are to teach is found in chapters 2 and 3. In chapter 2, Paul lays out sound doctrine for older men, older women, younger women, younger men and servants. In chapter 3, Paul commands Titus to remind all in the church of their past sinful condition—and the amazing kindness and love that God has shown to all of them. He also very clearly lays out the biblical method for dealing with heretics—or those who do not hold and/or teach sound doctrine. His instruction is very simply, admonish them two times, and if they continue to hold and/or to teach false doctrine, put them out. (Titus 3:10–11) Paul ends the letter with a reminder to all of us to "learn to maintain good works" so that we do not become unfruitful. (Titus 3:14) An unfruitful Christian is very simply a contradiction.

Additional highlights from Paul's letter to Titus...

- Be very discerning, because false teachers profess that they know God, and can present a very spiritual-looking front. (Titus 1:16) Upon closer examination, however, it will be revealed that they actually deny God with the life that they live. In the end, it isn't their profession that will matter, only God's! Jesus said in Matthew 7:23, "And then will I profess unto them, I never knew you: depart from me, ye that work iniquity."
- The same grace that "SAVES" us—also "TEACHES" us to live soberly, righteously, and godly in this present world. (Titus 2:11-12) That's why Paul said in Romans 6:1-2, "Shall we continue in sin that grace may abound? God forbid. How shall we that are dead to sin live any longer therein?" If we live with the constant reminder of what Jesus did for us when He saved us from our sin, we will then stand daily in awe of His grace, and sin will no longer have dominion over us. Quite simply, that's how grace teaches us to live a life that is pleasing to our Savior!

As we also consider today the Book of Philemon, God paints for us in this brief Book of the Bible a beautiful picture of grace, mercy, and forgiveness. Philemon was a personal friend of Paul that he had apparently had the privilege of leading to the Lord. (v.19) One of Philemon's slaves, a man by the name of Onesimus, had apparently stolen from his master and fled to Rome. As is often the case, one sin leads to another, so for an unidentified reason, Onesimus finds himself imprisoned in Rome. It is in this Roman prison that Paul meets Onesimus, and has the privilege of leading leading him to the Lord. Paul realized that if Onesimus would ever be all that God intended him to be, he would need to make things right with his master, Philemon. So Paul writes this short letter to his friend and fellow-believer, Philemon, asking him not only to receive Onesimus back into his house as a "slave," but now, as a "brother" in the Lord!

Note some of the incredible pictures God paints for us through the three main characters in this letter to Philemon...

1. PHILEMON is a picture of God the Father:

- * He was righteous. (vs. 7 c.f. Jer. 23:6)
- * He was wealthy. (vs.2,7,11 c.f. Hag.2:8)
- * The church was his habitation. (vs. 2 c.f. Eph. 2:22)
- * He was a caring householder. (vs. 2,5,7 c.f. Eph. 2:19)
- * He had been violated. (vs. 11, 18-19 c.f. Rom. 3:23)
- * He was the legal owner. (vs. 16 c.f. 1 Cor. 6:20)

2. ONESIMUS is a picture of us, as redeemed sinners:

- * He was a slave. (vs.16 c.f. Rom. 7:14)
- * He was an unprofitable servant. (vs.11 c.f. Matt. 25:30; Rom. 5:12)
- * He desired freedom. (vs.15 c.f. Gen. 3:1-6)
- * His quest for freedom found him imprisoned. (vs. 10 c.f. Rom. 6:17)
- * In desperation, he received God's liberating grace! (vs. 11 c.f. Eph. 2:8-9)

3. PAUL is a picture of Jesus Christ:

- * He was a prisoner on behalf of the gospel. (vs. 10 c.f. Isa. 53:8; Jn. 18:28)
- * He intercedes to the wealthy householder for the unprofitable servant. (vs.10-11 c.f. Heb. 7:25)
- * He will do nothing without the householder's permission. (vs. 14 c.f. John 6:38)
- * He was willing and able to pay the servant's debt. (vs. 18-19 c.f. 1 Tim. 2:6)
- * He asks that the violator be received just as he would be received. (vs.12,17 c.f. Rom. 8:17)
- * He secures for the restored a place to dwell. (vs. 22 c.f. John 14:1-2)
- * He soon returns to the householder. (vs. 22 c.f. John 14:5)

Wow! What a Book! May it cause us to stand in awe of our God today! (Psalm 33:8)

WEEK 51, DAY 1: TODAY'S READING: HEBREWS 1-6

OVERVIEW:

Comparing Christ to the Angels; comparing Christ to Moses; comparing Christ as our high priest to the priests of the Old Testament; comparing our rest in Christ to the rest of the Promised Land.

HIGHLIGHTS & INSIGHTS:

The Book of Hebrews begins a section of the New Testament that often causes people problems. A mistake that is very easy to make, and is very often made when believers read the Word of God is viewing everything they read through "Christian" glasses. Christian glasses aren't a bad thing when you're reading a Book that is addressed to the local church (or a leader of a local church), but they can pose some pretty serious doctrinal problems if you leave them on when reading other Books of the New or Old Testament.

Like the Gospels, because the Book of Hebrews is found in the New Testament, most people leave their "local church/ Christian" glasses on while reading this Book. That is an invitation to doctrinal disaster. One of the things that will clear up about 90% of the difficulties found in the Book of Hebrews is simply asking ourselves, "To whom was the Book of HEBREWS written?" Go ahead, take a wild stab at who you think it was! Um, was it a local church? No. Um, was it a pastor of a local church? No. How about Gentiles? Good guess, but, no. Could it have been Hebrews? Yes! You got it! Wow! You must be a seminary graduate to understand something that deep! The Book of Hebrews was written to Hebrews. Imagine that!

And do you remember what we talked about concerning the Jews when we entered into our reading of the New Testament? In terms of "rightly dividing the word of truth," the Jews/Nation of Israel is the "ancient landmark" that must be kept in place lest you enter into "the fields of the fatherless." Not recognizing that Paul is specifically addressing "Hebrews" in the Book of HEBREWS (!!!) will make our study of this Book a "fatherless field."

The twofold theme of the Book of Hebrews is:

- The SUPERIORITY of CHRIST
- The NEW COVENANT compared to the OLD COVENANT.

The key word in this Book is the word "BETTER. We have...

- A BETTER testament (7:22)
- A BETTER covenant (8:6)
- BETTER promises (8:6)
- A BETTER sacrifice (9:23)
- BETTER blood (12:24)
- BETTER substance (10:34)
- A BETTER hope (7:19)
- A BETTER country (11:16)

- BETTER resurrection. (11:35)

The word BETTER also provides an easy breakdown of the Book:

- Christ is BETTER than the Angels. (Chapters 1-2)
- Christ is BETTER than Moses. (Chapter 3)
- Christ is BETTER than Joshua. (Chapter 4)
- Christ is a BETTER High Priest. (Chapters 5-7)
- Christ established a BETTER Covenant. (Chapters 8-13)

HISTORICALLY, the Book of Hebrews was written to reveal the establishment of the new covenant by Jesus Christ. This Book is actually the written form of what the Apostle Paul did when entering cities for the first time to proclaim the gospel. Acts 17:2-3 reveals that Paul's standard operating procedure when entering into a city was to first go to the Jewish synagogue and reason from the scriptures how that Christ was the Messiah. In those synagogues, obviously, Paul would have been speaking predominantly to "Hebrews."

DOCTRINALLY (or PROPHETICALLY), the Book of Hebrews is written for the benefit of Jews during the Tribulation Period. We know from Romans 11 that God is not finished dealing with the Nation of Israel. As we've discussed previously, on God's timetable we are presently living in a "parenthesis" called the Church Age. After the rapture of the church, God will once again deal directly with the Nation of Israel. If you were a Jew in the Tribulation, and you realized that you and your people had missed the Messiah when Christ came the first time, as you look through the table of contents for the New Testament, as you see the names of the Books listed there, what Book do you think you would be most inclined to read? How about the one addressed specifically to YOU? The Book of HEBREWS!

DEVOTIONALLY (or INSPIRATIONALLY), however, we can still learn a tremendous amount about the new covenant and Christ's sacrifice for us even though the Book of Hebrews is not written directly "to" us (the Church). The Book also clearly reveals how Christ is the reality of the pictures and types contained in the Old Testament, as well as some of the clearest teaching on the effectiveness of Christ's sacrifice—how that from God's perspective, it was the "one sacrifice for sins for ever!" Hallelujah! So, the Book has a very "profitable" practical application for us! (2 Tim. 3:16)

There are three clear warning passages contained in the first six chapters of Hebrews. They are as follows:

- Chapter 2, verses 1–4
- Chapter 3 and verse 7 through Chapter 4 and verse 13
- Chapter 5 and verse 11 through Chapter 6 and verse 20

These warning passages are usually a place where many well-meaning people lose their neck. HISTORICALLY, these passages apply in two ways: First, to those Hebrews that had already placed their faith in Christ, these passages are an exhortation to hold fast to that faith. This would be similar to the teaching we see in Galatians, where Paul actually calls believers "foolish," even though they had trusted Christ. Second, to those Hebrews who had not placed their faith in Christ alone, these warnings serve as a call to salvation. These unbelieving Hebrews needed to realize that Christ is the fulfillment of what they believed was true (the Old Testament), and that they needed to embrace the new covenant Christ had established.

DOCTRINALLY (Prophetically), these warning passages will serve in the future as an exhortation to Hebrews during the Tribulation Period to remain true to Christ and endure until the end. This corresponds to Christ's teaching in Matthew 24:13, that those who endure until the end shall be saved. As we saw in Matthew 24, the context of that passage is not the Church Age, but rather, the time immediately preceding the Second Coming of Christ, the Tribulation Period.

WEEK 51, DAY 2: TODAY'S READING: HEBREWS 7-10

OVERVIEW:

Christ's priesthood superior to the Levitical priesthood; the old covenant was a shadow of the real; the old covenant sacrifices were temporary; Christ's sacrifice is permanent.

HIGHLIGHTS & INSIGHTS:

The chapters in today's reading provide one of the most complete explanations about the superiority of Christ when compared to virtually anything and everything—and the superiority of the new covenant when compared to the old covenant.

Paul begins chapter 7 by identifying Christ as a Priest after the order of Melchisedec. (The story of Melchisedec is found in Genesis 14:17–20.) This connection to Melchisedec is tremendously significant because it reveals to us that Christ is not a priest after the Levitical priesthood started with Aaron. (Heb.7:11) You see, the Levitical priesthood was comprised of MEN—men who were SINNERS! What that means, is that before these priests could offer sacrifices for the PEOPLE, they first had to offer sacrifices for THEMSELVES! (Heb. 7:27) These sacrifices were required to be made daily and repeatedly. And listen, that's precisely why Christ was not from Levitical priesthood! He is a High Priest after Melchisedec! (Heb. 7:24–28) Christ was not a sinner. Christ does not have to offer sacrifices daily. Christ is a High Priest forever because He lives forever and makes intercession for us. Perfection could never come from the Levitical priesthood—it could only come from a different priesthood—and a different priest. Our perfection comes from our High Priest, the Lord Jesus Christ!

And just a word about Melchisedec. Who is this "mysterious" person? Please allow me to simply lay out the facts that Hebrews 7 reveals concerning him...

- He is the King of Righteousness. (7:2a)
- He is the King of Salem, or the King of Peace. (7:2b)
- He is the Priest of the Most High God. (7:1)
- He has no father, mother or descent. (7:3a)
- He has no beginning or end. (7:3b)
- He is great. (7:4a)
- He receives tithes. (7:4b)
- He receives worship. (7:1d)
- He is without sin. (7:27)

Obviously, Melchisedec was an Old Testament appearance of the One of whom this simple list perfectly describes! He is, no doubt, none other than our very Lord Jesus Christ!

God also reveals something very interesting in chapter 8. He informs us that the sanctuary and tabernacle of the old covenant were merely a "shadow" of the real sanctuary and tabernacle inhabited by God in the heavens. We may need to take a minute to get our heads wrapped around the concept of a shadow—and how it relates to the point Paul is trying to get us to see. Obviously, we all know what a shadow is. A shadow a basic representation of something tangible and real. It can form a general outline of something... it can help a person identify what a particular thing is—whether it be a person, a tree, a bicycle, a car, etc. But one thing a shadow is not, and never can

be though, is the real thing! Can you imagine someone wanting to have a conversation with your shadow? That sounds ridiculous—but it's exactly God's point! And He's trying to get these Hebrews to recognize that they were still caught up worshipping in the shadows of the earthly representation of the tabernacle and sanctuary that were intended to merely point them to the reality of Christ!

But recognize that this wasn't just a 1st century, Jewish problem! Many Jews and Gentiles in the 21st century do the same thing today, by not realizing that religion is merely a SHADOW—and that there is nothing REAL in religion. Oh, it may make people feel better to go to church, to give their money, to do good works, to sing nice songs, or to be the best person they can possibly be—but none of these "shadows" can change the "reality" of their sin! Tragically, many people today still embrace the SHADOW instead of embracing the REALITY, Jesus Christ!

The old covenant revealed within itself—that it was not of itself... sufficient. The holy of holies in the old covenant could only be entered into one time per year on the Day of Atonement. This revealed that the way into the holiest of all (God's tabernacle—not the earthly one) was not yet revealed. It was simply a figure, or a shadow imposed by the law until what Paul calls in chapter 9 and verse 10, the "time of reformation." Notice, none of the work carried out by the High Priest of the Old Testament could even perfect his own conscience—much less the conscience of the rest of the people. But then the "time of reformation" did come—and we're not talking about the time of Martin Luther! We're talking about the time when the REAL High Priest showed up... an EVERLASTING High Priest... the High Priest of the TRUE tabernacle! And the blood offered by this High Priest was not the blood of bulls and goats, but was His very OWN blood—the blood of GOD! His sacrifice can purge our conscience... and His blood established a brand new covenant!

And, oh my, how much greater is this new covenant than the old one! The blood of bulls and goats (or anything else!) never could, never can, and never will be able to take away sin. But the blood and sacrifice of the new covenant is different—because it was offered by a different High Priest! This Priest, this man, the "God-man," the Lord Jesus Christ offered ONE sacrifice for sins forever! And there is no other sacrifice needed. There is no other sacrifice required by God. And any other sacrifice we attempt to offer becomes an affront to God—because what it actually says is that we don't believe the sacrifice of His Son was sufficient.

But let's get this down into the practical application of where we live. Sometimes after we fall prey to sin, we unwittingly add to Christ's sacrifice by doing things like attempting to feel really, really bad about our sin (a form of the unbiblical practice of the Roman Catholic penance). At other times when we've sinned against God, we think we can "sacrifice" for it by giving more... or reading more... or praying more... witnessing more, or promising to do better the next time. But, do you realize how much all of these "sacrifices" actually accomplish concerning our sin? NOTHING! Absolutely nothing! We can't add anything or take anything away from Christ's one sacrifice! We must trust His sacrifice, and His sacrifice alone... not our own sacrifice—or anything we may attempt to add to the gift of Christ's sacrifice! This is precisely why the false gospel that is preached by Roman Catholicism cannot save. It is a message that says Christ is still being sacrificed for sin (the mass), and it is a message that says that although you're forgiven, you must still pay for your sin (purgatory). But, oh, may we simply trust the once-for-all sacrifice offered by our perfect High Priest, and rest completely in Him, and the forgiveness of sin found in Him. And may we proclaim the message of the new covenant so that others may get out of the SHADOWS—and into the REALITY of Christ!

WEEK 51, DAY 3: TODAY'S READING: HEBREWS 11-13

OVERVIEW:

The examples of living by faith; the necessity of chastisement; the exhortation to endure; remembering others.

HIGHLIGHTS & INSIGHTS:

Hebrews 11 is one of the most popular chapters in the Bible. It is often referred to as the great "Hall of Faith." It lays out for us clear, real-life examples of what it means to live by faith. Most Christians are aware that God wants us to live and walk by faith, but what that actually means can sometimes seem somewhat sketchy or nebulous. That's why God presents in Hebrews 11, a panorama of men and women who walked by faith—so we can see what living and walking by faith looks like in real life!

It's also interesting to keep in mind what God reveals to us in His Word about the people mentioned in this chapter. Many times we read a chapter like Hebrews 11 and think that we could never attain the likes of these "GREAT men and women of God!" How easily we forget that these "GREAT people," were actually "NORMAL people"—just like me and you! Consider this...

- Noah got drunk after the flood.
- Abraham had a problem lying about his wife because he was more concerned about himself than he was her.
- Sarah thought she needed to help God out with His promise to Abraham.
- Jacob deceived and lied to his father in order to get his father's blessing.
- Moses was willing to kill a man in his "service" to God.
- Rahab was a harlot.
- Samson wasted most of his life and ability pleasing himself.
- David committed adultery and murder.

The biblically reality of these "GREAT men and women of God" in Hebrews 11 that we tend to hold up as "superstars" or "supersaints," is that they were FLAWED men and women just like me and you. And yet, these very "NORMAL" people pleased God because they did something very "ABNORMAL!" They simply chose to exercise faith in God and His Word! That, my friend, PLEASES our God (11:6)—and ultimately, that is why we exist... to bring Him "PLEASURE!" (Rev. 4:11)

Obviously, there is a tremendous amount of personal application we can make from this chapter, but we can only touch on a couple of key things:

1. Biblical faith results in action.

Notice that each example God lists in this chapter is an ACTION that had its root in FAITH. It was something a person did "by FAITH." And don't miss the biblical fact that when we are walking "by FAITH," it is because we are

“walking in the SPIRIT!” That is so crucial to keep in mind! Galatians 5:22 lets us know that FAITH is part of the FRUIT the Spirit produces when we are walking in Him. (Gal. 5:16) We could say it this way: Without FAITH it is impossible to please God (Heb. 11:6)—but it is impossible to have FAITH apart from the filling of the Spirit! (Gal. 5:16)

2. Biblical faith changes our values.

As Laodiceans, we want to have what we think is the “best” of both worlds. We want to walk with God, but we also want to enjoy the pleasures of this life. (11:15,25) Simply put, biblical faith enables us to see the emptiness and vanity of this world. Verse 14 says that biblical faith seeks a different “country,”—what verse 15 calls a “better country!” Biblical faith looks for a “city” whose builder and maker is God. (11:10) We may need to ask ourselves, “What 'city' and what 'country' would God say I'm presently seeking by the actions of my life?”

3. Biblical faith is what pleases God.

So many times we fall into the trap of thinking that God is PLEASED by all of the “stuff” we do: we go to church, we're good stewards of the money God entrusts to us, we read the Bible, we pray, etc.,etc. And listen, all of those things are vitally important and are most certainly part of our obedience—and yet, it is possible to do any and all of those things (and more!) in the power of the FLESH, totally apart from FAITH! The teaching of this chapter should cause us to ask ourselves this simple question: Is Christ living His life THROUGH me by the power of FAITH (2 Cor. 4:10)—or am I trying to live FOR God in the power of the FLESH? Yes, biblical faith will always result in actions, but those same actions produced by the arm of the flesh in an attempt to please God—fall absolutely flat, and are nothing but wood, hay and stubble. (1 Cor. 3:12)

The only way we will ever live a life of faith is to follow the admonition given in chapter 12 and verse 2: we very simply must LOOK UNTO JESUS! Our sights must be set on Him! He must be the goal we strive to attain. And notice, not only are we commanded and admonished to “look unto Jesus,” but we are to do so “DILIGENTLY!” (12:15)

Oh, may we get our eyes of ourselves... off of others... off of this world—and onto the Lord Jesus Christ! May He be PLEASED by our life of FAITH in Him!

WEEK 51, DAY 4: TODAY'S READING: JAMES 1-5

OVERVIEW:

Patience in tribulation; encouraging impartiality; the power of the tongue; true humility; the failure of money; the power of prayer.

HIGHLIGHTS & INSIGHTS:

The same question we asked at the beginning of Hebrews is applicable as we get started today in the Book of James: "To whom is this Book written?" Most people come to the Book of James and read it without considering that fundamental question. We usually read James (as we do Hebrews) just like we read the letters written to local churches or leaders of local churches (Romans-Philemon). However, the Book of James is not written to a local church or a leader of a local church. Notice, that in the very first chapter and the very first verse James lets us know very specifically and directly that what he is about to write was for "the twelve tribes scattered abroad"—or Jews!

The key principle God is communicating in the Book of James is that God fully intends that genuine, biblical faith results in a changed life. HISTORICALLY, this Book was written to Jews that had made a profession of faith in Christ to teach them that their faith should and will change their life. In a DOCTRINAL, or PROPHETIC sense, this Book is written to Jews living during the tribulation to teach them how to live out their faith in difficult circumstances. In a DEVOTIONAL sense, this Book is a very practical manual to help us understand how our faith should be lived out.

The Book can be broken down as follows:

- Chapter 1 – Real faith should endure temptation.
- Chapter 2 – Real faith should show no partiality.
- Chapter 3 – Real faith should change our speech.
- Chapter 4 – Real faith should transform our relationships.
- Chapter 5 – Real faith should anticipate Christ's return.

As mentioned above, there are many practical applications we can make to our lives from the Book of James. Here are a few to help you get started as you read this Book:

- **Be a doer of the Word. (1:22-25)**

What a slap in the face these verses provide to our Laodicean generation. As Laodiceans, we often feel that we are sitting in a good place spiritually because we "know" quite a bit about the Bible. God clearly reveals that it is not what you know, but what you do with what you know that is important! We need to judge ourselves the way God does—not based on our knowledge, but based on our walk.

- **See how God sees. (2:1-13)**

What kind of people do we give preferential treatment? We may not banish the poor to the back rows while escorting the rich to the front as James talks about in this passage, but do we view the poor and/or other people groups the same way we esteem the rich and successful? Are we willing to talk to the visitors at church that we view as “sharp,” but don’t have time or interest for those that don’t look like they would be “our kind”? God help us! We must seek to reach out to those whom Christ is touching regardless of their socio-economic status, race, or background.

- **Watch your mouth. (3:1-18)**

The questions James suggests in this passage deserve an answer! How is it that the same mouth can speak both blessing and cursing? How can we pray and sing such

awesome words to God, but be so rude and cutting when talking to people and about people? James is right, “My brethren, these things ought not so to be.”

- **Humble yourself before God. (4:1-10)**

We live at a time when people are taught from an early age to watch out for ourselves. Our natural thought process is to lift up ourselves in the sight of others. God’s command is the complete opposite. We are to humble ourselves before Him, and then His grace will work in us to lift us up. I love Andrew Murray’s comment concerning humility: “Humility is not thinking meanly about yourself. It is not thinking of yourself at all.”

- **God answers prayer. (5:14-18)**

None of us would dare SAY that God doesn’t answer prayer, but the question we need to ask ourselves is—do our actions reveal that we really BELIEVE that He does? Do we really believe God hears us and cares about the needs we bring before Him? Do we really believe that the “effectual fervent prayer of a righteous man availeth much?” If the answer to these questions in our lives is “yes,” it will be made manifest in at least one very specific activity... we will PRAY!

May we apply the incredibly practical truths of this Book, allowing God’s grace and power to be displayed in and through us.

WEEK 51, DAY 5: TODAY'S READING: 1 PETER 1-5

OVERVIEW:

The call to be holy; Jesus Christ is our cornerstone; learning to submit; the relationship between a husband and wife; suffering for the right reasons; yielding everything to Christ.

HIGHLIGHTS & INSIGHTS:

As the Book of 1 Peter opens, Peter is pointing these Gentile believers who were enduring intense suffering toward the "lively hope" that was theirs because of "the resurrection of Jesus Christ." (1:3) He reminds them that though all of their possessions may be taken from them in this life (as many of them had experienced in their suffering), God has promised them "an inheritance incorruptible, and undefiled, and that fadeth not away," and that it has been "reserved in heaven" for them. Peter recognized that that promise would make life in the future glorious and filled with rejoicing, but he also recognized that for the present time, the readers of his letter were "in heaviness through manifold temptations" or trials. (1:6)

Verse 7 of chapter 1 is a BLOCKBUSTER. It lets us know several key things about the trials, difficulties, and sufferings we endure in this life. First, it lets us know that these difficulties are not some random acts of fate, but are rather, the God-ordained "trying of our faith." In other words, the trials have come because God has allowed our faith to be put in the witness stand, because He wants to see what it's made of! (Deut. 8:2)

Secondly, because of Peter's understanding of these trials, he uses a term to refer to them that seldom comes to mind in those situations when it seems as if the bottom has dropped out of our lives. Peter refers to these difficulties (trials) as—(check this word out)... "PRECIOUS." Wow! But understand, the idea here isn't that our trials are precious in and of themselves—the point here is that they are precious because of what they accomplish! Peter let's us know that the trial of our faith is designed by God to bring us to the place that we "might be found unto praise and honor and glory" at our ultimate accounting before the Lord Jesus Christ at His appearing. Could there possibly be anything more valuable or precious than being found unto praise, honor and glory in that day? And Peter's point is, knowing that "praise and honor and glory" will be the result of these trials in "THAT" day, should have a major impact on our attitude as we go through them "TOday!"

Thirdly, Peter likens the refining process that takes place in our lives through these trials to the refining process of gold. Just as gold is the most "precious" commodity on earth from man's vantage point, our faith is the most "precious" commodity on earth from God's perspective. And just as gold is purified and refined as it is "tried in the fire," so also are we—or so also is our faith! And so, first of all, Peter gives his readers, whether they be in the 1st century or the 21st century, the hope and confidence we need as we face the trials of life.

Next, Peter transitions out of the subject of trials to the subject of personal holiness. But recognize that there is an obvious biblical and practical connection between the two. The fact is, the lust of the flesh does not have near the gravitational pull in times of pain and suffering than it has at other times. Peter communicates this fact very clearly in chapter 4 and verses 1b and 2: "For he that hath suffered in the flesh hath ceased from sin; That he no longer should live the rest of his time in the flesh to the lusts of men, but to the will of God."

Many times when we think about “personal holiness,” for some reason our minds want to begin to create a list of the things we SHOULD and SHOULD NOT do. While holiness certainly has a tremendous bearing on our actions, what we DO and DO NOT is not the main thought behind God’s command in 1:16– “Be ye holy: for I am holy.” Being holy is not a matter of rules and regulations. It is about God working in us to make us like Himself, changing us from the inside-out... not the outside-in. It is, first and foremost, about BEING—not DOING. A simple way of saying it is: BE who God wants you to BE—and you’ll DO what God wants you to DO! Recognize, however, that the opposite is not necessarily true.

As Peter continues, he lets us know that not only should our holiness manifest itself in our reaction to trials, but in our submission to the authorities God has placed in our lives. This passage teaches us that even when those authorities are wrong and/or have a froward attitude, we are to maintain an attitude of submission. In light of Peter’s instruction concerning Christian submission, it is difficult to reconcile the fact that in the 21st century we have “Christian” organizations and lawyers fighting for Christians’ rights! Obviously, that doesn’t mean Christians can’t use the laws of the land to try to bring about change, but be it known, demanding our “rights” is a concept foreign to the Bible. God never intended Christians to be viewed as political revolutionaries, lest the message of the gospel be lost. Jesus left us a clear example of submitting to those in authority even when they are wrong or contrary. In fact, God even specifically says in this very passage that it is “thankworthy” if we suffer wrongfully for being a Christian! (2:19) When we do, we remind Him of His Son! That’s why He becomes so filled with thanks. (Imagine that! The God of the universe thanking US for something!) Forgive me if I’m wrong, but I’m afraid that “fighting for our rights” has something to do with our not wanting to suffer! (Now, lest somebody take this point further than intended, let me hasten to add, that if the authorities in our lives are demanding that we violate the Word of God, “we ought to obey God rather than men!” (Acts 5:29)

Peter also reveals that holiness expresses itself in having a right relationship with our spouse. A right marital relationship is the result of husbands honoring their wives, and wives submitting to their husbands. (3:1-7) Notice also that this passage reveals that carrying out our biblical responsibilities to our spouse is not dependent on whether or not they fulfill theirs! Husbands are to honor their wives, even if she isn’t worthy of honor, and wives are to submit to their husbands, even if he isn’t obeying the Word of God. (3:1,7) Men cannot HONOR the LORD—and women cannot be in SUBJECTION to the LORD without doing so! And men, pay very close attention to the brief statement found at the end of verse 7! If we refuse to fulfill our biblical responsibilities to our wives—God will refuse to answer our prayers! That is HUGE—and a key reason men in the 21st century have so few answered prayers!

Next, Peter shows us that holiness also expresses itself in having love, compassion, and unity with other believers in our local church. (3:8-11) True holiness doesn’t render evil for evil, or railing for railing, but rather blessing. It should be noted that it is inevitable that other believers will wrong us. (Luke 17:1; Rom. 12:18) But when they do, what will be our response? Will we render evil for evil and railing for railing—or will we render blessing? (3:9) Will we use our tongue to speak evilly and with guile—or to speak good things? (3:10-11a) Will we passionately seek peace—or will will allow evil to prevail in the conflict? (3:11b-12)

As we read through 1 Peter, you will notice a recurring theme: love the brethren, and endure suffering for Christ. It just so happens that those two things seem to be the very things we have the hardest time doing! Pride in us keeps us unwilling to cover the sins of others when they wrong us (4:8), and pride also makes us think that we deserve

better in the midst of suffering. Perhaps that's why God commands us in chapter 5 to humble ourselves under His mighty hand. But how do we do that? Pay careful attention to 5:5-7. God doesn't end the sentence in verse 6, but rather, completes the thought of verse 6 in verse 7. The way we humble ourselves before God is by casting all of our care upon Him! Most of the time this verse is applied in times of sorrow, and rightfully so, because it does certainly teach us that God cares for us, and is interested in our problems. However, God wants this verse to become practical for us, not just with the cares that make us sorrowful—but with everything we find ourselves "caring" about. Which one of us doesn't wrestle with the "cares of this world" (our finances, our careers, our families, our future)? Notice that 5:7 says that God wants us to cast ALL of our CARES upon Him. In other words, God wants us to genuinely surrender every aspect of our lives to Him. That's what genuine humility is all about! And when we're completely yielded to Him, that's when He pours out His grace (the desire and power to obey God) upon us. (James 4:6)

WEEK 51, DAY 6: TODAY'S READING: 2 PETER 1-3

OVERVIEW:

The divine strategy for our spiritual growth and development; the superiority of God's Word to experience; false prophets and teachers; the Second Coming of Christ.

HIGHLIGHTS & INSIGHTS:

Peter writes his second epistle to remind these believers of truths they already KNEW, but needed to always have in REMEMBRANCE. Do you ever need to be reminded of what you already know? I know I sure do! There is a major difference between knowing something in our minds, and seeing it become operative in our lives. That's what Peter is driving at in this Book.

Obviously, the most important decision any person will ever make is the decision to come to Christ, or as Peter refers to it in verse 1 of chapter 1, to "obtain like precious faith with us." What an incredible reality, that the faith each of us has in Christ today—is the same exact faith apostles like Peter had... and the power that saved the apostles—is the same exact power that saved us!

You know, sometimes the journey to get to the place of expressing faith in Christ can be long and hard. By the time many people get to the place of calling on the name of the Lord by faith, they feel such a sense of relief and release—they feel the journey is over. What Peter lets us know in chapter 1, is that the journey of coming to faith in Christ isn't the END of anything—it's actually just the BEGINNING! God has a whole lot more in mind for our lives than simply our coming to faith—as vital and important as that is! He intends for the "grace and peace" we experienced in salvation to be "multiplied" throughout our lifetime (1:2)—all the way until we make our entrance into His "everlasting kingdom." (1:11)

Peter tells us in verses 5-7 of chapter 1, that after coming to faith in Christ—we are to "give all diligence" to add seven things to that faith. Notice, adding these seven things is so important, he doesn't admonish or command us to simply "give diligence" to add them to our lives—but to "give ALL diligence" to add them! In other words, this is something to which we are to make the focus and pursuit of our lives—for the remainder of our lives!

Notice also, that the seven things Peter tells us to "give ALL diligence" to add are SEQUENTIAL. This is not just a random list of seven things that we are to make sure get added to our lives (or, our faith) over the course of our lifetime. The grammar in verses 5-7 dictates that these seven things be added sequentially. In other words, the first thing we are to "give ALL diligence" to add to our faith is virtue. And he is careful to word verses 5-7 in such a way, so that we understand that once virtue has been established, then we begin the process of adding the second thing... knowledge. But notice, when knowledge gets added, it doesn't get added to faith—it actually gets added to virtue. And then when we add the third thing... temperance, it likewise, doesn't get added to faith—it gets added to knowledge. And the remainder of verses 5-7 follow this same pattern. This pattern that is laid out in these verses is what I like to refer to as "The Divine Strategy For Spiritual Growth." I believe this strategy will never be improved upon, and should not only be the strategy we build our lives upon—but should be the strategy every church should employ for growing it's people!

Now listen, the very command in verses 5-7 that we are to "give ALL diligence" to add these seven things is certainly enough in itself for each of us to drop our present pursuits and set our lives totally to adding them to our lives. However, Peter goes on in verses 8-11 to push the importance of these things into an entirely different realm!

First of all, Peter gives us three incredible POSITIVE GUARANTEES for what will happen in our lives if we will "give ALL diligence" to add these seven things...

1. We will truly KNOW Jesus.

Wow! How awesome is that?! And note in John 17:3, Jesus let us know that knowing Him is what this thing of "life eternal" is really all about!

2. We will never FALL.

And what a tremendous promise that is, especially when you stop to consider that...

- Adam, the most perfect man who ever lived other than Christ Himself—FELL!
- David, "the man after gods own heart"—FELL!
- Solomon, the wisest man who ever lived—FELL!
- Samson, the strongest man who ever lived—FELL!
- Thousands and thousands of others through the centuries who were just as sincere in their faith as any of us are in ours—FELL!

And here, Peter tells us that if we will "give ALL diligence" to adding these seven things to our lives, we will NEVER FALL! Wow! That is quite the guarantee! Let's do this thing!

3. Our entrance into the everlasting kingdom will be ABUNDANT.

In other words, when it's all been said and done—when our life is over, and we walk OUT of the Judgment Seat of Christ and IN to the everlasting kingdom, if we added these seven things, our ENTRANCE into that kingdom is going to be everything God intended for it to be! It will be ABUNDANT!

Listen, can you imagine any three guarantees that could possibly be more powerful and positive than these? And yet, realize, that Peter also gives three incredible NEGATIVE GUARANTEES if we neglect to add the seven things he listed in verses 5-7.

1. We will become BLIND.

And how interesting it is that Jesus said that in Revelation 3:17 that one of the chief characteristics of believers in the last days is that they are spiritually BLIND. Blind to the WORD of God,... blind to the WORK and WORKING of God... and blind to the WILL of God.

2. We will be unable to see into the ETERNAL REALM.

Peter says that we won't be able to "see afar off." (1:9b) In other words, we won't be able to see the things Paul said he was looking at in 2 Corinthians 4:18 - "the things which are not seen," Or, in other words, the things in the eternal realm that are seen only through the eyes of faith!

3. We will end up LIVING LIKE WE DID BEFORE WE WERE SAVED.

The way Peter says it is—we will forget that we were "purged from [our] old sins." Or, we will end up living like we did before we came to faith!

Listen, with those six guarantees (three extremely positive and three extremely negative!)—how could we not take the rest of our lives and set it to "giving ALL diligence" to add these seven things? Peter was so sure that this was what we were to give the rest of our lives to that he basically says this in verses 12-15...

"Listen—these seven things are so significant to what you do with the rest of your life, that I don't care whether you're already established in them or not—I'm not going to stop talking about them! I'm going to approach them as if you've never even heard them! I'm going to take every ounce of energy I have for the remainder of my life to stir you up about the necessity of being established in these seven things! Because you see, the Lord has revealed to me that my days on this planet are limited, so I'm going to 'give ALL diligence' to make sure you 'give ALL diligence' to add these seven things—because I want you, not only to get established in them now, but I want to make sure that you remember to remain established in them every day of your life for the rest of your life—long after I'm dead and gone!"

I'd say the old boy was pretty enamored by those seven things! Oh, may we be likewise!

WEEK 52, DAY 1: TODAY'S READING: 1 JOHN 1-5

OVERVIEW:

People with the assurance of their salvation confess sin (chapter 1); people with the assurance of their salvation don't love the world's system (chapter 2); people with the assurance of their salvation purify their lives (chapter 3); people with the assurance of their salvation love God and His children (chapter 4); people with the assurance of their salvation believe the Bible (chapter 5).

HIGHLIGHTS & INSIGHTS:

There are three things every person on this planet wants: 1) PEACE. 2) JOY. And 3) SECURITY. Interestingly enough, from a DEVOTIONAL standpoint, it is precisely those three things for which the Book of 1 John was written and included into the canon of Scripture!

- **Peace with God.**

First of all, chapter 1 and verse 3 says, "That which we have seen and heard declare we unto you, THAT (or in other words, "FOR THIS PURPOSE") ye also may have FELLOWSHIP with us: and truly our fellowship is with the Father, and with his Son Jesus Christ." You see, PEACE with God is the result of our FELLOWSHIP, or our RELATIONSHIP with God through the Lord Jesus Christ.

- **Fullness of Joy.**

Secondly, chapter 1 and verse 4 says, "And these things write we unto you, THAT (again, "FOR THIS PURPOSE") your JOY may be full," which is actually the result of the first purpose (PEACE with God) and the third purpose...

- **Security for the Future.**

Chapter 5 and verse 13 says, "These things have I written unto you that believe on the name of the Son of God; THAT (and there it is again, "FOR THIS PURPOSE") ye may KNOW that ye have ETERNAL LIFE." And this third reason is really the key to the other two, because we will never really experience the PEACE of God or PEACE with God, nor the fullness of JOY, until we know beyond any shadow of a doubt that we have genuinely been born again. Again, from a DEVOTIONAL standpoint, the Book of 1 John is in the Bible for that specific purpose: to provide the ASSURANCE of our salvation. (Note: Do recognize that there are people who are genuinely saved that simply don't have the ASSURANCE that they are!) This Book is about PEACE with God and the fullness of JOY that comes from the ASSURANCE of our salvation. It is written so we can KNOW we're saved. In fact, the word "KNOW," or some form of it, is found 27 times in this Book.

Be it known, the Bible is very clear that every person that is genuinely born again is eternally secure. The Book of Ephesians was written to teach us that as members of the body of Christ, upon our salvation, we were actually placed "IN CHRIST," and then "SEALED with that Holy Spirit of promise, which is the earnest (i.e. downpayment, literally, "engagement ring") of our inheritance until the redemption of the purchased possession, unto the praise of his glory." (Eph. 1:13-14) If we have genuinely been born again, there is no question about it, we are eternally secure. The only question is, "Have we genuinely been born again?" And if we have, how can we have the ASSURANCE that we have?

God tells us in 1 John 5:13 that the criteria we are to use to provide the ASSURANCE of our salvation is the Book of 1 John. The verse says, "These things have I written unto you that believe on the name of the Son of God; that ye may know that ye have eternal life, and that ye may believe on the name of the Son of God." Understand that the "THESE THINGS" that John said were "WRITTEN" to let us "KNOW" that we have "ETERNAL LIFE," are specifically— chapters 1, 2, 3, 4 and 5 of the Book God was using him to write!

What the Book of 1 John actually does is present two simple tests that provide us what we need to give to us the ASSURANCE of our salvation. There is both a DOCTRINAL test, and a MORAL test. Basically, all John does throughout this entire Book is present and expound upon these two tests.

Let's talk, first of all, about the **DOCTRINAL TEST**. The Doctrinal Test has two parts, or asks two questions:

1. What did you say about SIN?

Chapter 1 is clear that those who are born again are those who have confessed that they are sinners. John says, "If we say that we have not sinned, we make him a liar, and HIS WORD IS NOT IN US!" (1:10) Salvation is dependent upon the Spirit of God reproving or convicting us of sin, righteousness and judgment (John 16:8-11), and us responding to the Spirit's conviction by confessing to God that we are helpless and hopeless sinners before Him.

2. What did you say about CHRIST?

To be saved, God says that you must believe that "Jesus is the Christ." (2:22) "The Christ" means "anointed." The Hebrew word "anointed" is the word "Messiah." The Jews understood that Messiah ("the Christ") would be God in a human body (Isa. 9:6 - "THE MIGHTY GOD"). To be saved, one must believe that Jesus Christ is GOD—not "A" God... and not One who was created at a point in time by God, but "THE" one true GOD that alone can take away sin. (2:22-23)

In short, the DOCTRINAL TEST says that those who are saved are those who believed that God became a man in the Person of Jesus Christ because mankind was hopelessly separated from Him by their sin, and that He is the only hope for the forgiveness of sin through the confession of sin. If you (or any other person, regardless of their "profession") did not believe those two things, you very simply are not saved.

So first of all, there is the DOCTRINAL TEST, which asks, "WHAT DID YOU BELIEVE?" And then, there is the second test, the MORAL TEST, which asks, "HOW DO YOU BEHAVE?" The Moral Test, likewise, has two parts:

1. The OBEDIENCE test.

This entire Book is screaming out that you can “KNOW” that you are genuinely saved by your OBEDIENCE. Make sure that you understand that your obedience doesn't MAKE you saved, or KEEP you saved—the blood of Jesus Christ applied to your sin secured that! (1:7) Again, the issue here, from a devotional standpoint, is that your obedience provides you the ASSURANCE that you are saved! John says in chapter 2, verses 4-6, “He that saith, I know him, and keepeth not his commandments, is a liar, and the truth is not in him. But whoso keepeth his word, in him verily is the love of God perfected: hereby know we that we are in him. He that saith he abideth in him ought himself also so to walk, even as he walked.” Certainly, Christians do sin (2:1), and are capable of walking in disobedience (as did the Corinthians!), but when they do, they will find that they struggle to have the ASSURANCE of their salvation—and thus, will likewise struggle to experience PEACE and JOY.

2. The LOVE test.

And the love test has three parts. John says, first of all, that those who are saved LOVE GOD. Again, this is repeated in various ways throughout the Book, but is put very succinctly in 4:19, “WE LOVE HIM, because he first loved us.” Secondly, John says that those who are saved will LOVE THEIR BROTHERS (AND SISTERS). As with each of these tests, it is repeated throughout the Book. One of the clearest examples of this reality is found in 2:9-11: “He that saith he is in the light, and hateth his brother, is in darkness even until now. He that loveth his brother abideth in the light, and there is none occasion of stumbling in him. But he that hateth his brother is in darkness, and walketh in darkness, and knoweth not whither he goeth, because that darkness hath blinded his eyes.” And then thirdly, John lets us know that those who are born again will NOT LOVE THE WORLD. Chapter 2, verses 15-17 say, “Love not the world, neither the things that are in the world. If any man love the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For all that is in the world, the lust of the flesh, and the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life, is not of the Father, but is of the world. And the world passeth away, and the lust thereof: but he that doeth the will of God abideth for ever.”

But CAN truly born again people—and DO truly born again people at times wane in their love for God, or struggle at times to love their brothers and/or sisters, or struggle to not love the world and the things in it? Absolutely! But when we do, the result will be lack of ASSURANCE—which inevitably leads to lack of PEACE and JOY.

WEEK 52, DAY 2: TODAY'S READING: 2 JOHN, 3 JOHN, JUDE

OVERVIEW:

2 JOHN: The basis of love (1-3); the behavior of love (4-6); the bounds of love (7-13).

3 JOHN: The excellence of Gaius (1-8); the evil of Diotrephes (9-10); the elevation of Demetrius (11-14).

JUDE: The command to contend for the faith (1-4); the condemnation of the counterfeits of the faith (5-16); the call to surrender in our faith (17-25).

HIGHLIGHTS & INSIGHTS:

The Book of 2 John is a very important Book of the Bible for those of us living in the last days. It seems that the heed and call in "Christian" circles today is, "Let's drop our petty doctrines for the sake of love." The Book of 2 John is in our Bible to tell us the exact opposite!

As John begins this Book, he refers to himself as "the elder." He is not referring to a position or office he held in the church, but rather to his age. John is an old man by the time he writes this Book—probably somewhere between 80–90 years old.

He is writing to "the elect lady." She is not mentioned by name, but is obviously someone with whom John has a very close relationship, as he affirms his love for both she and her children in the opening verses.

Several things we surmise from this little Book is that this lady's husband had apparently passed away and that her children were now grown. She has a passion for ministry, compassion for people, and wanted to use her home as a tool for the Lord to use to house itinerant preachers and teachers on their journeys. She is obviously a very good-hearted and loving lady.

In John's travels, however, he has come in contact with this "elect lady's" nieces and nephews (v. 13), and they've informed him of something that was very alarming and upsetting to him. They inform him of how their Aunt's so-called "love" was causing her to show hospitality to false prophets and teachers. (v. 10) John immediately takes a piece of paper and ink (v.12) and writes to instruct this extremely loving, benevolent, and hospitable lady that the Lord wanted her to be discriminate in her demonstration and expression of love.

We're able to detect the urgency of John's message to this special lady in verse 12: "Having many things to write unto you, I would not write with paper and ink: but I trust to come unto you, and speak face to face, that our joy may be full." We don't know the things John spoke to her face to face. Obviously, we don't need to know them or the Spirit of God would have inspired John to record them for us. But we do have the words of the first 11 verses, and the Spirit of God definitely wanted us to have these words so that God's people through the centuries would understand exactly how God wants us to respond to false prophets and teachers. This little letter actually shows us how biblical love is to operate when it encounters false doctrine, prophets, and teachers.

In verses 1-3, John lets us know that the BASIS of genuine, biblical love is TRUTH. (Note that the word "truth" is repeated five times in the first four verses!) He shows us that LOVE and TRUTH are inseparably linked in Christianity, and that our love cannot be permitted to be governed by anything other than TRUTH! The whole point in verses 1-3 is that we are not to indiscriminately share love for the sake of love. Rather, we share LOVE for the sake of TRUTH! And when truth is violated, love is to be redirected. Wow! You talk about going against the teaching of Laodicean Christianity! But that is the crystal clear teaching of God's Word!

In verses 4-6, John let's us know that whereas the BASIS of love is TRUTH, the BEHAVIOR of love is OBEDIENCE. John sets the "elect lady's" children as an example for sharing love: the fact that they were "walking in truth." And he really brings it back to the same point he had just made: Walking in LOVE is walking in TRUTH; and, walking in TRUTH is walking in LOVE! The simple fact is, love obeys! It obeys the truth. And when truth is violated, love is not unleashed. The love of the truth keeps love in bounds. Yes, folks, love... true biblical love—has boundaries!

And that's what John shows us in verses 7-11, the BOUNDARIES OF LOVE. In verse 7, John gives us the reason we must walk in love AND walk in truth. He says "FOR (!) many deceivers are entered into the world, who confess not that Jesus Christ is come in the flesh. This is a deceiver and an antichrist." John is trying to get us to see that unless we understand the biblical connection between truth and love, and unless we are walking in truth and in love, we will never respond to these deceivers and antichrists as God intends. And John shows us that our response to them is extremely important to God! So important, that a wrong response will even have a profound impact on us at the Judgment Seat of Christ! Verse 8 says that we put ourselves in a position of losing rewards that we have already wrought—or rewards that we have already attained through our previous work! Verse 9 actually lets us know who and when TO love, and who and when NOT TO love. He tells us specifically that truth limits the expression of our love toward those who "transgress" the "doctrine of Christ." In other words, when dealing with those who do not teach that Jesus Christ is God in a sinless human body, we are to apply the teaching of verse 10—not letting them in our house and not telling them "God bless you." To do otherwise, John says in verse 11, is to become a "partaker" in their "evil deeds." (These verses are obviously in reference to someone who comes to you on a mission to propagate false doctrine, and not simply those who may have been deceived by false teachers.)

As we move into the Book of 3 John, we observe three main characters: Gaius, Diotrephes and Demetrius. John shows us...

- * The EXCELLENCE of GAIUS in verses 1-8,
- * The EVIL OF DIOTREPHEs in verses 9-10, and
- * The ELEVATION OF DEMETRIUS in verses 11-14.

As we read this little Book today, perhaps a question each of us needs to consider is: "Which of these three characters am I most like: Gaius, Diotrephes or Demetrius?"

And as we then make our way into the Book of Jude, recognize that from an HISTORICAL standpoint, this little Book was written to Jewish believers, charging them to "earnestly contend for the faith," and to endure until the coming of Lord Jesus, their Messiah.

From a DOCTRINAL (prophetic) standpoint, it is written to Tribulation saints to help them identify the Antichrist and his "ministers," and to "earnestly contend for the faith" as they await the Second Coming of their Messiah, the Lord Jesus Christ.

And, from a DEVOTIONAL (practical) standpoint, the Book of Jude teaches us that if we are eagerly awaiting the return of our Lord Jesus Christ, we will also be "earnestly contend[ing] for the faith."

May that be our testimony in these dark and perilous last days!

WEEK 52, DAY 3: TODAY'S READING: REVELATION 1-5

OVERVIEW:

John's description of the risen and glorified Christ and our Lord's instruction concerning the "Revelation" (chapter 1); the seven letters to the seven churches representing seven periods of church history (chapters 2 and 3); the scene in heaven following the Rapture and during the Tribulation (chapters 4 and 5).

HIGHLIGHTS & INSIGHTS:

We embark today into one of the most incredible Books of the entire Bible, the Book of Revelation. Many through the centuries have thought that this Book was so shrouded with mysteries that it could never fully, or perhaps even remotely be understood. Actually, there is really very little in this Book that is a mystery, and when it is, it is clearly presented as such, and is clearly explained in the passage. (1:12, 16, 20) The difficulty in understanding the Book of Revelation stems from two basic problems:

1. Not believing what we read.

In other words, reading it, but asking the wrong question. Asking, "What does the verse or passage MEAN?" rather than asking "What does it SAY?"—and simply believing it!

2. Not "rightly dividing the word of truth." (2 Tim 2:15)

In other words, not recognizing some of the key statements and events in the Book that reveal to us where we actually are on God's prophetic timeline in a particular chapter, passage or verse.

Let's take a couple of minutes to allow the Lord to reveal to us (1 Cor. 2:7-14) the divisions He clearly makes in this intriguing Book.

Within the context of the 22 chapters of this Book, something significant happens two times: heaven opens. When heaven opens the first time in 4:1-2, somebody GOES UP. When heaven opens the second time in 19:11, somebody COMES DOWN. In 4:1, when somebody goes up, heaven opens and John, who is a picture of the church, hears a voice, the sound of a trumpet, and in the moment in the twinkling of an eye, finds himself in heaven at the very throne of God. It is clearly identifying the Rapture, because it describes exactly what Paul detailed in 1 Thessalonians 4:13-17. In 19:11 when somebody comes down, heaven opens and the Lord Jesus Christ comes out of heaven on a white horse with His armies following behind, also on "white horses, clothed in fine linen, white and clean." (19:14) The "armies" that are with Him are clearly the church (See 19:7-8), and the event is unmistakably the Second Coming of Christ. A simple way to distinguish between these two events is that at the Rapture, Jesus comes in the CLOUDS—FOR His saints (1 Thess. 4:17), and at the Second Coming, Jesus comes to the EARTH—WITH His saints. Whereas the Rapture ends the Church Age and ushers in the Tribulation, the Second Coming ends the Tribulation period and ushers in the Millennium ("milli" = 1,000, "anum" = years). (Rev. 20: 1-6).

So, these two significant events (heaven opening) "divide" the Book into three sections:

- 1) Chapters 1-3
- 2) Chapters 4-19
- 3) Chapters 20-22

Interestingly enough, in chapter 1 and verse 19, God told John that there would be three sections to the Revelation he would receive:

- 1) "The things which thou HAST SEEN" (past)
- 2) "The things WHICH ARE" (present)
- 3) "The things which SHALL BE hereafter" (future)

If we will "rightly divide" this Book, it is imperative that we make the obvious connection between the three divisions of the Book created by the two times heaven opens, and the three tenses in which God told John to write in 1:19. However, there is a key that many miss when making these connections! Notice what John says in chapter 1 and verse 10: "I was in the Spirit on the Lord's day." Now, most assume that John is talking about the fact that one Sunday afternoon he was simply "walking in the Spirit" as all of us have been commanded to do (Gal. 5:16), when all of a sudden he received an incredible "revelation" from God. But that is not what the verse is communicating!

As we've talked about since the very beginning of the 52 Weeks of Pursuit, the phrase "the Lord's day" that John references in verse 10 isn't talking about "Sunday," this is the phrase God uses to refer to the theme of the Bible! It is that 1,000 year "day" that God set aside for Himself way back in Genesis 2:3! (c.f. II Peter 3:8) What John is trying to get us to understand in verse 10 is that the Spirit of God had picked him up and catapulted him forward in time to the "Day of the Lord," and from the vantage point of someone way out in the 21st century at the time of the Lord's Second Coming, he was told to write in the three tenses described in 1:19.

So, from John writing the "Revelation" from the standpoint of "the Lord's Day," the Book of Revelation actually "divides" (2 Tim 2:15) like this:

- Chapters 1-3 are "the things which John HAST SEEN" (1:19a), or the things which from the standpoint of "the Lord's Day" were in the PAST. Namely, the events of the Church Age to the Rapture.
- Chapters 4-19 are "the things which ARE" (1:19b), or the things which from the standpoint of "the Lord's Day" were in the PRESENT. Namely, the events of the Tribulation to the Second Coming.
- Chapters 20-22 are "the things which SHALL BE" (1:19c), or the things which from the standpoint of "the Lord's Day" were yet in the FUTURE. Namely, the events of the Millennium on into Eternity.

It should be noted that because this Book is "the Revelation of Jesus Christ" (1:1a), it actually necessitated that it be "divided" into these three tenses—because our Lord Jesus Christ is He "which is, and which was, and which is to come!" (Rev. 1:8)

With these basic guide posts, the Book of Revelation is really not very difficult to understand if we simply take it LITERALLY, and BELIEVE what it SAYS. Understanding how to "rightly divide" the Book allows us to know what each chapter is detailing, and begins to open our eyes to truths (Ps. 119:18) that are nothing short of astounding.

For example, when we place the seven letters written to the seven churches in Revelation 2 and 3 in today’s reading into the “right divisions” of the Book, we find that they actually represent seven periods of history within the Church Age. In other words, the seven letters actually outline the history of the church where the Book of Acts leaves off, and takes us all the way up to the Rapture, which again, is found in Rev. 4:1, immediately after the seventh and final letter to the churches.

Sure, the seven letters were addressed to real churches that existed historically in Asia Minor in 95 A.D.—and addressed real needs that these churches were really facing when John received the revelation, but in their context, they also provide an absolutely perfect outline to help us interpret the events that have taken place in the history of the Church Age.

The following is a brief overview of church history as defined by Rev. 2 and 3:

CHURCH	REFERENCE	APPROX. DATES	MEANING
Ephesus	Revelation 2:1-7	90 A.D.– 200 A.D.	“Fully Purposed”
Smyrna	Revelation 2:8-11	200 A.D.– 325 A.D.	“Bitterness” or “Death”
Pergamos	Revelation 2:12-17	325 A.D.– 500 A.D.	“Much Marriage
Thyatira	Revelation 2:18-29	500 A.D.– 1000 A.D.	“Odor of Affliction”
Sardis	Revelation 3:1-6	1000 A.D.– 1500 A.D.	“Red Ones”
Philadelphia	Revelation 3:7-13	1500 A.D.– 1900 A.D.	“Brotherly Love”
Laodicea	Revelation 3:14-22	1900– Rapture of the Church	“Rights of the People

WEEK 52, DAY 4: TODAY'S READING: REVELATION 6-11

OVERVIEW:

The first account of the Tribulation and Second Coming through the opening of the seven seals (6:1-8:1); the second account of the Tribulation and Second Coming through the sounding of the seven trumpets (8:2-11:19).

HIGHLIGHTS & INSIGHTS:

Yesterday's reading concluded with John revealing to us the SCENE IN HEAVEN immediately following the Rapture of the redeemed Church of Jesus Christ (chapters 4 and 5). When we pick up in chapter 6 in today's reading, John is revealing to us the SCENE ON THE EARTH immediately following the Rapture.

This chapter begins the revelation of the Tribulation Period, which of course, culminates with the Second Coming of Christ. In fact, what we will see in chapters 6-19, are actually four accounts of these events. This is a point we need to fully grasp if we're going to keep ourselves within the framework of how God has "divided" the Book of Revelation! And it is my belief that it is here that most commentators, theologians, and Bible "experts" lose their way in this Book. They try to approach these chapters as if they were written linearly or sequentially (i.e. this happens, then this happens, and then that, etc.) That is how Westerners think, and usually dictates, not only our approach to life, but our approach to the Bible. The Bible, however, is an Asian Book, and is written circularly as opposed to linearly. There is perhaps no place in the Word of God where this is more clearly observed than in Revelation 6-19. Rather than one, continuous, sequential time-line in these chapters, God rather takes us through the same time period (the Tribulation Period which culminates with the Second Coming of Christ) four different times—from four different perspectives! Sure, commentators, theologians, and Bible "experts" balk at such a preposterous idea, reasoning, "Why in the world would God do something as unthinkable as that?" Granted, it is certainly a legitimate question! And the question is best answered by pointing to the fact that God did it in the Gospels! The Gospels provide four accounts of the First Coming of Christ from four different perspectives—and because God is so unbelievably consistent, before He concludes His revelation to man, in the Book of Revelation, He gives us four accounts of the Second Coming of Christ from four different perspectives!

If we fail to understand what God is actually doing in these chapters, the Book of Revelation becomes a chaotic nightmare requiring a lot of doctrinal gymnastics to keep it making any kind of logical and chronological sense. Seeing that one simple factor (four accounts of the same events), however, keeps this seemingly complex Book unbelievably simple and easy to understand.

God brings us through the first account of the Tribulation and Second Coming through THE OPENING OF THE SEVEN SEALS in Revelation 6:1-8:1. In fact, make a mental note as you read chapter 6 today, that this chapter alone provides the first complete account of the Tribulation and Second Coming. The opening of the first five seals (6:1-11) covers the entire seven years of the Tribulation Period, and the opening of the sixth seal (6:12-17) is the first account of the Second Coming of Christ.

In chapters 8:2—11:19, God brings us through the Tribulation and Second Coming for the second complete time—this time through THE SOUNDING OF SEVEN TRUMPETS.

The third account is found in chapters 12-14, as God brings us through the same events in this time period through THE REVEALING OF SEVEN PERSONAGES (or PERSONALITIES).

Then, the fourth and final time through the Tribulation and Second Coming is found in chapters 15-19, through THE POURING OF THE SEVEN VIALS.

As we're reading chapters 6–11 today, be sure to keep in mind that one of the keys to understanding this incredible Book is recognizing that John's record of these events is not symbolism that needs to be unraveled or interpreted. Just believe what you're reading, understanding that John is a man living in the 1st century, using 1st century terminology, trying to describe events happening in the world in the 21st century!

WEEK 52, DAY 5: TODAY'S READING: REVELATION 12-17

OVERVIEW:

The third account of the Tribulation and Second Coming through the revealing of the seven personages (chapters 12–14); the fourth account of the Tribulation and Second Coming through the pouring of the seven vials (chapters 15–16); the Babylonish mother (17:1–6); the Babylonish monster (17:7–18).

HIGHLIGHTS & INSIGHTS:

As we move into chapter 12 in today's reading, John begins the description of the third account of the Tribulation and Second Coming that our Lord revealed to him. In this account, these events unfold through THE REVEALING OF SEVEN PERSONAGES that are found in chapters 12–14.

1. The first PERSON is the **WOMAN**, referred to in 12:1–2, 4–6, and 14–17. The WOMAN is clearly the NATION OF ISRAEL.
2. The second PERSON, mentioned in 12:2, 4–5, is the **CHILD**, and is none other than the LORD JESUS CHRIST.
3. The third PERSON, referred to in 12:3–4, 7–9 and 12–17, is the **DRAGON**. The DRAGON, as 12:9 leaves absolutely no question, is SATAN.
4. The fourth PERSON, the ARCHANGEL mentioned by name in 12:7–9, is **MICHAEL**.
5. The fifth PERSON is identified in 13:1–10 as the FIRST BEAST. This FIRST BEAST is none other than the infamous **ANTICHRIST**.
6. The SECOND BEAST is the sixth PERSON revealed in this tour of the Tribulation and the Second Coming, and is not mentioned by name, but is the **FALSE PROPHET** who will work in conjunction with the ANTICHRIST during the Tribulation. He is described in 13:10–18.
7. The seventh and final PERSON or PERSONAGE in this third account of the Tribulation and Second Coming is the 144,000 described in 14:1–5. The 144,000 are the **TRUE JEHOVAH'S WITNESSES**.

Once again, there are simply too many things unfolding in these chapters to provide adequate commentary. But because so many Laodicean cults have been spawned by a misunderstanding and false teaching concerning the 144,000 (the Jehovah's FALSE Witnesses, the World-Wide Church of God, the Seventh-Day Adventists and the Mormons—the so-called "Latter Day Saints" and the "Reorganized Church of the Latter Day Saints"), perhaps a comment or two is necessary.

The 144,000 mentioned in chapter 14 are the same 144,000 that were mentioned in chapter 7. The only difference between the 144,000 in these two chapters is their location. In chapter 7 they are on the earth. In chapter 14 they are in heaven (i.e. "The Mount Zion"—14:1).

The big question, of course, is who are they? Chapter 7, verses 4–8 lets us know that they are 12,000 from each of the 12 tribes of the children of Israel. In other words, they are 144,000 literal, physical Jews. Much to the dismay of the aforementioned cults, there is not a Gentile in the bunch! The next time an antichrist (1 John 2:22) comes to your door and tells you they are a part of the 144,000, just ask them which of the 12 Tribes of ISRAEL they're from! Some things are just pretty dog-gone simple, folks!

These 144,000 Jews will be miraculously converted sometime at the beginning of the Tribulation Period. (7:1–3) Note that 14:3 says they will be “redeemed from the earth,” and 14:4 says they will be “redeemed from among men.” It appears that their miraculous conversion will be like that of the Apostle Paul, Paul referring to himself in 1 Corinthians 15:8 as “one born out of due time.”

After their conversion to Christ, the 144,000 will then be sealed in their foreheads (7:3) with what is called “the seal of the living God,” which is the Father’s name: JEHOVAH. (7:2–3; 14:1) They are sealed for three reasons:

1. TO MARK GOD’S PERSONAL POSSESSION.

God marks them with His name for the same reason we put our name on what belongs to us. He is saying, “These are mine!”

2. TO GUARANTEE GOD’S PERSONAL PROTECTION.

Placing our name on our possessions may not deter people from messing with it. The name of Jehovah on something, however, is completely different!

3. TO FULFILL GOD’S PERSONAL PURPOSE.

God’s purpose has always been to reach the whole world. That was the purpose God wanted to fulfill through Israel in the Old Testament—and it is the purpose He now wants to fulfill through the Church. It will, likewise, be His purpose through the 144,000 “servants of our God” (7:3) during the Tribulation Period. Matthew 24:14 says that during the Tribulation Period, “This gospel of the kingdom shall be preached in all the world for a witness unto all nations; and then shall the end come” (i.e. the Second Coming). That prophecy will be fulfilled through the 144,000. They will be the “firstfruits” (14:4) of those saved during the Tribulation Period, and through their “witness” (Matt. 24:14), there will be an incredible harvest to follow! According to Revelation 7:9, those who respond will be from every nation, kindred, people and tongue! The 144,000 will be like 144,000 invincible “Apostle Paul’s” roaming the earth—evangelizing everywhere they go! (Rev. 7:3; 1 Cor. 15:8)

Notice that when chapter 14 opens, the 144,000 have been raptured to heaven. (14:1–5) In 14:6–13, John reveals God’s last call to lost man. This will most likely take place in the final few months, weeks, or even days of the seven year Tribulation. God gives His last call through four voices that John hears. (14:6–13) When chapter 14 closes, the Lord Jesus Christ returns to earth in judgment. (14:14–20; 2 Thess. 1:7–9)

As we move into chapters 15 and 16, John reveals the fourth and final tour through the Tribulation and Second Coming, this time through the figure of THE POURING OF THE SEVEN VIALS. Perhaps the best way to comprehend what is happening in these chapters is to understand that for the last 6000 years of human history, God, Who is supremely loving, gracious, merciful and kind has been storing up His wrath. In that 6000 year period, God’s name has been defied, disgraced, defamed, ridiculed, reproached, belittled, betrayed, and blasphemed. He has watched and listened from His throne as puny little humans have exalted themselves as if they were God. But be it known, that while God has been “longsuffering to us-ward, not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance” (2 Peter 3:9), day after day His wrath has been filling up—being stored in seven vials (15:1; 16:1) in the

temple of the tabernacle in heaven. (15:5,6) The Tribulation Period is that time when God says, "That's enough!"—and His wrath is poured out of the vials upon the earth. (16:1)

Note that "the woman" described in chapter 17 (also referred to as "the great whore"), is a woman that has been seen throughout the entire Bible!

- * She is the STRANGE WOMAN of the Book of Proverbs.
- * She is the RELIGIOUS WOMAN of the Tower of Babel.
- * She is "THAT WOMAN, JEZEBEL" of the Book of Revelation. (2:20)

Chapter 17 reveals that "the woman" is the false religious system that the Antichrist will use during the Tribulation Period to unite the world religiously—the Roman Catholic Church.

Beware! The stage is being set right now in these last days of the Laodicean Church Period for the Antichrist to use that false system to unify the world. Recognizing that fact will help us to interpret some of the events we are presently seeing and will be seeing in the world and in "Christianity" in the near future!

WEEK 52, DAY 6: TODAY'S READING: REVELATION 18-22

OVERVIEW:

The fall of Babylon (chapter 18); the Second Coming of Christ (chapter 19); the Millennium (chapter 20); the New Heaven, New Earth and New Jerusalem (chapters 21-22).

HIGHLIGHTS & INSIGHTS:

Beginning in chapter 6, John has brought us through four different accounts of the Tribulation Period which, of course, culminates with the Second Coming of Christ:

1st account— The OPENING of 7 SEALS. (6:1-8:1)

2nd account— The SOUNDING of 7 TRUMPETS. (8:2-11:19)

3rd account— The REVEALING of 7 PERSONAGES. (12-14)

4th account— The POURING of 7 VIALS. (15-16)

It is very important to recognize that chapters 17 and 18 do not advance the events of the Book of Revelation beyond chapter 16. These two chapters actually provide the commentary and explanation of two key verses: 14:8 and 16:19. Chapter 17 is the explanation of 14:8 where John says, "And there followed another angel, saying, Babylon is fallen, is fallen, that great city, because she made all nations drink of the wine of the wrath of her fornication." Chapter 18 is the explanation of 16:19 where John says, "And the great city was divided into three parts, and the cities of the nations fell: and great Babylon came in remembrance before God, to give unto her the cup of the wine of the fierceness of his wrath."

Perhaps we could understand it this way: Revelation 17 is a MYSTERY form of Babylon where she is a RELIGIOUS system. Revelation 18 is a LITERAL form of Babylon where she is a COMMERCIAL city (both a political and economic system).

Chapter 19 is the revelation of the greatest event in human history—the Second Coming of Christ, or "the Day of the Lord." Note some key biblical realities about this event...

IT IS THE EVENT TO WHICH ALL OF GOD'S WORD HAS BEEN POINTING.

We have seen this from the very beginning of our 52 Weeks of Pursuit. The theme of the Bible is "the Day of the Lord." We read about it in almost every single Book of the Old Testament, either specifically, or in picture form. It is "that day" when the Lord Jesus Christ finally receives the glory that is due His name!

IT IS THE EVENT OF WHICH ALL OF GOD'S PROPHETS HAVE BEEN PREACHING.

That's not just my guess or opinion! That is specifically what the Bible says in Acts 3:20-21: "And he shall send Jesus Christ, which before was preached unto you: Whom the heaven must receive until the times of restitution of all things, which God hath spoken by the mouth of ALL HIS HOLY PROPHETS since the world began." It is the same event Jude 14 says Enoch was preaching about thousands of years before the First Coming of Christ!

IT IS THE EVENT FOR WHICH ALL OF GOD'S PEOPLE HAVE BEEN PRAYING.

In fact, Jesus said it is actually to be the first request of prayer: "Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done in earth, as it is in heaven." (Matt. 6:10; Luke 11:2) It becomes the number one prayer of our heart when we recognize that Christ's

Second Coming will be the first time since Adam sinned in the Garden that the Lord Jesus Christ will receive the glory He deserves! In that day, every knee shall bow and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord to the glory of God the Father! (Phil. 2:9–11)

IT IS THE EVENT AT WHICH ALL OF GOD’S HOSTS WILL BE PRAISING.

That is what Rev. 19:1–7a describes. We will praise Him because...

- His SALVATION has been fully EXEMPLIFIED. (19:1)
- His JUSTICE has been fully EXECUTED. (19:2-4)
- His SOVEREIGNTY has been fully EXERCISED. (19:5-6)

IT IS THE EVENT FOR WHICH ALL OF GOD’S CHURCH HAS BEEN PREPARING.

This is the day when our marriage to the Lord Jesus Christ will be consummated. According to 19:7–8, we will be wearing the wedding garment that we prepared for ourselves through the righteous life we're presently living! Notice, how we live on the earth right now does matter in eternity!

John takes the remainder of chapter 19 (verses 11-21) to give a further description of the “greatest event in human history.” By the time the chapter comes to a close, everyone gets exactly what they deserve. The Lord Jesus Christ finally gets the glory He deserves as King of kings and Lord of lords. The beast (Satan in a human body, the Antichrist), his false prophet, and all of his followers will get exactly what they deserve as they are cast into the “lake of fire.” Again, in that day, everyone will get exactly what they deserve—with one incredible exception... US! Because God in His mercy and grace chose to place us “in Christ” (Eph. 1:4) when we called upon His name—He accepts us and receives us as He does His very own Son! As undeserving as we are, we, because of Christ, get the glorious privilege of spending eternity with God! Can somebody say, “AMEN?!”

Chapter 20 is awesome. It reveals the Lord Jesus Christ spanking the devil like a two-year old at Wal-Mart, exercising the power and authority that has always been His, as He establishes His millennial (1000 year) reign. (Note: This is the “seventh day” that the Father “blessed” and “sanctified” for Himself as a day of “rest” way back in Genesis 2:1–3! By comparing Scripture with Scripture, 2 Peter 3:8 reveals that that “day of rest” would be a 1000-year day that would come after 6000 years of toil.)

The remainder of chapter 20 describes the fierceness of the final judgment we commonly refer to as the Great White Throne Judgment. The description is terrifying, as will be the event itself.

Politicians in these last days have been talking about a “New World Order.” Revelation chapter 21 describes “God’s New World Order.” There will be a New Heaven that will be inhabited by the “Gentiles,” a New Earth that will be inhabited by the “Jews,” and a New Jerusalem that will be inhabited by “the church of God.” (I Cor. 10:32)

Chapter 22 concludes with seven practical responses to the Book of Revelation, and to the conclusion of God's revelation to man—the Bible!

1. TRUST the Truth of God you hold in your hand. (22:6,18–19)
2. LIVE with the imminent return of the God of Truth in your thinking. (22:7a, 12a, 20a)
3. DO the Truth of God you know in your mind. (22:7b,14–15)
4. WORSHIP the God of Truth you have in your heart. (22:8–9, 13,16)
5. SHARE the Truth of God entrusted to your stewardship. (22:10–11,17)
6. WORK in response to the Truth of God you have received.(22:12)
7. WALK in the grace of the God of Truth until He comes for you. (22:20b–21)

May we all say with John, "Amen. Even so, come, Lord Jesus!" (22:20b)

I say with John, "The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you all. Amen." (22:21)