

2022 SABBATH THOUGHT ARTICLES



by

Steven Greene

Website: <https://sabbathreflections.org>

Email: sabbathreflections@gmail.com

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SABBATH THOUGHT 2022-01-01—EVIL LEADERS

May God bless you on His Sabbath day!

Every so-called conservative voice and their pundits in this country are outraged. It seems with every passing week their voices are getting louder. No one can fail to hear the indignant cries against Critical Race Theory being taught in the schools, mask mandates, vaccine mandates, the multi-trillion dollar spending bills, persecution of Trump and his administration while withholding justice from criminal liberals, cancellation of the Keystone pipeline while approving a Russian pipeline, weak foreign policy, criminals that rule the streets robbing and murdering, disparagement and criminal prosecution of law enforcement officials, cowardly military leaders, and the list goes on. Their outrage is real—and, perhaps, even justified.

However, it is too late for outrage. The problem is not the behaviors that result in so much madness, but the thinking behind it all. This problem had its beginnings at the start of the 20th century if not before. Up until now, the proponents of Marxism and Socialism over the years were a handful of mostly ignored authors and few of their followers. Mostly, it was conceived away from the light of the press and the hearing of the public. Today, however, a critical mass has been achieved in the numbers of people who are convinced that through chaos and lawlessness they can have power and wealth. Who can blame them? Those seeking power promote socialism to attract voters with free handouts. Those seeking wealth promote government spending as the means to fund their personal bank accounts. These temptations have always been around. As the Bible says, “the love of money is a root of all evils” (1 Tim 6:10).

Now that enough of the population has enjoined themselves to wickedness—the practice of evil—everything that was established by rules of good and decent order is now at risk. The corruption behind elections is a prime example where a few wicked people can alter the outcome of the entire nation. It also happens in the executive and legislative branches of the federal government. So, what is the reaction of the conservatives? Their goal is to flood Congress with more conservatives this year and reelect Trump next term. If successful, they think they will restore the country with more laws to prevent future illicit behaviors.

But what will that change? Seriously. Does anyone believe that trying to elect a conservative government every two to four years is even possible? Why would anyone believe that preventing Marxist or Socialist agendas in the federal lawmaking system is the solution to the problems? Those who scheme against conservative values have already demonstrated that they cannot be stopped by any of the millions of existing laws. Liberals in the justice system protect the criminals and traitors who, in turn, keep them in power by any means necessary. And their numbers are continuously increasing.

The problem is not the criminal behaviors, it is with criminal THINKING! With a critical mass of people who simply ignore the laws and are protected from punishment, laws are useless. It does not matter if the majority of the nation wants a return to a system founded upon one nation, under God, that purports to ensure freedom. Those who reject the notion of obedience to the government, even if they are physically forced to abide by the laws, continue their rebellion in their minds. At their core, “every imagination of the thoughts of [their] hearts *is* only evil continually” (Gen 6:5). They will never STOP THINKING evil and they will never stop teaching their children to think evil. Eventually, the majority of the population will actually be **wicked**. No one can stop their influence and takeover. Eventually, they will be able to do it legitimately, because they will establish laws that support their thinking.

So, if the problem is a growing population of evil-thinkers, what can be done about it? Nothing. This nation legally removed the one deterrent to evil thinking back in 1962 and 1963 when prayer, and then the Bible, were banned in public schools. Without the Bible and a relationship with God, there is no way to instill righteous-thinking into a nation. Once this nation eliminated that singular teaching from public schools, the ways of man took permanent hold. The same thing happened to Adam and Eve—Satan successfully convinced Adam and Eve to change HOW they think. What was the solution? God eventually had to kill every single person on the earth except for righteous Noah and his family.

In this age of mankind, once a person begins to think evil there is no stopping them unless, by some miracle, the person starts to obey God and His Word. Does that sound like a possibility in today’s world? Absolutely not. “Many are called, but **few** are chosen” (Mat 20:16). For this reason, there is coming a Day of the LORD—the vengeance of God—on a corrupt and evil-thinking world.

So, do not expect the elections this year to make a difference—or future elections. Do not look to Trump or any other person for change. Do not expect the conservative masses to rise up and restore this nation to lawful obedience. Do not believe this country can change for the better. Too many evil-thinkers abound and they are teaching their ways to this generation, the next generation, and every generation after that. No one can stop the rise of those that “draw iniquity with cords of vanity, and sin with cart ropes” (Isa 5:18). The end of all this is set. Change can now only come through destruction by the vengeance of God, who will start a new age with a people who are “of a poor and contrite spirit and who trembles at My Word” (Isa 66:2).

The course of the wicked is plotted and their ship has sailed, but God will not let them reach their destination. God has planned from before the foundation of the world to create a family of righteous-thinking and loving children. God sacrificed His very own Son to that end so **no one** can stop Him from completing His plan of salvation! To that is our hope. Our vision. Our salvation. Be “not doubting at all because the one who doubts

is like a wave of the sea that is driven by the wind and tossed to and fro” (Jas 1:6). Do not build your house upon the sand, but upon the rock who is Christ. Wait “for the city with the foundations of which God is the Architect and Builder” (Heb 11:10).

May God fill you with His peace and joy!

Steven Greene

<https://sabbathreflections.org>

SABBATH THOUGHT 2022-01-08—SUFFERING & JOY

May God bless you on His Sabbath day!

Today, another child was begotten by God. What a joy it was for the new convert and us as witnesses at the baptism! If we rejoice when a sinner is converted, imagine the sound of angels in heaven who rejoice (Luke 15:7). It amazes me to think that the entire heavenly host spontaneously cheers when someone is baptized. It makes me think of the unspeakable joy to come (1 Pet 1:8).

However, it is paradoxical that the joy of baptism comes with a price—suffering. All who are baptized must count the cost (Luke 14:28-33). Some of the cost we must be willing to pay is suffering for Christ (2 Tim 3:12; 1 Pet 4:13). God tests our hearts to prove whether we will obey Him no matter what. Instinctively we know there will be little joy in the midst of suffering.

Jesus Christ said something very interesting when He was talking to the disciples prior to His crucifixion: “These things I have spoken to you, in order that My joy may dwell in you, and *that* your joy may be full” (John 15:11). Why did He say “joy may dwell” and “joy may be full?” Joy is not guaranteed in this life because this physical life always involves some amount of suffering—for everyone.

This might seem to contradict James who said, “Consider it all joy, when you are beset with various trials.” (Jas 1:2). Who can say they experience joy during a trial? Are we lesser Christians if we suffer and are not filled with joy? No, because there is a difference between HAVING joy during a trial and considering the joy that will come AFTER the trial. James goes on to say that joy follows a trial when we successfully endured a test of our faith. Through it, we become more perfect (Jas 1:3-4). We also must be prepared for the possibility that the joy will only come after our death, at the resurrection.

My wife and I personally experienced this recently when talking with a brother in Christ who was dying. Even though he was in terrible pain, he only talked about seeing Jesus Christ and God in the kingdom. Not once did he mention his suffering. He was completely focused on considering the joy that was set before him—at the resurrection—and all of God's people. Just listening to him reminded us of that joy. Ironically, he gave us what we thought to give him! The point is that he had a choice to dwell upon his suffering or think about God's promised kingdom. The former changes nothing but the latter changes everything. Forever.

Trials should be motivation for prayer. We pray more earnestly during a trial than when things are going well but there is also a very special opportunity that comes after a trial or when God eases the suffering. We can then offer thanksgiving to God for allowing us to imitate the suffering of our savior Jesus Christ (1 Pet 2:21). While a trial can be most

miserable, afterwards it can be a wonderful joy—even an honor—to be accounted worthy to have suffered in a manner similar to Jesus Christ, our High Priest and Advocate.

As the Preacher said, there is a time in life for everything (Ecc 3:2-8). There are times with joy and times with pain, grief, sadness. But, we can be encouraged because Jesus Christ set the example. He did not have joy during that Passover night and day in 33AD. In fact, He sweat drops of blood just anticipating His suffering (Luke 22:44). He was in agony. Hebrews 12:2 tells us that Jesus endured the cross for the joy that was set BEFORE Him. It would come in the future, not in the here and now. Even so, it was His motivation for suffering. No one endures joyous things. Jesus suffering unimaginable pain for the future joy that would come by finishing His task to bring sons and daughters into His Father's kingdom.

FULL joy lies not in this physical life but in spiritual eternity. David recognized this when he said, “You will make known to Me the path of life; **in Your presence is fullness of joy.** At Your right hand are pleasures forevermore.” (Psa 16:11). Our joy will never be completely full until we are in the presence of God and Jesus Christ.

Even though we suffer, there can be joy in this life. For most, there are times of testing and occasions for rejoicing. The main difference is that **sorrow is always temporary** whereas joy will be permanent at the resurrection. Jesus talked about this in John 16:20-22, comparing the sorrow of short-lived birth pangs to the lifetime joy of a new child.

We can also give joy to others. It usually is a simple matter of spending time or communicating with them. What did Jesus say in John 15:11? “**These things I have spoken to you, in order that My joy may dwell in you,** and *that* your joy may be full.” Jesus Christ spread joy to His disciples by talking with them about the kingdom and showing He loved them. In the parable of the sheep and goats, Jesus commended those who helped people. The sheep brought joy to others simply because they showed they cared. Even if the suffering or pain isn't eliminated, the joy that we can give to others by doing good works will certainly ease it. This is one way we “bear one another's burdens” (Gal 6:2). The bottom line is that we might intellectually know that someone cares for us but, we know it in our HEARTS when they take the time to reach out to us. Joy comes from the heart, not the mind.

God does this, too. Who can read the last few verses of 1 Thessalonians 4 or chapters 20 and 21 of Revelation and not be filled with joy? I'm certain you can list dozens of uplifting, encouraging, helpful, and spiritual scriptures that bring joy just by reading them. What is the scripture you go to when you need to be refreshed with God's joy?

In fact, do not ALL the words of God show us how much He loves us? Does not the sacrifice of Jesus Christ speak volumes about His love toward us? If we, being flesh and

blood, can bring joy to others with a few loving and kind words, who among us can lack for joy when God personally speaks to us through His Word of life?

Joy from God can be powerful. Have you ever talked to God about the joy in your life? Have you ever thanked Him for the joy He gives us? Just thinking about God's kingdom can produce joy. I don't know about you, but I have an unending list of questions about God's kingdom. I think about them and talk to God about them at times. What will it be like to live forever? How long will it take to personally get to know every angel and child of God? Probably a ridiculous question for timeless beings. What will the new heaven and earth look like? As vast and amazing as the universe is, I believe it is barely a shadow of the vast expanse of glory and grandeur of the one that is yet to come. God promises to GIVE US this brand new kingdom (Luke 12:32)—it won't be the secondhand, "high-mileage" universe we live in now.

I also imagine construction of beautiful, incredible cities in the kingdom. Did you know that God's throne on Mount Zion is part of a CITY (Heb 12:22)? The replacement, called New Jerusalem, is currently under construction and will be brought down to this earth where God and Jesus Christ will dwell with us (Rev 21). Perhaps more cities will be constructed throughout the New Heavens for the vast numbers of God's children. Thinking about these things is both peaceful and joyful.

Something else I picture in my mind at times is being resurrected. After a moment of confusion upon awakening in a new body, I imagine all the brethren I have known—and more—around me. All are shining like suns and stunning in their white robes. Standing next to each one is an angel who will show us how to step off this earth to meet Jesus Christ in His full glory above! We will be exploding with joy and anticipation at seeing the Father and everything He has in store for us. I love to ponder these things.

For many, this will be the first time in memory they are without pain or grief or torment. Think bigger now. Imagine a whole world without suffering. No. More. Tears. Jesus makes this promise not only to the firstfruits (Rev 7:17) but all the future children of God (Rev 21:4). He specifically mentioned this twice because His promise is to everyone, not just the firstfruits. Maybe because everywhere on earth, all God sees are faces filled with tears. But that is about to end. Read this scripture that gives more hope in a few words than exist anywhere in the world today—it is central to His promises established from the beginning.

ISAIAH 25:8-9 He will destroy death forever; and the Lord GOD will wipe away tears from all faces. And He shall take away from all the earth the rebuke of His people, for the LORD has spoken it. 9 And one shall say in that day, "Lo, this is our God. We have waited for Him, and He will save us. This is the LORD; we have waited for Him, we will be glad and rejoice in His salvation."

Did you notice that this OT scripture speaks of both God **and** Jesus Christ (“LORD”)? We will REJOICE in salvation! Who can read this and not see the joy that is set before us? One particular Psalm, I think, describes in a few words what happens on the day that God's spiritual family is complete and this physical world is gone. It is one of the shortest Psalms but then, there really are no words to describe what awaits us

PSALM 100:1-5 **Shout for joy** to the LORD, all the earth. 2 Serve the LORD with gladness; **come before His presence with singing**. 3 Know that the LORD, He is God. He has made us, and we are His; **we are His people** and the sheep of His pasture. 4 **Enter into His gates with thanksgiving** and into His courts with praise; give thanks unto Him and bless His name, 5 For the LORD is good; **His steadfast love is everlasting**; and His faithfulness endures to all generations.

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SABBATH THOUGHT 2022-01-15—ANOINTINGS

May God bless you on His Sabbath day!

Anointings are very much a part of a believer's life. I imagine most everyone has been anointed by an elder for a physical disease or illness at one time or another. The elder will, upon request, lay hands on the person and anoint them with oil while praying for God to intervene and heal them. The oil represents the Holy Spirit, which is the power of God, coming upon the person. Oil is an integral part of this because to *anoint* literally means to “smear or rub with oil.”

Interestingly, anointings have been around from the beginning of recorded history and have been used for many purposes aside from healing. After awakening from his dream of a ladder extending to the heavenly throne of God, Jacob made a memorial pillar out of the stone he used for a pillow and poured oil upon it. He did this to consecrate the place where he had his dream because God's presence was there (Gen. 28:16-19). In fact, he called it the Gate of Heaven. Jacob repeated this another time when he was at Bethel. There, God spoke to him and confirmed the covenant of Abraham would continue with him (Gen. 35:9-15). These anointings sanctified, or made holy, places where he had contact with God.

We also find that anointings were used to set apart someone in service to God. Aaron was anointed as the high priest by Moses (Exo. 28:41). This was a critically important role that God established to ensure the ancient Israelites maintained a proper worship of God by the people through sacrifices, offerings, and care of the tabernacle. God even commanded Moses to prepare special oil to be used for anointing Aaron and the fixtures of the tabernacle (Exo 30:23-30).

God also instituted anointing for the purpose of healing as in the case of a leper (Lev. 14:18). What is most interesting is that the Bible says that the leper was *cleansed*, not healed. In the Hebrew, *taher* means to *make holy* or *purify*. While leprosy was certainly a physical disease, God does not see the healing as a purely physical issue. Have you ever wondered why?

It all began with Adam and Eve. Before they sinned, they never knew pain, suffering, or disease. It was only after they sinned that they became subject to the afflictions that can come upon a physical body. Sin brought about all of them. Just look at the promise of God to the ancient Israelites: **“If you will diligently hearken to the voice of the LORD your God, and will do that which is right in His sight, and will give ear to His commandments, and keep all His laws, I will put none of these diseases upon you...”** (Exo. 15:26). Obedience to God means He protects those who obey Him.

If we have this promise from God, then why is any believer afflicted with disease or illness? Does this mean he or she sinned? Not necessarily. There are three possible cases: first, we ourselves sinned; second, someone else sinned; and third, no one sinned.

The first one is obvious. Eating unclean foods can lead to sickness or being injured while performing a dangerous task because we failed to implement proper safety measures are both situations we should have avoided. The fault lies with us. In the second case, perhaps it was someone else who sinned and subsequently got sick who spread disease to others. This is not our fault.

Finally, we can be afflicted even if no one sinned, believers are all subject to trials whereby God tests our faith and obedience under duress (1 Pet. 2:21-24; 5:9-10). This is, again, not our fault, because we must suffer for the sake of the kingdom of God and as a witness to the world at times. A perfect example of this is the man who was born blind discussed in John chapter 9. After healing him, Jesus tested him by asking if he believed in the “Son of God” (v35-39). Jesus also used this healing to witness against the Pharisees (v40-41). What is so amazing is that the Pharisees knew that there had never been someone who had been born blind and was later healed (v32); still, they did not believe.

So, except in the case where someone is being tested or used by God as a witness to others, healing involves dealing with sin. If sin did not exist in the world, neither would disease or illness. When we are sick or ill, SOMEONE sinned. This is the reason that Jesus Christ said He forgave the sins of the paralytic instead of telling him that he was healed (Mat. 9:2-7).

That brings me to another point. There is a difference between disease and illness. A disease is something that causes sickness. Examples of disease include heart disease, cancer, viruses, infections, etc. Illness, on the other hand, is a more general condition or ailment that may or may not stem from a disease. For example, chronic pain can occur without any specific diagnosis; in other words, there is no known cause for it.

Whether it is disease or illness, the sacrifice of Jesus Christ included the SUFFERING of the entire world. In fact, Jesus did not just HEAL those who were sick but also those who were tormented, possessed, mentally ill, and paralyzed:

MATTHEW 4:23-24 And Jesus went throughout all Galilee, teaching in their synagogues, and preaching the gospel of the kingdom, and healing every disease and every bodily ailment among the people. 24 Then His fame went out into all Syria; and they brought to Him all who were sick, oppressed by various diseases and torments, and possessed by demons, and lunatics, and paralytics; and He healed them.

While we all understand disease and illness affect our physical wellbeing, anointings are also something to consider when there are, what I might call, spiritual weaknesses or

afflictions. In other words, they are something that affects the heart, mind, and soul spiritually. These are what the Bible calls *infirmities*:

MATTHEW 8:16-17 Now when evening had come, they brought to Him many possessed with demons, and He cast out the spirits by *His* word, and healed all who were sick; 17 So that it might be fulfilled which was spoken by Isaiah the prophet, saying, "**He Himself took our infirmities** and bore our diseases."

How did Jesus take upon Himself our infirmities and diseases? Through the terrible beatings before His crucifixion:

ISAIAH 53:4-5 Surely **He has borne our infirmities**, and carried our sorrows; yet we esteemed Him stricken, smitten of God, and afflicted. 5 But **He was wounded for our transgressions [sin]; He was crushed for our iniquities;** the chastisement of our peace was upon Him; and **with His stripes we ourselves are healed.**

Now we have come full circle to the beginning of my article—anointings. These are the means by which we call upon God who, through the stripes of Jesus Christ, heals us. It is in the book of James that we find the ordinance of anointing for healing:

JAMES 5:14 Is anyone sick among you? **Let him call for the elders of the church, and let them pray over him after anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord.**

But what if an elder is too far away? Apparently, this happened often to Paul who was limited to how far he could walk in a day. His solution was to send anointed cloths to those who asked for healing:

ACTS 19:11-12 And God worked special works of power by the hands of Paul, 12 So that even when **handkerchiefs or cloths were brought from his body to those who were sick, the diseases departed from them and the wicked spirits went out from them.**

Notice, in particular, that Paul also healed those who were possessed—a spiritual affliction. Again, anointings and healings are not just for disease. They can be for all manner of infirmities or illnesses. While it was common in the days of the apostles to deal with afflictions other than disease, it is not the case today. Many request anointings for disease (as they should); however, requests of anointing for spiritual afflictions are rare (but should not be).

Now I come to the heart of the matter. Even though we acknowledge that disease is usually the result of sin, do we assume it is always the sin of someone else? No one is ashamed if they suffer because someone else sinned, so asking to be anointed carries no shame. However, we live in a culture where we are ashamed to admit sin—sometimes

even to ourselves. So, do we withhold asking for anointing for spiritual afflictions because we assume we might be judged?

It is very important to understand that confessing to sin is NOT required for an anointing. When someone asks to be anointed, the elder will anoint the person without regard to the cause of it. In other words, the elder is not concerned with whether or not there was sin involved or who committed it. He understands that judgment belongs solely to God, which, by the way, includes forgiveness. John said, “If we confess our own sins, [God] is faithful and righteous, to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.” (1 John 1:9). No one should ever be ashamed to ask for an anointing when they need it regardless of whether it is for a physical disease or spiritual condition. Both circumstances can be difficult matters for a believer; but, sometimes a spiritual weakness or inadequacy is a more important concern because it can affect our eternal lives. Getting anointed for spiritual conditions may be just what is required.

NOTE: While James 5:16 says “Confess your faults to one another,” it is referring to reconciling offenses. Refer to the booklet “Offenses—Ordinance of God.”

If we are reluctant to request an anointing for spiritual afflictions because sin may be involved, we should rethink our perspective because EVERYONE sins. I do and so do you—even if it is a fleeting thought, misspoken word, an offense, or something worse. Our lives belong to God and only He knows our hearts and minds (1 Kings 8:39). If Jesus Christ lives in us (Gal. 2:20), we must strive to overcome sin through the sacrifice of Jesus Christ and the forgiveness of God. Being willing to admit our sins is the only way to receive forgiveness; however, confessing our sins is something each of us does PRIVATELY to **God**.

Sin is **not** something anyone needs to discuss with the elder when asking for an anointing. Every anointing is a special “**prayer of faith**” whereby an elder petitions God to “raise him up; and if he has committed sins, they shall be forgiven him [by God]” (James 5:15). The oil invokes God’s merciful power through the Holy Spirit to CLEANSE, FORGIVE, and HEAL. It is a special ceremony that formally petitions God to allow the stripes borne by Jesus Christ to take away the disease or illness. An elder will never assume guilt nor will he ever ask any questions unless the petitioner wants to discuss something more deeply. Simply speaking, anointings can be a powerful spiritual help as we overcome the world!

May God fill you with His peace and joy!

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SABBATH THOUGHT 2022-01-22—COMMUNICATION

May God bless you on His Sabbath day!

We live out in the country. Some nights, especially in the winter, when I go outside it is completely quiet. No wind blowing, no leaves rustling, no crickets chirping, no birds singing, no traffic—nothing. No sounds whatsoever. For some, it would be unnerving but for me, it is utterly peaceful. I can hear my heart beating and my breathing—even my thoughts seem to be the loudest thing around.

There is one thing that is never in short supply in this world—noise, especially talking. It used to be that the world communicated primarily by books, letters, newspapers, magazines, etc. To reach people throughout the world required thoughts and ideas to be written or printed and it took time for these materials to reach their readers even if, like newspapers, they arrived the next day. It was also a quiet means of communication. When people are talking, there is rarely a pause to have time to think. Reading, on the other hand, is silent. I can pause, whenever I choose, to think about what I read.

Nowadays, everyone has a platform for instantaneous communication—Facebook, YouTube, WhatsApp, Instagram, WeChat, TikTok, Snapchat, Pinterest, Twitter, Reddit, Quora, and a dozen more ridiculous and obscure names. What is profound is the number of people using them. One statistic showed that the top 17 social media sites serve over 17 BILLION users. That over **twice** the world's population! How can the world have that much to say?

At least when communications were through printed media, authors had to write with an economy of words if, for no other reason, than more words meant higher costs to print and ship. Today, however, words are free and unrestrained and everyone has an opinion that they thrust upon the world. Everyone has something to say and thinks the world owes them a platform from which to speak.

There is, odd though it may sound, a benefit to being limited how much of something can be written. Too much information muddles the message. Perhaps this is the reason that the apostles did not write everything that Jesus did: “But there are also many other things that Jesus did, which if they were written one by one, I do not suppose that even the world itself could contain the books that would be written.” (John 21:25). In fact, not all of them even felt it necessary to write an epistle that was included in the New Testament. There are no writings by Andrew, Thomas, Simon the Zealot, Philip, or Bartholomew. Apparently, the other authors covered everything we needed to know so they spent their time in doing the works of God.

But today, few understand how to communicate anything meaningful. Even the workplace has changed. In the past, except for small meetings, most information delivery

formats consisted of a few speakers who were selected to present to an audience. My first presentation was on a stage in an auditorium filled with hundreds of people. I was, to say the least, quite unnerved. But given the platforms we have today, no one has to experience stage fright. They do not have to look into the eyes of an audience of their peers and take care with what they say. It does not matter if it is true or useful. Today, the expectation is to just speak your mind even though this is usually a very bad idea. Perhaps the most irritating thing is that people are extremely emotional about everything they say—usually in anger. We used to call those “rants” but now they are just hidden behind “free speech.”

But the workplace has migrated to Teams, Skype, GoToMeeting, and other communication platforms. Usually, everyone is encouraged to speak so that they can feel they are a part of the team. Oddly enough, I never felt I was part of a team just because I could say whatever I wanted whenever I felt the urge. Instead, teams were built upon trust and working together. A team was forged by solving problems and accomplishing the goal. The cornerstone of every team was the leader. Nowadays, it is hard to figure out if anyone is in charge. But I’m getting off topic...

Meaningful communication means eliminating emotion. Writers rarely resort to emotion to cover a topic, at least in times past. They tried to be rational and reasonable; focusing on the facts. It was left to the reader to fill the emotional void with the hope that their response was in agreement with the content or that the reader would learn something useful.

Another benefit of the written word, was the author took the time to comprehensively cover a topic without interruption. I cannot remember the last time I watched the news when a guest was not interrupted by the host. These days, it seems the host spends more time commenting on the topic rather than listening to the expert who has to listen while hoping for a pause by the host. Worse yet, some media platforms limit the number of words (i.e., Twitter). No one can soundly discuss an important topic in 280 words so the posts consist mostly of insults and indignant comments.

With all the talking going on, who is actually listening? Who can hear those voices that have something truthful and meaningful to say? They are drowned out in the sea of noise. I imagine it is like someone yelling “fire” at a rock concert. Only those directly next to the person might hear the warning but the rest are lost in a meaningless and mind-numbing clamor of sounds.

What the world cannot hear above the din of their angry words is the voice of God. There must have been a lot of noise even in the days of the apostles because sixteen out of twenty one of the New Testament epistles opened by asking blessings of peace from God upon their readers. Unlike the world, God is not yelling to make the world hear Him. He has given this world up to their own ways and is watching and waiting—except for those few He has personally called through the quiet “voice” of His Holy Spirit. Out of need or

curiosity, they are drawn to a book authored by God Himself—the Bible. It explains things, answers many of our questions, and constructs a picture in our minds of a place wherein there is peace unencumbered by a world of people all talking at once. I long for the time when Romans 3:19 is fulfilled: “Now then, we know that whatever the law says, it speaks to those who are under the law, so **that every mouth may be stopped**... .” It will be a time when people are finally silent and can listen to God’s voice. Not just hear. To listen, from the Hebrew perspective, means to hear what is said, understand what is said, and then act on what is said.

Sadly, most will have to be forced to listen to God. When Jesus Christ returns, He will rebuke the world for all of their selfish and meaningless talking:

PSALMS 50:3, 16-17, 19-21 Our God shall come, and **He shall not keep silent**; a fire shall devour before Him, and it shall be very tempestuous all around Him. ... 16 But to the wicked God says, ... 17 Yea, **you hate to be taught**, and **you cast My words behind you**. ... **19 You give your mouth to evil**, and **your tongue frames deceit**. 20 You sit; **you speak against your brother; you slander your own mother’s son**. 21 These things you have done, and **I have kept silence; you thought that I was like yourself**, but I will rebuke you, and set them in order before your eyes.

Can you imagine what it is like to be God and hear everything that the world says? Is it any wonder that God shields Himself with clouds to drown out the noise of this world?

LAMENTATIONS 3:44 You have covered Yourself with a cloud that our prayer [*and meaningless talking*] should not pass through.

People will one day be silent because God has something to say. The most important message the world will ever hear. In that day, all the world be silent:

Zechariah 2:13 **Be silent, all flesh, before the LORD**; for He has risen out of His holy dwelling place."

Sadly, the world will not cease talking on its own. It will require dramatic intervention by God. It all begins on the Day of the LORD, when the world will be forced into silence. It is a time when God will no longer be silent and what He says will be heard the world over. Perhaps this is the reason even the angels will cease talking when the seventh seal (Day of the Lord) is finally opened:

REVELATION 8:1 Now when He opened the seventh seal, *there* was silence in heaven *for* about a half hour.

The good news is that after the Day of the LORD will come a time of peace and quiet as the world learns to listen to God. It will be like going outside my home on a quiet winter night when it seems I could hear someone whisper from the next hillside. It will be a time

when people will finally hear, listen, and consider all that God has been saying for the last 6,000 years. Can you imagine it? People sitting in silence waiting to hear what God says? No more meaningless talk obscuring their hearing. No more noise distracting their minds. Just truth that brings the peace of God upon the hearers. What a day that will be when the scripture is fulfilled:

ISAIAH 32:18 And my people shall dwell in **a peaceable home**, and in secure dwellings and **quiet resting places**.

May God fill you with His peace and grace!

Steven Greene

<https://sabbathreflections.org>

SABBATH THOUGHT 2022-01-29—GOOD WORKS

May God bless you on His Sabbath day!

Passover is 76 days from now. It is a time for self-examination. We must consider our past works, whether they pleased God or not. While this should be done each and every day throughout the year, it is especially important for the Passover so that we do not dishonor it:

1 CORINTHIANS 11:27-28 For this reason, *if* anyone shall eat this bread or shall drink the cup of the Lord **unworthily, he shall be guilty of the body and the blood of the Lord.** 28 But let a man examine himself, and let him eat of the bread and drink of the cup accordingly.

Whether our works pleased God or not, we are to partake of the Passover “accordingly,” meaning we are thankful to God for the good and repentant of the bad. In both cases, we humbly come to the Passover knowing that God works in us for the good and the sacrifice of Christ covers the bad.

I speak and write about works quite frequently; particularly, *good* works. They are critically important because doing good works are salvational. This is made clear in the parable of the talents, the parable of the sheep and goats in Matthew 25, and many other scriptures. The following is, perhaps, the foremost of all of them:

EPHESIANS 2:8-10 For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this *especially* is not of your own selves; *it is* the gift of God, 9 Not of works, so that no one may boast. 10 For **we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus unto the good works** that God ordained beforehand in order that we might walk in them.

But why assess our works? Those works that were sin, we (hopefully) have already repented of before God. We also know that salvation does not rest on past good works—we must continue doing them up to the day of our death. The reason for examining our works is because they are a reflection of the *motivation* for all of our works. In simple terms, works reveal to us the thoughts and intents of our hearts. This is described in beautiful and poetic words by Paul:

HEBREWS 4:12-16 For the Word of God *is* living and powerful, and sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing even to the dividing as under of both soul and spirit, *and* of both *the* joints and *the* marrow, and **[God] is able to discern the thoughts and intents of the heart.** 13 And there is not a created thing that is not manifest in His sight; but **all things are naked and laid bare before the eyes of Him to Whom we must give account.** 14 Having therefore a great High Priest, *Who* has passed into the heavens,

Jesus the Son of God, we should hold fast the confession *of our faith*. 15 For we do not have a high priest who cannot empathize with our weaknesses, but *one Who* was tempted in all things according to *the likeness of our own temptations*; yet *He was* without sin. 16 Therefore, **we should come with boldness to the throne of grace, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.**

Works that we find deficient or sin should prompt us to seek God's help. God the Father, in fact, *encourages* us to seek His help. Why else would He remind us that Jesus Christ sympathizes with our weaknesses of which He was tempted just like you and me? Likewise, has not God given to us that same spirit of Christ so that we can endure (Rom. 8:9)? Did not God send multiple angels to minister to Jesus after His spiritual battle with Satan (Mat. 4:4)? God witnessed Christ's struggle so He understands ours and wants to send angels to minister to us in our time of need as well. The Bible tells us that we are to be humble and contrite before God. And He is also to be feared because He can kill both body and soul (Mat. 10:28). But here, in verse 16, we are told to be **bold** before God's throne of mercy and grace when we need His help. The Greek word for *bold* in no way implies an arrogant and aggressive manner. It means to be out-spoken or blunt to God while having assurance that He is faithful to render the help we need. When we need God's help, are we not humble and contrite? Does not the shame of our sin precede us when we come before God?

So, God is not so much interested in our works as He is in our hearts. God says this in Isaiah 57:15: "I dwell in the high and holy place, even with the one who is of a contrite and humble spirit" and in Isaiah 66:2: "to this one I will look, to him who is of a poor and contrite spirit." Our hearts are completely exposed to God. He knows our hearts better than we do. That's why examining our works—both good and bad—is important since they are the window through which *we* can see our own hearts.

Good works are, ultimately, the means for understanding and growing in God's agape love. I spent a lot of time studying before and after my baptism. I studied the holydays, the Sabbath, the Law of God, biblical history, prophecy, the calendar, Judaism, sacred names—all manner of things. One day I realized that I was missing something: agape love. It hit me like a ton of bricks. I thought that agape love would come through commandment-keeping as John said (1 John 5:3). While that is true, what I missed were the really important commandments (to do good works). As I examined myself, I saw that I did not even understand how to *have* agape love. I felt so deficient and ashamed. 1 Corinthians 13, the love chapter, kept gnawing at me—I had been gaining knowledge but it was pointless without agape love.

So, I asked God for help. I began praying for God to give me His agape love. Every day, for years. I did not know how I would receive it; I only knew I needed to ask for it. I was bold about it in the sense that I was unrelenting like the widow before the unjust judge (Luke 18:4). For quite awhile, it eluded me. What could I do? But that is exactly what

happened. Almost in an effort to cover over my feelings of deficiency in agape love, I started serving others. For me, it was simple works behind the scenes—cleaning the meeting room, praying for the sick and suffering, sending cards, helping distribute food to the needy, giving rides, etc. Unknowingly, I was finally starting to fulfill Ephesians 2:8-10. But all of these works had an effect that I had not anticipated—they were producing and revealing God’s agape love in me. It took time but it was growing. Finally, God revealed to me what was so obvious—the one thing that I had missed in all my diligent studies:

EPHESIANS 4:15-16 But **holding the truth in love**, may in all things grow up into Him Who is the Head, *even* Christ 16 From Whom all the body, fitly framed and compacted together **by that which every joint supplies**, according to *its* inner working **in the measure of each individual part**, is making the **increase of the body unto the edifying of itself in love**.

Those of you who know me, have heard me often talk about these verses. And for good reason. They reveal the connection between works and God’s agape love. The two are intimately linked together. They are inseparable because good works produce agape love, which motivates us to do more good works. In engineering parlance, it is an unconstrained system. Unconstrained electro-mechanical systems usually end with catastrophic failure. However, the unconstrained system of good works producing agape love, which leads to more good works, are exactly how God put it all together for us. God IS love! If God is the sum of all power, wisdom, might, and majesty, how much greater is the agape love that *defines* Him? Unimaginable!

So, asking God for help in time of need is vital and we do not have to understand how it will work out. The asking is what is important. These days I have also come to understand that good works are not just doing things for others, they are allowing others to do good works **for us!** Agape love functions both in the giving *and* receiving.

Jesus Christ said, “It is more blessed to give than to receive.” (Acts 20:35); however, only Paul mentions it. It is nowhere else recorded so there is no context for its origins. In Acts, Paul was saying this to the elders from Ephesus as a warning against wolves attacking the flock. However, good works can only exist if others have deficiencies or sufferings. All of us begin life with health and strength but our end is sickness, illness, weakness, and death. That is the way of this life. All of us will eventually need help whether it is physical or spiritual.

As odd as it may sound, the greatest agape love is shown by those who allow us to serve their needs. Why? Because there is no pride or arrogance in their heart. And **that** is approaching the perfection of Jesus Christ! Those who **serve** must do so humbly and meekly because they will one day need help. Those who **are served** are not only humble and meek, but without pride or arrogance because they need help. In simple terms, those

who are utterly and completely reliant upon God for everything in their life know the purest form of agape love. This is why James said:

JAMES 1:27 Pure and undefiled religion before God and *the* Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their afflictions, and to keep oneself unspotted from the world.

The Greek word for *pure* is *kathara* from which we get the English word *catharsis* meaning purged or cleansed. The purest form of religion before God the Father and Jesus Christ is the good works of the Body of Christ. This is what it means to edify itself in agape love. That is, pure and undefiled religion is *doing* good works for those in need and *receiving* good works in a time of need. Good works cannot exist without both giving and receiving. Think about it. How does God provide help to us in times of need? Through others. If anyone refuses to help others, God will find someone else and it becomes a lost opportunity. On the other hand, how will God fulfill His promise to help us if we refuse the good works of others?

So, the Passover is that time to deeply examine our hearts so that we can partake of it worthily. Does that mean our works need to be perfect? No, it only means we need to know which have pleased God and which have not. Understanding what to ask God to help us with is important to overcoming and being a little more perfect at the next Passover.

Pure and undefiled religion consists of agape love and good works. One cannot exist without the other. Neither can there be giving without receiving. Again, one cannot exist without the other. Are you desiring to have more of God's agape love in you? Be involved with good works whether giving or receiving. Paul emphasizes this by saying:

HEBREWS 10:24 And let us be concerned about one another, and *be stirring up one another unto love and good works*.

We cannot stir one another up if we are not doing good work but neither can we stir others up if we refuse good works in our time of need. These things fulfill Ephesians 4:15-16 and, in doing that, we are discerning the Lord's body and partaking of the Passover "worthily" and "accordingly" (1 Cor. 11:26-29)!

May God's grace and peace be upon you!

Steven Greene

<https://sabbathreflections.org>

SABBATH THOUGHT 2022-02-05—CUTOFF

May God bless you on His Sabbath day!

Recently, I talked with someone who was concerned with what the Bible had to say about being “cut off” from God. It takes a very converted mind to recognize that God means everything He says—both the good things as well as the admonitions against disobedience. An unconverted mind will either ignore God’s warnings or simply assume they do not apply to themselves. Realizing that God is absolutely serious about obeying Him is not only an indication of the Holy Spirit working in us, it is a result of sincerely loving God and wanting to please Him.

The Hebrew word for *cut off* is *karath* and it has two seemingly contradictory meanings. The first is as part of establishing a covenant. Such a covenant is based upon a maledictory oath of the parties to the covenant. One example is the covenant between God and Abram. Genesis chapter 15 describes cutting the sacrificial animals into two pieces and laid out with a path between the halves. God then passed between the pieces and consumed them with fire (they were a burnt offering). The maledictory oath stipulates that either party, in this case it was Abram or God, had to die if one of them failed to fulfill the covenant between them. So, the word is used when making or “cutting” a covenant. *Karath* also refers to the covenant between God and the Israelites in the wilderness (Exo. 34:10; Deu. 4:23; 5:2-3, et al).

The other meaning for *karath* is to destroy or consume. Although similar to a covenant where the animals were consumed, it also means complete destruction of someone or something. God warned that He will *cut off*, or destroy, anyone who eats the peace offering while unclean (Lev. 7:20-21), eats the fat of a sacrificial animal (Lev. 7:25), drinks the blood of an animal (Lev 7:27; 17:13-14), commits sexual perversions (Lev. 18), commits child sacrifice (Lev. 20:3-5), engages spiritual mediums (necromancers or conjurers) (Lev. 20:6), offering deformed animal sacrifices (Lev 22:24), etc. When God said that He would destroy the existing inhabitants of the promised land when the Israelites entered into it, the word He used was *karath*; that is, they would be “cut off.” Basically, *karath* is one of the strongest words God uses when He warns against committing certain acts of disobedience.

When it comes to God’s holydays, He is just as serious about some very specific violations. For example, we are to put leaven out of our houses during the days of Unleavened Bread. While God does **not** say He will cut off someone who fails to eliminate the leaven from their house, notice the warning against deliberately eating leaven:

EXODUS 12:15-20 You shall eat unleavened *bread* seven days; even the first day you shall *have* put away leaven out of your houses; for **whoever eats**

leavened bread from the first day until the seventh day, that soul shall be cut off from Israel. 16 And in the first day *there shall be* a holy convocation, and in the seventh day there shall be a holy convocation for you. No manner of work shall be done in them, except that which every man must eat, that only may be done by you. 17 And you shall keep the *Feast of Unleavened Bread*, for in this very same day I have brought your armies out of the land of Egypt. Therefore you shall keep this day in your generations as a law forever. 18 In the first *month*, on the fourteenth day of the month at sunset, you shall eat unleavened bread, until the twenty-first day of the month at sunset. 19 Seven days there shall be no leaven found in your houses, for **whoever eats that which is leavened, even that soul shall be cut off** from the congregation of Israel, whether he be a stranger, or born in the land. 20 You shall eat nothing leavened. In all your dwelling places you shall eat unleavened bread.' “

Over the years, many have accidentally or inadvertently eating something that was leavened during these days. When that happens, are we immediately cut off from God? No, because Jesus Christ's blood is there to cover our sins. More importantly, it was not intentional. In these verses, God threatens to cut off those who deliberately eat leavening. Think about it. In the days of the ancient Israelites, they were in the wilderness. There were no office buildings in which they worked where someone would bring in bagels or doughnuts to share and a believer would have a memory lapse and eat one. For the ancient Israelites to eat something leavened, they would have to consciously keep some leavening and then purposely bake bread with it. For them, they could not *accidentally* eat leavening. Therefore, God's warning was severe and had grave consequences.

Another holyday with a similar warning is Atonement. On that day, anyone who refuses to fast (abstain from eating and drinking), is *cut off*:

LEVITICUS 23:28-29 And you shall do no work in that same day, for it *is* the Day of Atonement, in order to make an atonement for you before the LORD your God, 29 For **whoever is not afflicted [fasting] in that same day, he shall be cut off** from among his people.

Fasting is not something that easily slips our minds. The same was especially true for the ancient Israelites. Being in the wilderness, they did not have the influence of the pagans around them. Moreover, to cook something meant building a fire that would be easily noticed by the rest of the Israelites. Eating on Atonement would have been immediately observed, so failing to fast could only be intentional.

God also gives the same serious warning of being cut off for anyone who works on the Sabbath:

EXODUS 31:14 You shall keep the Sabbath therefore, for it *is* holy to you. **Everyone that defiles it shall surely be put to death, for whoever does any work on it, that soul shall be cut off** from among his people.

Working on the Sabbath is something that has been the subject of many questions. What is *work*? Generally, it is any servile work (that of a servant) or labor for wages. While it is specific to the weekly Sabbath here, it is applicable to all of God's holydays because we are commanded to refrain from work on each one of the high days, generally noted as holy convocations. But what about activities that fall outside of "servile work" or "labor for wages?" There are endless discussions about what constitutes "work" and what is not. How can we decide? Many try to make a list of *rules* for Sabbath-keeping. Rather than rules, there are two questions that we can ask to decide whether something is a violation of the Sabbath:

- 1) Does it interfere with our spiritual connection to God and with His children?
- 2) Does it have a significant impact our time with God and His children?

Obviously, shopping for food, filling up the car with gasoline, taking out the trash, being in a noisy environment or one with raucous music, taking phone calls from work, etc., are all unnecessary distractions that should be avoided on the Sabbath. While there are situations that everyone must deal with on the Sabbath, God judges us based upon the "thoughts and intents" of our hearts (Heb. 4:12). Sabbath-keeping should be a time we *DESIRE* to spend with God and His children. Anything that seriously disrupts that is probably not something we should be doing.

There is one other serious warning God makes that we need to heed and it is specific to the Passover. The Passover is not a holyday for the reason that God makes something holy. He alone establishes the Sabbaths and holydays as holy. We keep them holy by how we observe them. Since God (the Logos) died on Passover, it is not a holyday due to the absence of Jesus Christ at His death. However, this warning reflects just how important it is to keep Passover:

NUMBERS 9:13 But **the man that *is* clean, and is not in a journey, and holds back from keeping the Passover, even the same soul shall be cut off** from among his people. Because he did not bring the offering of the LORD at its appointed time, that man shall bear his sin.

Without Passover—without the sacrifice of Jesus Christ—none of the holydays or weekly Sabbaths matter. We are all dead in our sins. So, someone who is spiritually clean (baptized, in our case) and is not on a journey is *cut off* if they refuse to observe the Passover. In fact, Passover is so important to God, who gave His very own Son to be sacrificed and die, that there is another time it can be observed if someone is unable to keep it on the evening of the 14 day of Nissan (Abib):

NUMBERS 9:10-12 “Speak to the children of Israel, saying, ‘**If any man of you or of your generations shall be unclean because of a dead body, or in a journey afar off, he shall still keep the Passover** to the LORD. 11 They shall **keep it the fourteenth day of the second month between the two evenings**, eating it with unleavened bread and bitter *herbs*. 12 They shall leave none of it until the morning, nor break any bone of it. According to all the ordinances of the Passover they shall keep it.

In all that God requires of us, there are a few sins against Him that come with a warning of being cut off from Him. The most important, and applicable to us, are *eating leaven* during the Days of Unleavened Bread, *refusing to fast* on Atonement, *working* on the Sabbath, and *observing* the Passover. These all reflect a rebellious attitude toward God. Except for the Passover, the others are generally simple enough for us to remember and keep. If we fall short on occasion, we have the blood of Jesus Christ to cover it.

When it comes to Passover, however, remembering and partaking of the symbols of the body and blood of Jesus Christ are part of our covenant with God. At our baptism, we *karath*—or “cut a covenant”—with God to obey Him in return for our sins being forgiven so that we might be receive eternal life. Failing to observe the Passover breaks that covenant and results in our being *karath*—or “cut off”—from God.

Even though the Passover is not a holyday, it is a most desirable observance for us. We should value it and look forward to it more than any of the holydays. For us, it is the means to eternal life in God the Father’s kingdom through the sacrifice of our Lord, God, and Savior, Jesus Christ. Prepare now for it. Enter into it with a humble and contrite heart knowing that our lives belong to God whose mercy has covered our sins with the blood of that Passover sacrifice.

May God’s grace and peace be upon you!

Steven Greene

<https://sabbathreflections.org>

SABBATH THOUGHT 2022-02-12—HEALING

May God bless you on His Sabbath day!

The last couple of weeks began with several prayer requests going out for the brethren in this area. Believers are impacted by those in the Body of Christ who are suffering, but it is particularly felt when you know them personally. As it says in Scripture, “If one member suffers, all the members suffer with him...” (1 Cor. 12:26). This is a remarkable statement by Paul because the Greek word for the second “suffer” is *sumpascho*, which literally means to “experience pain jointly or of the same kind.” This is more than just empathy—it literally means that we ourselves experience a kind of suffering when our brothers and sisters suffer.

Feeling these things when we hear of others who suffer is how God’s agape love works. God changes our hearts so that we see our brethren, and even the world, as He does—“God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, so that everyone who believes in Him may not perish, but may have everlasting life” (John 3:16). God wants us all to have a heart like His and changing our hearts is His greatest work in us! I cannot imagine the depth of compassion, empathy, and love in God’s own heart such that He IS love (2 John 4:8, 16). Think about that. We can easily recognize God’s power; but, above all else, He is love. Love is the basis for everything He creates, all that He thinks, and the works that He does. More amazing is that WHAT He is, is what we are to BECOME! This is how “God may be all in all” (1 Cor 15:28).

God tests us all through suffering so He can know if we will obey Him under duress. Christ set the example of suffering (1 Pet. 2:21). Why did He suffer? “He learned obedience from the things that He suffered” (Hebrews 5:8). Through the sufferings of the cross in obedience to God (Phil. 2:8), He was “perfected,” as it says in the next verse. The Logos as God was PERFECTED! How can God be made more perfect? Through the experience of being human, Jesus knows what it is like to be in this weak, physical body (Heb. 4:15). When we suffer, it is for exactly the same reason—to be perfected (1 Pet. 5:10)—only it is in the opposite sense. Jesus learned what it is like to be human and we are learning to become like God. Of suffering, there is a scripture that is quite revealing:

1 PETER 4:1 Consequently, since Christ has suffered for us in *the* flesh, arm yourselves also with the same mind because **the one who has suffered in the flesh has finished living in sin.**

How is it possible that we are “finished living in sin” through suffering? Paul answers the question in the next scripture:

1 PETER 4:2 *To this end: that* **he no longer live his remaining time in the flesh** to the lusts of men, **but to the will of God.**

None of us wants to suffer, but God wills it for our perfection—to become like Him. That is our motivation to willingly suffer unto Him. When we suffer, God examines our hearts! We know that our remaining time in this body of flesh is being used by God to perfect us. To that end, Jesus Christ is living in us (Gal. 2:20), so we are striving to no longer live in the lusts of this life.

God healed *every one* of those in this area who were sick! Some had been sick or ill for weeks but their recovery started within hours after the prayer requests went out (maybe immediately, but it takes some time for the word to spread). There have been numerous examples of this recently. Without any great heavenly fanfare of singing or trumpets, God healed them. After such things, we need to remember to give thanks to God, especially those who were healed. We should remember every time God blesses us, heals us, and provides for us. For such things, let our hearts and prayers offer all honor, praise, worship, and glory to Him!

One aspect of healing that I used to ponder is the correlation between God's healing and the help of a physician. Jesus Christ never condemned physicians even though that was the view of many in times past. In fact, He likened Himself to one when He said, "Those who are strong do not need a physician, but those who are sick. I did not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance." (Mark 2:17). Also notice Luke 4:23.

However, human physicians obviously have limitations. I grew up in a family of physicians—my father and both my grandfathers were physicians, and my mother was a registered nurse. Luke 8:43-44 is the story of the woman with the issue of blood. She spent her life savings on physicians who were unable to cure her. Upon touching the robe of Jesus, she was completely healed. My father can still recount those patients that he lost and cases where physicians are helpless still exist today. One brother in Christ was so sick that the hospital told him they could do nothing for him and that he would die. A few hours after the prayer request went out, he had improved so significantly that the hospital sent him to therapy instead, and then home!

I think that we have entered into a new era of medical care over the last couple of years. Regardless of your personal thoughts about COVID vaccines and treatments, no one can deny that federal interference with physicians and hospitals has reached unprecedented levels. Never before in the history of this country have government agencies so vehemently advocated or proscribed medical treatment options for doctors. Add to this the fact that COVID testing that has become, for lack of a better term, a distraction. There have been a cases where people have gone to a hospital for something other than COVID and a positive test redirects the medical response away from the original problem.

The overall result is that people have lost trust and confidence in the medical system. But, perhaps, it is also provoking believers to have more faith and turn to God. God can heal without medical intervention—He has done it for me several times. I also know that physicians can help with the healing process. There are also naturopaths, osteopaths,

acupuncturists, chiropractors, etc. who have successfully helped people. The question is do we trust in God and call upon Him even as we pursue medical intervention?

There is a difference between curing and healing. Curing a disease eliminates all evidence and effect of it. Healing is a condition of being made whole. It attends to the mind and heart in addition to the body. Physicians do not cure anything—the body takes care of that—but they can help stimulate the body. But only God can heal.

There is a reason that the sacrifice of Jesus Christ was both the stripes of His body as well as His shed blood. The blood covers our sins and washes us clean. However, unless we are also healed of the source of the sin—the lusts of the heart and mind—the sin can return. Jesus Christ endured the terrible physical torture in His body while He was yet alive so that His body, represented by the Passover bread, would apply for the healing of our hearts and minds and body.

Some of those who were sick recently were under the care of a physician who did their best to help. However, it was not until God got involved that the healing began. Did the physician make the wrong diagnosis or use ineffective interventional medications? Probably not, since most medical treatments are based upon knowledge of having successfully treated similar cases in the past. While they were not immediately *cured*, God obviously initiated the healing. For those who had not been to a physician as well as those who had, GOD made the difference. This should be a reminder that we should always call upon God's healing power whether we visit a physician or not.

Also, believers should not think that going to a physician demonstrates less faith in God. As I mentioned, Jesus never disapproved of physicians. When telling the story of the good Samaritan recorded in Luke 10:30-35, He mentioned the Samaritan used wine and oil to dress the man's wounds. He then took the injured man to an inn where he "took care of him" until he was healed. There is no mention of God's intervention. Jesus Christ obviously expects us to do whatsoever we can in this life, including when sickness or illness occurs. And God gave us bodies that can deal with disease, illness, and injury.

Jesus Christ told us to preach the gospel of the kingdom. It is a commanded work. Is there anyone who would say that our work of preaching the gospel to the world happens without God's power and blessing behind it? Is not every baptism a miracle of GOD working in the mind and heart of a person and drawing them unto the truth? All of us have experienced the opening of our minds. The fact is that none of us could understand the Word of God until He removed the veil of blindness and deafness that was upon us.

And so it is with healing. A physician can help and we can do things to target the physical problem but God is the one who heals. Without His intervention, there might be no healing and, perhaps, no cure either.

Our physical bodies are an incredible creation of God, able to recover from many things. Physicians can provide an additional help for injuries, sickness, and illness. However,

without God, even a simple wound or cold could lead to unnecessary suffering or death. This is not to say that those who died of a sickness or illness lacked faith or did not pray to God. Quite the contrary, because we all are appointed once to die (Heb. 9:27) and there is a time when each of us will die regardless of how great is our faith. Abraham and David are obvious examples.

But faith is required to receive healing (Mat. 9:29). Can we say that someone who has the faith to be healed has less faith than others if they see a physician? No, because faith is for God's *healing*, the physician can only assist a person's body to *cure* itself. The physician does nothing except enhance the miraculous abilities of the body. All too often, I think, we tend to draw a line between a physician and God when it comes to our physical health. They have completely different roles: God is our healer and a physician can help our bodies recover.

An example of the roles of God and a physician are similar to our leaders. God is the Great King (Mat. 5:35) and ultimate authority in the universe, but He also establishes human rulers to carry out His will:

ROMANS 13:1, 4 Let everyone be subject to the higher authorities because there is no authority except from God; and those authorities that exist have been instituted by God; ... 4 For he is a servant of God to you for good. ...

He gave us leaders for our good. We all answer to someone: a boss, the tax collector, police or law enforcement, a judge, etc. Problems can occur, though, when we fail to involve God. The same is true with our healing. Always take your supplication to God and, if necessary, ask the brethren for prayers or an elder for an anointing.

Have you ever considered that "God Himself has placed certain *ones* in the church [with] gifts of healings" (1 Cor. 12:28)? I would guess that most of those who have the gifts do not even realize it. Thankfully, when a prayer request goes out, they are among those who are praying. That is not to say that the other believers who pray have no influence with God. Most of us are like the woman who relentlessly petitioned the unjust judge (Luke 18:1-7). In particular, notice the reason He gave the parable: "[Jesus Christ] also spoke a parable to them to show that **it is necessary to pray always, and not to give up.**" The prayers of the brethren ARE effective. All of them. They are prayers in faith, humility, sincerity, and love. They all matter because we all suffer when members of the Body of Christ suffer.

May God's grace and peace be upon you!

Steven Greene

<https://sabbathreflections.org>

SABBATH THOUGHT 2022-02-19—WEALTH

May God bless you on His Sabbath day!

Given the financial impact that COVID has had upon the world, it came as a complete surprise that the number of people who are worth more than \$1,000,000 INCREASED by about 25%. This was in spite of the supply chain problems, inflation, lost jobs, firings, lost businesses, work restrictions, retirements, etc. In other words, there is a very large segment of the population that MADE MONEY from the COVID crisis. How? I am not a business expert so I could only speculate; but even so, the “how” is not that important.

About 71% of the world live in poverty or are considered to be in a low income bracket. Another 22% or so are in the upper income range, leaving about 7% with a high income status. The actual numbers are not all that meaningful because this is not something new. There have always been a few rich elites and a large minority who do fairly well, but the vast majority just barely get by or struggle every day for their necessities.

What is important is the effect of wealth. When someone wins the lottery and comes into a huge sum of money, their lives are turned upside down. After winning the lottery, people usually say something to the effect, “This changes nothing in my life. I plan to continue to work, be with my friends, etc”. The reality is quite different. Relatives and friends begin calling and asking for money, they decide to “upgrade” to a larger house and buy that expensive sports car. They send their children to private schools. All these new things become topics of conversation with their friends who, either because they are jealous or weary of hearing about all the new things, pull away.

Few who come into sudden wealth escape these things. More often, they are completely changed. Most eventually spend it all and end up back where they started. Sadly, the impact is lasting. They had a taste of wealth and want it back. Those few who manage to hang on to the new found wealth begin to want more. The big new house, cars, and expensive clothes are just the beginning. It progresses from vacation homes to yachts to private planes. It never stops. In fact, greed can only be satisfied with more greed.

Having wealth is a full time job to keep it and even more work to increase it. The rich require the services of financial advisors, accountants, business staff, personal assistants, personal trainers, household servants, chauffeurs, full time mechanics, and even pilots. **Who** they are becomes lost in **what** they are. Whether it was a lottery winner, inheritance, or a successful business that produced the wealth, the end is the same. Too much of it and their lives change forever because wealth becomes a distraction from what was important in the past. We all know this and God warned against it because He knows the human heart:

DEUTERONOMY 8:10-18 When you have eaten and are full, then you shall bless the LORD your God for the good land which He has given you. 11

Beware that you do not forget the LORD your God by not keeping His commandments, and His judgments, and His statutes, which I command you today, 12 Lest *when* you have eaten and are full and have built goodly houses and lived in *them*, 13 And *when* your herds and your flocks multiply, and your silver and your gold is multiplied, and all that you have is multiplied, 14 Then you become haughty of heart, and **you forget the LORD your God** Who brought you forth out of the land of Egypt from the house of bondage, 15 Who led you through the great and terrible wilderness *with* fiery serpents and scorpions and thirsty ground where *there was* no water, Who brought forth water for you out of the rock of flint, 16 Who fed you in the wilderness with manna which your fathers did not know, so that He might humble you and that He might prove you to do you good in your latter end. 17 **Beware lest you say in your heart, 'My power and the might of my hand has gotten me this wealth.'** 18 But you shall remember the LORD your God, for *it is* He Who gives you power to get wealth, so that He may confirm His covenant which He has sworn to your fathers as it is this *very* day.

Did you notice that having a covenant with God is dependent upon NOT FORGETTING that wealth comes from Him? **Covenants are the foundation for any relationship with God.** No one has an association with God without a covenant. Forgetting that God owns everything and gives it to whom He chooses is a cause of spiritual death. It is hard to resist the greed that wealth produces. The obvious conclusion, then, is:

PSALM 37:16 Better is the little that a righteous man has than the riches of many wicked.

But there is another kind of wealth in the world—family wealth. This is the old money of the very elite. They are not only rich but also powerful. Behind all the politics and large enterprise business executives are the ultra-wealthy who have powerful influences. Nothing on a national front, or even global scale, happens without the directives and backing of those few elite. What I find interesting is that they always work in the background. They are nameless and faceless using their most trusted employees to pass along their influence and control of the world. It must be a very dismal life to be forever hiding from the regular people of the world.

Those with this kind of wealth, especially over their generations, have become the ultra-wicked. Through their wealth, they have exerted control over the lives of the world in order to ensure their continued riches and power. Such is the temptation of maintaining their wealth and power that they become willing to commit any sin and engage in any evil work. Those who forget God gave them their wealth eventually turn to wickedness:

PSALM 52:7 “Behold, the man who did not make God his stronghold, but trusted in the abundance of his riches. **He strengthened [hardened] himself in his wickedness.**”

Just look at the politicians in the USA. I did a search for politicians who had been convicted of crimes and was stunned at the number of senators, congressmen, executive appointees, legislative appointees, etc. Guess what? The list started in 1777 which was twelve years BEFORE our first president! Sadly, it will only continue to grow as the end times get closer. This is even reflected in Revelation:

REVELATION 18:3 Because all nations have drunk of the wine of the fury of her fornication, and the kings of the earth have committed fornication with her, and **the merchants of the earth have become rich through the power of her [Babylon's] luxury.**"

Our English translations hide much that is fascinating in the Greek. In the above scripture, the Greek word for "merchants" is *emporos*, from which comes our word "emperor". The end-time world order called Babylon will be a system over which are the Beast and False Prophet (Rev. 16); however, much of the economic system will be ruled by the merchants who are economic EMPERORS. They control all the wealth.

The danger of wealth is twofold: a distraction from God and a willingness to commit evil in order to preserve it. All evil is the result of the temptation of lust. In other words, it begins as a thought in our hearts and minds:

JAMES 1:14 But each one is tempted when he is drawn away and is enticed by his own lust.

There are two ways to avoid evil. The first is to be content with what God has given us. Whether it is money, a wife, a home, a job, being truly content to have that which God supplies for our needs prevents temptations from even entering into our minds.

The second way to avoid evil is to avoid or prevent the circumstances that cause temptations. Not playing the lottery or avoiding relationships with evil people prevent us from being exposed to evil. Simply speaking, avoid being in a position of being tempted.

Believers who are among the wealthy have a warning from God and should always pray they never forget it is God who provided it. However, most of us will never have enough wealth to become tempted; however, we should also not put ourselves in a position of being beholden either. By that I mean, becoming dependent upon the wealthy in ways that might put our salvation at risk. The world's elite want control and power over the entire world, especially GOD'S people.

This is the purpose behind the socialist agendas (or whatever brand name is now in vogue). It starts with distributing wealth whereby those in poverty are given free money. Years ago, I was involved in a treatment foster care program that provided temporary home for children whose parents either would not or could not provide for them. I personally knew of women who would get pregnant just to increase their welfare payments. Again, the desire for, and acquisition of, wealth is dangerous.

After wealth distribution, there is “free” healthcare to all. In recent times, I have heard of free cell phones, citizenship freely given to illegal immigrants, free money for not working (during COVID), welfare to non-citizens, etc. These all lead to a dependency. For example, many government freebies required proof of a COVID vaccine. While this all sound innocuous, the end goal is to have a world population that is completely dependent upon governments for their livelihoods.

When growing up, healthcare was determined by affordability. There was no expectation that the latest and greatest advances were available to all. My grandfather, a physician, sometimes got paid with a chicken or eggs. None of the physicians in my family were ever rich. They never treated people as a means to gain wealth. Specialty clinics that brought great wealth to doctors only became the business model in the 1980s when the insurance and pharmaceutical companies started taking control of hospitals and doctors.

We must always view the world from the perspective of our covenant relationship with God. Any temptations that put that in jeopardy must be avoided, whether it is wealth or power or even our very lives. Nothing in this world is worth exchanging for our crown in the kingdom of God. The elite who are bringing this world under their absolute control are threatened most by His potential children. They must eliminate everyone whose loyalty cannot be bought or bribed. Believers are called to be faithful to God above all of mankind, so they are a threat to their control. They hate God because they know their works are wickedness.

Believers need to be wary of the motives and works of this world to avoid being deceived. In a very real sense, we are “in the midst of wolves. Therefore, *[we need to] be wise as serpents and harmless as doves.*” (Mat. 10:16). Jesus Christ warned against deceivers in the latter days THREE TIMES in the Olivet prophecy of Matthew 24. The deceivers will all be part of the Beast power and backed by the miracles of the False Prophet. In other words, they will be part of a government that uses wealth and power to control the world and the elite are aligned with them completely.

On the other hand, the wealth of Satan’s world is nothing compared to eternal life in God’s coming kingdom! Stay close to God, pray for His agape love in your heart, and do good works for brethren. Christ is coming. When the world is at its worst, “the sign of the Son of man *[will appear]* in heaven” (Mat. 24:30). That is when we need to remember to “look up, and lift up your heads, because your redemption is drawing near” (Luke 21:28). The kingdom of Almighty God will prevail!

May God’s grace and peace be upon you!

Steven Greene

<https://sabbathreflections.org>

SABBATH THOUGHT 2022-02-26—NATIONS & BOUNDARIES

May God bless you on His Sabbath day!

I'm sure that everyone has heard by now that Russia has invaded Ukraine. The talking heads on the news have analyzed and scrutinized every aspect of it and determined that Putin is a despot who is trying to restore the glory of the former USSR. But what "glory" would that be? Russia is almost twice the size of the USA but it is economically smaller than Italy or Canada. It seems almost incongruous that for all its land and resources, Russia is, in fact, poor.

Ukraine, on the other hand, is about the size of Texas with an economy less than a tenth that of Russia. Conquering Ukraine would not add much to the Russian economy. Ukraine was under the authoritarian thumb of the USSR after World War 2. Men like Lenin, Stalin, Khrushchev, Brezhnev, Chernenko, Gorbachev, repressed their economy after the war and subjected the citizens to a life of fear. Not only Ukraine, but also Belarus, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Czechoslovakia (now Chechia and Slovakia), Hungary, Romania, etc. After the economic fall of the USSR in 1991, eastern European countries gained some form of independence from Russia, but many of their newly elected leaders continued to have ties to mother Russia because it assured them wealth and power. That has slowly been changing but many problems still exist today.

Today's Russia is dominated by Putin, who has been president for 19 of the last 31 years. Since the fall of the USSR in 1991, the Russian economy has remained completely stagnant. Putin has done nothing to improve the lives of the people. He uses his position of power to steal the wealth of the nation. I remember one time he flew on his private helicopter to a wilderness river area where he strutted around without a shirt to show off his physique. To maintain favor with the people, he creates the persona of a strong conqueror who will establish a new Russian empire. In reality he has done nothing.

All of this is happening under the watch of President Biden who seems to rely upon the NATO allies to determine a response. Of course, members of NATO consist mostly of European countries who are fearful of engaging in a war with Russia. And rightly so. Even 75 years after WW2, the idea of a war in Europe is anathema to them because they remember the utter devastation, suffering, and death.

The war in Ukraine could have significant impacts here in the USA, too. Inflation was already rising at a rate not seen since the 70s and economic sanctions against Russia will only make matters worse. This is especially true since the USA now imports oil from Russia to make up for the loss of national sources that were shut down by Biden.

The world has really never been without wars. There is always a despot ready to stomp on a smaller country so it can be absorbed for the purposes of empire-building and wealth. All of this has been going on since before the great flood. It is hard to imagine,

but there was a time when nations did not exist. It was not until after God established different languages at the Tower of Babel that national boundaries were formed:

GENESIS 11:6-9 And the LORD said, “Behold, the people *are* one and they all have one language. And this *is only the beginning of* what they will do— now nothing which they have imagined to do will be restrained from them. 7 Come, let Us go down and there confuse their language, so that they cannot understand one another’s speech.” 8 So **the LORD scattered them abroad from that place upon the face of all the earth.** And they quit building the city. 9 Therefore the name of it is called Babel, because the LORD confused the language of all the earth there. And from there **the LORD scattered them abroad upon the face of all the earth.**

God did not just randomly scatter them from the Tower of Babel; He dispersed them to predetermined places where they gathered according to their new common languages:

DEUTERONOMY 32:7-8 Remember **the days of old [pre-flood]**; consider the years of many generations. Ask your father, and he will show you; your elders, and they will tell you. 8 When **the Most High divided to the nations their inheritance**, when He separated the sons of Adam, He set the bounds of the people according to the number of the children of Israel,

It was language that defined the people of the nations but God had determined the specific lands that they would inherit. In modern times, nations defined by specific languages have become somewhat muddled by older national identities. For example, the Jews live in various countries throughout the world. Those born as German citizens still are viewed, either personally or by true Germans, as Jews first and foremost. This applies almost universally. There are African Americans, French Canadians, etc. Today, nations are defined by both national identity and language. Which comes first is largely a matter of religious belief and commitment. This is true of the Jews but applies to Christians and Catholics and the other many religions of the world.

Culture, on the other hand, is really just an identity based upon a combination of religious beliefs and national traditions. Italians are dominated by Catholicism with all of its pro forma customs. Even for those who are not sincere believers, their country and society is underpinned by their long-held customs.

Interestingly, language and religion remain the identity of people even after they are conquered. Just look at the countries that were ruled by the ancient Romans or the modern case of the USSR—they retained their identities during their captivity and continued them after their independence. The same thing occurred with ancient Israel. How many times did God bring in a conquering army when they sinned? Language and religion always defined them regardless of who ruled over them.

So why did God establish the nations? It was because “nothing [*evil*] which they have imagined to do will be restrained from them” (Genesis 11:6)? But there was another reason that God separated the peoples:

ACTS 17:26-27 And He made of one blood all the nations of men to dwell upon all the face of the earth, having determined beforehand *their* appointed times and the boundaries of their dwelling; 27 **In order that they might seek the Lord**, if perhaps they might feel after Him and might find Him; though truly, He is not far from each one of us,

A united world is capable of doing great evil, but it is not a stretch to think that smaller nations might seek after the true God. One example was Nineveh who, at the preaching of Jonah, repented before God. The fact that their repentance was soon forgotten is why Nineveh no longer exists today. Verse 26 also says that national boundaries were established by God for “their appointed times.” God preserves nations that seek and obey Him. Those that reject Him, as history has shown us, come and go. National boundaries only exist for a period of time as determined by God for His purposes.

At this point, Ukraine, without God’s protection, and will likely fall to Russia if for no other reason than Putin cannot afford to fail. If Russia cannot defeat the tiny nation of Ukraine, they will become the laughing stock of the world and Putin cannot allow that to happen. His ego is too big so failure is not an option for him.

However, no nation without God lasts. God established appointed times for all nations to exist. This is true of every nation; however, there is one that is unique in all the world—Israel (the land of Canaan given to Abraham). Obviously, Israel has repeatedly and continuously disobeyed and has been conquered countless times. Still, the national boundaries have remained basically the same since the beginning. The reason for this is God’s promise to Abraham to give his descendants the land of Canaan:

GENESIS 15:18-21 In the same day the LORD made a covenant with Abram, saying, “**I have given this land to your seed**, from the river of Egypt to the great river, the river Euphrates, 19 The *land of the* Kenites, and the Kenizzites, and the Kadmonites, 20 And the Hittites, and the Perizzites, and the Rephaim, 21 And the Amorites, and the Canaanites, and the Girgashites, and the Jebusites.”

In spite of their disobedience, God has kept His promise to Abraham. The nation of Israel—the land of Canaan—is still here. There is also another reason that the national boundaries of Israel have never changed—God delivered His Word to the Jews for them to preserve:

ROMANS 3:1-2 **What then is the advantage of the Jew**, or what *is* the profit of circumcision? 2 Much in every way. Primarily, in that **they were entrusted with the oracles of God**.

The national boundaries of Israel have remained essentially intact for the last three thousand years so that God’s Word can be preserved by the Jews. It would be next to impossible if the Jews were scattered throughout the world to safeguard the word of God. All other nations have an appointed time for their existence because they reject God:

PSALMS 2:1-3 **Why do the nations rage and the people plot in vain? 2**
The kings of the earth set themselves, and the rulers **take counsel together**
against the LORD and against His Christ, saying, 3 “Let us break Their
bands asunder and cast away Their cords from us.”

This also applies to the nations inhabited by the ten tribes of Israel. As a chosen people, they have rejected God and murdered millions of babies through abortion. Their sins have reached into heaven above and God will bring the curses of Deuteronomy 32 upon us. How great is God’s wrath upon His chosen people who reject Him? Prophecy tells us that the national descendants of Abraham will fall to the greatest evil empire in the history of mankind in the last days. It will put to shame the past empires of Egypt, Assyrian, Babylon, Persia, Greece, and Rome who ruled a small portion of the Euro-Asian continent. It will be a worldwide empire under the absolute rule and control of Satan.

So, there will be one more evil empire to rise up and then the end will come. But with the end comes a new beginning and a new empire—the kingdom of God. Power, holiness, righteousness, wisdom, kindness, mercy, compassion, peace, and love define God our Father who sits upon that throne. In that day:

REVELATION 21:4-5 And God shall wipe away every tear from their eyes; and *there* shall not be any more death, or sorrow, or crying; neither shall *there* be any more pain, because the former things have passed away.” 5 And **He Who sits on the throne** said, “Behold, I make all things new.” Then He said to me, “Write, for these words are true and faithful.”

National identity is established at birth. Each of us has some idea of our lineage but that will change because we will be born again. When we are finally born of spirit in God’s kingdom, our identity completely changes—we will have the name of God, not the name of a patriarch who lived in times past:

REVELATION 3:12 The one who overcomes will I make a pillar in the temple of My God, and he shall not go out any more; and **I will write upon him the name of My God, and the name of the city of My God**, the new Jerusalem, which will come down out of heaven from My God; and *I will write upon him* My new name.

Our identity will be the name of God. Our nation will be the city of our God. And we will be one nation, OF God, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all.

May God’s grace and peace be upon you!

Steven Greene

<https://sabbathreflections.org>

SABBATH THOUGHT 2022-03-05—ROLE OF ELDERS

May God bless you on His Sabbath day!

What do you personally think are the roles of an elder? My parents attended mainly Methodist churches, so my experience as a child was that of a minister appointed by some faraway grand council to run the business and religious operations of a building where people met on Sundays. The business side involved money from the weekly offerings (they did not talk about tithing) and the religious work was the weekly fifteen-minute sermon from a high and lofty pulpit and occasional hospital visitations. Of course, there was more to it than that but, to an impressionable young teen, that seemed to fairly encapsulate the main construct. I also knew it was a fairly common one because every church my parents attended in the cities where we lived had similar organizations.

When God called me and I started attending weekly Sabbath services, the role of the minister appeared to be similar to that of Protestant organizations. However, the ministers spent a lot of time referring to a luxurious and opulent headquarters from which all truth flowed as revealed by a revered leader. I am certain most of you can fill in the many blanks I left of how things worked back then.

I saw much the same structure in the subsequent organizations after the demise of that initial Church of God. The problem for me was that I came to a point in my life where I realized that I had come to rely upon ministers for the truth of God. I spent my beginning years reading booklets, magazines, and listening to sermons without much real Bible study. While the material available from the church organization was useful and valuable, delving deeply into the Bible was secondary. At one point, I put aside the church material and began to really study the Bible. That was then that things changed. Even though I proved that much of the information in the church sermons and materials was biblically correct, having direct knowledge from the Bible gave me a much greater understanding, appreciation, and confidence in the truth of God.

Something else occurred that I had not anticipated—I came to KNOW that I was begotten of God. Previously, I had “measured” my calling by the lists of things that met the “requirements” for salvation mentioned in sermons and church materials. After awhile, intense study of the Bible established a relationship with God that I did not have before. Without direct knowledge of the Bible, I was “hearing” from God “secondhand”. In other words, articles and sermons were hearing **about** God rather than **from** Him.

But, you might ask, were not the saints taught through the preaching of the gospel, especially from the apostles? Yes, of course! But things today are quite different. Most of the saints back in Paul’s time did not have a Bible (certainly not the New Testament) so preaching was the primary means for communicating the gospel of the kingdom of God. Moreover, what they preached was directly taught by Jesus Christ so their gospel was

without human misunderstanding and errors. They also had greater measures of the Holy Spirit and God inspired them with a perfect truth that was captured in their writings. No elder today can claim such credentials.

Today, the Church has a good understanding of the gospel of the kingdom and God's truth. However, **all** of us are admonished to "work out your own salvation with fear and trembling" (Phil. 2:12). Everyone knows this, but have you read the previous sentence?

PHILIPPIANS 2:12-13 So then, my beloved, even as you have always obeyed, not as in my presence only, but **now much more in my absence**, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling. 13 For **it is God Who works in you** both to will and to do according to *His* good pleasure.

Paul emphasized that the saints must work out their own salvation in the **absence** of an elder because it is GOD who works in us, not a man. This was certainly the case in my early years. I never even considered being on my own and had mistakenly come to rely upon the writings and sermons of ministers for my spiritual relationship with God.

This is **not** to say that preaching is bad or wrong or something to be avoided or despised. Quite the opposite. I would never have had the exposure to God's truth without some help because the Bible can be hard to decipher: "For precept *must be [built]* upon precept, precept *[built]* upon precept; line *[built]* upon line, line *[built]* upon line; here a little, there a little" (Isa. 28:10). For a new convert, it can be a daunting task. Paul understood this quite well, which is likely the reason he was such a prolific writer and teacher:

ROMANS 10:14-15, 17 How then shall they call on *Him in* Whom they have not believed? And how shall they believe in *Him* of Whom they have not heard? And **how shall they hear without preaching?** 15 And how shall they preach, unless they be sent? Accordingly, it is written, "How beautiful *are* the feet of those who announce the gospel of peace, and those who announce the good news of good things!" ... 17 So then, faith *comes* by hearing, and hearing through *the* Word of God.

But did you notice verse 17? Faith comes by hearing but hearing comes from the **Bible**, which is the Word of God! So, preaching is first but it must be accompanied by an individual responsibility to have a personal knowledge of God's own truth because we are the children of—and our salvation comes from—God alone. So, written material and sermons are absolutely important, but knowing the Bible is more so. Having a strong biblical foundation is crucial to salvation because it is the basis for our relationship with God (along with prayer). All have read Acts 17:11 many times but read it again and notice the subsequent verse:

ACTS 17:11-12 Now *[the Bereans]* were more noble than those in Thessalonica, *for* they received the Word with all readiness of mind *and*

examined the Scriptures daily to see if these things were so. 12 **As a result, a great number of them believed**, including not a few of the honorable Greek women and men.

More Bereans were converted than of those in Thessalonica **because** they verified Paul's preaching in the Scriptures! So, obviously one role of an elder is to preach the gospel but examining Scripture is the only way to establish a sincere and deep relationship with God. It also prevents being us from being led into false teachings. If the preaching of an elder is God's truth, it will be in lock step with the Bible. This is a proof of an elder of God. Others are his fruits of the Holy Spirit and his good works.

It is interesting that the Bible uses two words to describe an elder's role of preaching: preach and teach. In the Greek, *preach* means evangelize, which simply means to proclaim the gospel of the coming kingdom of God. *Teach*, on the other hand, means just that—to educate or instruct. Preaching and teaching are the primary roles of a minister. This was, in fact, emphasized above all else by Jesus when He told the apostle Peter to feed His sheep (John 21:15-17). Later, we find that the apostles took this to heart in Acts 6:2 where they appointed deacons to minister to the physical needs of the people so the apostles could focus on the Word of God. However, it is the responsibility of all to have their foundation in the Bible for all preaching and teaching.

Another obvious role of an elder is anointings. These can be for healing of spiritual or physical issues, baptisms, or ordinations. Marriage, too, is a function of an elder because a true marriage is founded upon vows to God where an elder is a mediator and witness of the marital covenant.

Elders also must deal with false teachers and those who cause dissensions. Anyone who preaches or teaches falsehoods or tries to use the saints for their own ends are to be confronted and properly dealt with, usually by denying them continued fellowship (at least until they truly repent). However, in the absence of an elder, mature converted men who are not elders can (and should) take up that responsibility. This was something Paul admonished the Corinthians about because they did not remove the man who committed fornication with his stepmother. He said:

1 CORINTHIANS 5:1-5 "*It is commonly reported that there is sexual immorality among you, and such immorality as is not even named among the Gentiles—**allowing one to have his own father's wife**. 2 You are puffed up and did not grieve instead, so that **he who did this deed might be taken out of your midst**. ... 4 In the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, **when you are gathered together**, and my spirit, together with the power of our Lord Jesus Christ 5 To **deliver such a one to Satan** for the destruction of the flesh, that the spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus."*

The roles of an elder are overseeing the spiritual needs of the saints. An elder is to zealously convince, admonish, encourage, and protect the saints in agape love, patience, and the truth of God (2 Tim. 4:2). This cannot be done by compulsion because each person is solely responsible for their own salvation. No elder can force someone to repent if they reject sound biblical doctrine. A love of truth comes only from God—it is impossible for an elder to force it upon someone.

1 PETER 5:1-3 *The elders who are among you I exhort, even as a fellow elder, and an eye witness of the sufferings of Christ, and a partaker of the glory that is about to be revealed: 2 **Feed the flock of God** that is among you, **exercising oversight not by compulsion, but willingly**; not in fondness of dishonest gain, but **with an eager attitude**; 3 **Not as exercising lordship over your possessions; but by being examples to the flock of God.***

Oversight simply means to diligently examine, be aware of, or inspect. To do this, an elder must love God and the brethren, be grounded in Scripture, a good listener, patient, and desirous that each child of God attain salvation. It also means he must be able to discern good and evil (Heb. 5:14).

The above roles omit many of the things that we have become accustomed to and assumed are the sole purview of an elder. For example, is an elder required to hold Sabbath services? No! Every one of us can pray, study, sing psalms, and fellowship without one. Also, is **God's** Sabbath is “cancelled” if he is unavailable? Again, no! Is an elder required for brethren to have a Bible study? No! Why would we individually be expected to study the Bible but not allowed to study with other converted saints? Remember the Bereans? They went off and verified everything Paul taught.

While elders are responsible to God for preaching, teaching, and overseeing the saints, there are just not enough elders to go around these days but keeping the Sabbaths and holydays are still required of everyone by **God**. On the other hand, having a deep understanding of God's word from the Bible is absolutely necessary to avoid going “off course”, especially if we are isolated from God's people. So, it is good if everyone knows an elder they can contact. If not, they should call the main office and ask to talk with one. Everyone should also be comfortable talking with an elder, knowing that such discussions are kept private and no one is ever condemned (correction is not condemnation). Even elders talk to other elders and ask for prayers, discuss doctrine, or seek advice in dealing with situations. Remember, elders were once “babes” themselves.

Even though every elder is unique in how they fulfill their roles and have distinct gifts, some things are common to each one who is doing the work of God: they have a good understanding of Scripture (2 Tim. 3:14-17), are able to preach and teach (2 Tim. 2:24-25), love God and the brethren (Phil. 1:5), care for the widows and orphans (Jas. 1:27),

are available to answer questions, and desire fellowship with the brethren. In other words, elders serve the needs of God's children in humility and agape love.

May God's grace and peace be upon you!

Steven Greene

<https://sabbathreflections.org>

SABBATH THOUGHT 2022-03-12—COVENANTS

May God bless you on His Sabbath day!

Did you know that every serious and significant relationship in this life has one thing in common? Whether it involves citizenship for an immigrant, a newly enlisted recruit of the armed forces, or even a marriage, all require entering into a *covenant*. We might not often think about it, but covenants are foundational to all important relationships.

For example, all godly marriages are based upon vows made by the husband and wife to each other. Together, the vows of the couple make up what is called a marital covenant. Simply speaking, a covenant is a binding agreement wherein the two parties involved vow to fulfill certain obligations. A covenant requires the vows of both parties to be witnessed by God, who is also the Judge of whether or not they are broken.

Vows are different from promises. A promise is usually made by one person to another—without any commitment from the other party—so no covenant is involved. God is also not called upon as a witness (although breaking a promise is still a sin before Him). Because the vows of a covenant are witnessed and judged by God, many vows include the phrase, “so help me God,” which is basically a plea for God to help keep and fulfill them.

Covenants define not only the terms of relationships, but they also establish the beginning of them. The anniversary date and number of years of a marriage, military service, or a naturalized citizenship are counted from the day of the covenant. The same is true with most believers who count time from the day of their baptism. However, what they are really referring to is the day they made a baptismal covenant with God. That covenant is based upon a vow of the person and the promise of God. The covenant ceremony is then followed by baptism and the elder laying hands on the person for the receiving of the Holy Spirit.

NOTE: God does not make vows because there is no one greater to witness or judge Him. Instead, a covenant with God is based upon **His promises** and **our vows** (for which He is both witness and judge).

Uniquely, a covenant only exists between parties whose relationship is based upon love, faithfulness, and trust. The vows are always what someone will do for, or give to, the other party. They are never about getting; they are about *giving*. A treaty, on the other hand, is a binding agreement with opposite intentions. The agreement defines what each party *gets* from the other party. In a large sense, a treaty is made between parties that do **not** trust each other. Covenants, on the other hand, only work if there is love between the parties. Obviously, that is the basis for every marital covenant. (For more information on marital covenants, refer to the booklet *Marriage & Divorce—Understanding the Marital*

Covenant.) But it also applies in the case of immigrants receiving citizenship because they love their new homeland. Military service is the same—soldiers usually serve out of love for their country. In addition to love, covenants can only exist if both parties are faithful to it and have trust in the other party to keep it. That is why covenant vows are ones of love, faithfulness, and trust.

This is also the reason that breaking a covenant is a betrayal—the worst of all offenses. (For more information on offenses, refer to the booklet *Offenses—Ordinances of God*.) Because the foundation of a covenant is love, faithfulness, and trust, the repercussions of a betrayal include devastating emotions of hurt, pain, and anger. Even God gets angry when someone betrays a covenant with Him:

JOSHUA 23:16 When you have **transgressed the covenant of the LORD your God**, which He commanded you, and have gone and served other gods, and bowed yourselves to them, then **shall the anger of the LORD** be kindled against you, and you shall perish quickly from off the good land which He has given to you.”

The reason a covenant betrayal is so hurtful is it takes advantage of the bond of trust between the parties. Having love for someone and being faithful to them requires giving of our innermost selves. We become vulnerable to the other person because we withhold nothing from them. Betrayal is absolute disregard for the victim who trusted in the vow of love and faithfulness of the other person. This is true whether the covenant is between people or with God.

You may have noticed that every binding agreement with God requires a covenant. This was the case with Noah, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses, David, etc. Why is that? Because God **is** love (1 John 4:8, 16)! For that reason, God will never enter into a treaty, which is based upon distrust instead of love. Without vows of love, faithfulness, and trust, there can be no binding agreement with God.

With the Passover closing in upon us, we should think about our covenant with God. We vowed to love and obey God who, in turn, promises to give us eternal life. However, our covenant only exists because of the sacrifice of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of our sins. The Passover ceremony points to our covenant with God the Father because it is sealed by the shed blood of Jesus Christ:

MATTHEW 26:28 For this is My blood, **the blood of the New Covenant**, which is poured out for many **for the remission of sins**.

Every covenant with God must be sealed with blood because His promises involve eternal **life**:

HEBREWS 13:20 And *may* the God of peace, Who raised our Lord Jesus from among *the* dead—that great Shepherd of the sheep—through **the blood of the everlasting covenant**,

Either we fulfill our covenant with God or we betray it. The former brings eternal life and the latter eternal death. Because God promises *eternal life*, the penalty for betraying our covenant with God is eternal death. Forfeiture of our life requires the shedding of our own blood because the Bible says that physical life is contained within the blood:

LEVITICUS 17:11 For **the life of the flesh is in the blood**. And I have given it to you upon the altar to make an atonement for yourselves; for **it is the blood that makes an atonement for life.**'

As I mentioned before, all covenants are based upon love, faithfulness, and trust. We vow those things to God and He promises the same to us. Our love for God is demonstrated by obeying His commandments. God proves His love to us by forgiving our sins and atoning for them with the blood of Jesus Christ. The fulfillment of God's love happens when He imparts eternal life to us. This is not complicated or hard to understand. In fact:

2 CORINTHIANS 11:3 But I fear, lest by any means, as the serpent deceived Eve by his craftiness, so your minds might be corrupted from **the simplicity that is in Christ**.

The simplicity is "**in** Christ" because our covenant is established, or sealed, by the blood of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of our sins. It also **continues** in the blood of Jesus Christ through the forgiveness of God for any sins we commit later.

Our vow to God requires us to obey His commandments, so every sin we commit transgresses our covenant with God. We "renew," or reestablish, our covenant through repentance. Failure to repent leaves our covenant with God in question. However, as part of our covenant with God, He promises to cover, or atone for, and forgive our sins by the blood shed by Jesus Christ when He was sacrificed:

1 JOHN 1:9 If we confess our own sins, **He is faithful** and righteous, **to forgive us** our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.

I have heard believers say that Passover is a time for the renewal of our covenant with God. In a literal sense, that does not happen at Passover because only those who are in covenant with God can even partake of it. Technically speaking, our covenant is broken each time we sin and renewed (or restored) upon repentance to God.

Passover is a memorial and remembrance of the suffering and death of Jesus Christ. It is a ceremony by which we show honor and respect to the One who gave His life for ours. We come before God and Jesus Christ in all humility and meekness having the highest regard for their love, faithfulness, and forgiveness toward us. Passover is when we

consider the undeserved mercy and compassion we have received from God. It is a time to understand the magnitude of the sacrifice of both God the Father and Jesus Christ for our lives. This realization only comes when we look inside ourselves and know that we were unworthy of salvation and truly how great is the love of our Father and Christ in heaven.

The ultimate purpose of Passover is to remember Jesus Christ (1 Cor. 11:24-25) and examine ourselves (1 Cor. 11:28). We do this for the simple reason that **we are in a covenant** with God the Father and Jesus Christ! Furthermore, we are only in a covenant with God because of Jesus Christ's Passover sacrifice. So, it is a very appropriate and meaningful time to remember Jesus Christ, examine ourselves, and ponder our covenant with God for the greatest gift one could ever imagine—eternal life in the kingdom of God.

May God's grace and peace be upon you!

Steven Greene

<https://sabbathreflections.org>

SABBATH THOUGHT 2022-03-19—DEATH OF CHRIST

May God bless you on His Sabbath day!

Passover is soon to be upon us. Everyone is focused upon the deep meaning of this day, as we should be. There have been, and will be, sermons and messages about Passover because, without the Passover sacrifice, the other holydays are meaningless. In fact, there would be no gospel—good news—of the kingdom. It would be a message of bad news for the world.

Obviously, the core of Passover is a **commandment to remember** two things: the beaten body of Jesus Christ and His shed blood.

1 CORINTHIANS 11:24-26 And after giving thanks, He broke *it* and said, “Take, eat; this is My body, which *is* being broken for you. This do in the **remembrance of Me.**” 25 In like manner, *He* also *took* the cup after He had supped, saying, “This is *the* cup of the New Covenant in My blood. This do, as often as you drink *it*, in the **remembrance of Me.**” 26 For as often as you eat this bread and drink this cup, you **solemnly proclaim the death of the Lord** until He comes.

Passover is also the **commanded memorial** of the death of Jesus Christ (1 Cor. 11:26). The result of that selfless act is God’s forgiveness of our sins and our covenant of eternal life with Him, sealed with the sacrificial blood of His Son.

Passover is a very personal memorial because salvation is to a nation, but to individuals. Just as Passover was originally observed by each household (Exo. 12:3-4) instead of at the tabernacle or the temple, some believers will have a private ceremony at home while others will gather in small groups. Both are acceptable because Passover is a ceremony that is personal, so no priest (or elder) is required. Unlike the other sacrifices and offerings when offerers had to provide their own animal, Passover is also the one time that the people ensured that even the poor had the means to keep it. Notice 2 Chronicles 35:6-8 where Hezekiah, the king, gave 30,000 lambs to the people so that they could keep the Passover.

They also could not keep it in the first month because of their uncleanness so they kept the second Passover (Num. 9:6-13). The postponement of the Passover from the first month in Hezekiah’s time for uncleanness also shows how important it is to prepare for it. 2 Chronicles 30:15 records that the Levites and priests were **ashamed** because they had not cleansed themselves. Hezekiah also prayed for God to pardon the uncleanness of the people (2 Chr. 30:18). In addition to discerning the Lord’s body, all must be clean to keep the Passover. Cleansing is a process that takes time. John records that people in Jesus’ time came to Jerusalem early to purify themselves (John 11:55).

How do we purify and cleanse ourselves? Through prayer, fasting, studying, and understanding that God the Father and Jesus Christ gave everything to redeem us from our sins. Why purify ourselves? Because Passover is a reminder that we were unworthy of the Passover sacrifice. This is why the ceremony begins with footwashing (John 13:1-17)—the service of a lowly and humble servant. (Note: those who keep Passover alone do not perform the footwashing but must still purify themselves mentally and spiritually.) In the Greek, *katharos* means “clean”. It is where we get our word *catharsis*, which is a purging of harmful physical, mental, or emotional waste. It is perfectly fitting for the cleansing of our hearts and minds prior to Passover.

Another important aspect of the Passover is that it is actually the very first day of unleavened bread, making the feast of unleavened bread a total of eight days. This is clear in Luke 22:1 “Now the feast of unleavened bread, which is called Passover, was approaching.” This is also mentioned in Exodus 12:18, Matthew 26:17, and Mark 14:12. Why would the Passover be a day of unleavened bread? Paul tells us:

1 CORINTHIANS 5:6-8 Your glorying *is* not good. Know ye not that a little leaven leaveneth the whole lump? 7 Purge out therefore the old leaven, that ye may be a new lump, as ye are unleavened. For even Christ our **passover** is sacrificed for us: 8 **Therefore let us keep the feast, not with old leaven, neither with the leaven of malice and wickedness; but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth.**

Paul says to keep the feast with “the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth.” Is he referring to the seven days we call the Days of Unleavened Bread? No. He includes Passover in verse 7. Leaven represents sin, which is “malice and wickedness,” but unleavened bread represents “sincerity and truth.” The Greek word for “sincerity” is *krineias*. It is a wonderfully interesting word, especially as it applies to Passover. It means *clearness of thought*; that is, our minds are focused without distraction, with an implication of also being *pure*. The word is derived from *eilikrine* translated “pure” in Philippians 1:10 and 2 Peter 3:1. This form of the word literally means to be *judged by sunlight*! What is Jesus Christ called? The “Sun of righteousness” (Malachi 4:2). So, the Passover absolutely is a day of unleavened bread because it requires having the purity and truth of our Lord and Savior.

Besides remembering the body and blood of our Savior’s sacrifice, Passover is a memorial of His death. His resurrection is the means by which we have eternal life (Romans 6:8-10); however, His resurrection was not on Passover. Passover was the day He died, so it is the memorial of His death. But why do we remember His death rather than His resurrection? It has to do with sin: **all believers must be dead to sin in order to have eternal life.** Romans 6 makes this very clear:

ROMANS 6:1-23 1 What then shall we say? Shall we continue in sin, so that grace may abound? 2 MAY IT NEVER BE! **We who died to sin**, how shall we

live any longer therein? 3 Or are you ignorant that we, as many as were baptized into Christ Jesus, were **baptized into His death**? 4 Therefore, we were buried with Him through the baptism into the death; so that, just as Christ was raised from *the* dead by the glory of the Father, in the same way, we also should walk in newness of life. 5 For if **we have been conjoined together in the likeness of His death, so also shall we be in the likeness of His resurrection**. 6 Knowing this, that **our old man was co-crucified with Him in order that the body of sin might be destroyed**, so that we might no longer be enslaved to sin; 7 Because the **one who has died to sin has been justified from sin**. 8 Now if we died together with Christ, we believe that we shall also live with Him, 9 Knowing that Christ, having been raised from *the* dead, dies no more; death no longer has any dominion over Him. 10 For **when He died, He died unto sin** once for all; but in that He lives, He lives unto God. 11 In the same way also, you should indeed reckon yourselves to be **dead to sin**, but alive to God through Christ Jesus our Lord. 12 Therefore, do not let sin rule in your mortal body by obeying it in the lusts thereof. 13 Likewise, do not yield your members as instruments of unrighteousness to sin; rather, yield yourselves to God as those who are alive from *the* dead, and your members as instruments of righteousness to God. 14 For sin shall not rule over you because you are not under law, but under grace. 15 What then? Shall we sin because we are not under law, but under grace? MAY IT NEVER BE! 16 Don't you realize that to whom you yield yourselves as servants to obey, you are servants of the one you obey, whether *it is* of sin unto death, or of obedience unto righteousness? 17 But thanks *be* to God, that you were *the* servants of sin, but you have obeyed from *the* heart that form of doctrine which was delivered to you; 18 And having been delivered from sin, you became *the* servants of righteousness. 19 I speak from a human point of view because of the weakness of your flesh; for just as you *once* yielded your members in bondage to uncleanness, and to lawlessness unto lawlessness, so now yield your members in bondage to righteousness unto sanctification. 20 For when you were *the* servants of sin, you were free from righteousness. 21 Therefore, what fruit did you have then in the *things* of which you are now ashamed? For the end result of those things *is* death. 22 But now *that* you have been delivered from sin and have become servants of God, you have your fruit unto sanctification, and the end result *is* eternal life. 23 For the wages of sin *is* death, but the gift of God *is* eternal life through Christ Jesus our Lord.

All believers know that the blood of Christ cleanses us from all sin (1 John 1:7). We also know that the beaten body of Jesus Christ heals us of our sins. (Physically, our bodies must be healed to prevent recurrence of a disease. Likewise, we must be healed of our sins so that we do not commit them again.) But that is not enough for salvation. **We must also be dead to sin.** Baptism portrays the death of our life of sin. And it is not just any death. It is not the death of the physical body, which happens to all whether they are good

or evil. It is the death of Jesus Christ who was **made** sin just prior to dying (2 Cor. 5:21; 1 Pet. 2:24). Think about it. We are a “new creation” (2 Cor. 5:17) upon receiving God’s Holy Spirit but prior to that, we must die in the watery grave of baptism. Jesus Christ literally bore our sins in Himself when He died, allowing us to commit our sinful lives to the grave through baptism. **In other words, no one can have God’s Holy Spirit unless they have first died to sin!**

All believers were “buried with Him through the baptism into **the** death” (Rom. 6:4). What is THE death? We were “baptized into His [Christ’s] death” (Rom. 6:3). Jesus Christ lived a sinless life; therefore, His death was a special one because He “gave His life [for] a ransom” (Mat. 20:28). In other words, Jesus did not die for His own sins; He died for the sins of others. His death could not have been the second (eternal) death because that it is for sinners who reject God. Since Jesus Christ was sinless, His death is the one and only by which we can die for sin but live unto righteousness (Rom. 6:3-4; Col. 2:12).

The memorial of the death of Jesus Christ is fundamental to Passover. We remember His body and blood but we also honor and recall the one death to which we must all willingly submit so that we can die to sin and then live unto righteousness with God’s Holy Spirit in us!

May God’s grace and peace be upon you!

Steven Greene

<https://sabbathreflections.org>

PS—I want to thank everyone for their emails. I do not reply to everyone, but your comments are very encouraging to my wife and me. Some of you also ask questions and I always try to answer them. They are both interesting and important, so keep them coming. I hope these weekly messages have been helpful and uplifting.

SABBATH THOUGHT 2022-03-26—THAT NIGHT OF THE LORD

May God bless you on His Sabbath day!

The first Passover was an interesting time for a variety of reasons. From the perspective of the ancient Israelites, it was the first time God commanded them to observe a specific day. However, unlike the holidays of today, it was not a time for rejoicing. Notice how God required them to eat the Passover meal:

EXODUS 12:11-13 And this is the way you shall eat it: **with your loins girded, your sandals on your feet, and your staff in your hand. And you shall eat it in haste with trepidation.** It is the LORD'S Passover, 12 For I will pass through the land of Egypt this night, and **will smite all the firstborn in the land of Egypt, both man and beast.** And I will execute judgment against all the gods of Egypt. I *am* the LORD. 13 And the blood shall be a sign to you upon the houses where you *are*. And when I see the blood, I will pass over you. And the plague shall not be upon you to destroy *you* when I smite the land of Egypt.

They were not to change into comfortable clothes (“loins girded”), remove their sandals, or put away their staff. And they were to eat it quickly because of the fearful night that was looming: the Egyptian firstborn would DIE. Basically, God wanted them to be prepared to leave at a moments notice. They likely needed no encouragement to stay inside their houses with the thought of the “destroyer” lurking outside (Exo. 12:12, 23). It was certainly a fearful night, not a day to rejoice.

It was after midnight when the Egyptians discovered that all of their firstborn were dead. Upon seeing this, Pharaoh sent word to Moses and Aaron that every one of the Israelites and all their animals must leave Egypt. Along with Pharaoh, even the Egyptian people “were urging the people, that they might send them out of the land **quickly**, for they said, “We are all dead men.” (Exodus 12:29-33).

This was an urgent demand for them to leave. So, they spent the remainder of the next day (Passover) getting ready. The Bible describes it this way:

EXODUS 12:34 And the people **took their dough before it was leavened, their kneadingtroughs being bound up in their clothes** upon their shoulders.

Basically, they packed up their bread dough, kneading troughs, and clothes. These were clearly important because the Bible records only these specific items but says nothing about taking anything else. Kneading troughs were required to make bread dough, which was made and set aside days before they baked it. Bread that is naturally leavened by yeast in the atmosphere can take two to three days to rise—longer if the temperatures are

cooler, which would have been the case around the time of Passover. However, when the command from Moses and Aaron came, they wrapped up their dough in their clothes before it became leavened. While it was their circumstances that led to them eating unleavened bread that Passover day (Exo. 12:39), it is in keeping with Passover being a day of unleavened bread (Exo. 12:18; Mat. 26:17; Mark 14:12; Luke 22:1, 7; 1 Cor. 5:6-8).

The fearful urging of the Egyptians to leave also forced them to gather only basic household goods. Consider someone coming to your house and ordering you to leave by sunset. What would you take? As slaves, I suspect that the Israelites had very little to begin with; however, fleeing from Egypt meant they had to travel light—they left behind anything that was too big or heavy or not useful to a people escaping for their lives. But during this state of emergency where they took only the things that mattered, they were also enriched:

EXODUS 12:35-36 And the children of Israel did according to the word of Moses. And **they asked** for articles of **silver**, and articles of **gold**, and **clothing** from the Egyptians. 36 And the LORD gave the people favor in the sight of the Egyptians, and they granted their request, and they stripped the Egyptians.

Why would they ask for, and receive, silver and gold in addition to clothing from the Egyptians? I imagine that the Egyptians in Ramses (located in the area called Goshen) were frantically yelling at the Israelites to GET OUT. They were overcome with fear so, when the Israelites *asked*, the Egyptians were more than willing to give them anything if they would just leave—now! While today anyone can buy bars or coins of gold (if you can afford them), in the time of Moses, silver and gold was in the form of jewelry. This was also a benefit because it was something they could wear as opposed to having to carry it. (Recall that the golden calf was made entirely from earrings—Exo. 32:3.)

Finally, after everyone had gathered their belongings and animals, they mustered together and began the journey out of Egypt. It is an interesting point that spent their first night (the first day of the Days of Unleavened Bread) at the Egyptian city of Succoth (Exo. 12:37). So, at the end of the first day of their flight, they were *still in Egypt* (as are we). The second day was spent at Etham (Exo. 13:19) at the edge of the wilderness outside of Egypt. In other words, their journey from Egypt was a progression that happened over time.

The Israelite's flight out of Egypt portrays our own coming out of sin. We all know this because that is the focus of the Days of Unleavened Bread. However, it all started with Passover because, without the death of the Egyptian firstborn, the Egyptians would never have let them leave. In other words, they would have remained slaves (this is quite true of us as well). In fact, it was so significant that God said:

EXODUS 12:41-42 And it came to pass at the end of the four hundred and thirty years, it was even **on that very same day, all the armies of the LORD went out from the land of Egypt.** 42 **It is a night to be much observed** to the LORD for bringing them out from the land of Egypt. This *is* **that night of the LORD** to be observed by all the children of Israel in their generations.

The night that the Israelites began their journey out of Egypt was significant. They were slaves who had witnessed all the plagues God put upon them (the first three) and the Egyptians. They endured the night of the Passover: eating a meal in haste while listening to the sounds of death just outside their doors. I can only imagine their fear while wondering if the blood of a lamb smeared on their doorposts could truly spare them from the horrors they heard outside of their homes. The next day was spent frantically packing what they could and gathering their animals. All of that happened on Passover as the Egyptians were yelling at them to leave. Only when all was ready did they begin their journey away from everything that they had called “home” for 430 years—longer than the USA has been in existence.

What I have just described is “That Night of the Lord”. Most of us call it *The* Night to be Much Observed. While that is certainly true, Scripture says it is “**a** night to be much observed”:

EXODUS 12:42 **It is a night to be much observed** to the LORD for bringing them out from the land of Egypt. This [*night*] *is* **that night of the LORD** to be observed by all the children of Israel in their generations.

The second half of the verse records that God called it “**That Night of the Lord**”. But is the name significant as long as we observe it? Yes! Because it is not just ANY night to be observed; it is THE night COMMANDED by GOD because of what HE did for His people! What did God do? He called us, and is now leading us, out of sin and death. None of us would be on this journey unless God intervened in our lives. None of us could have simply chosen to leave “Egypt” and begin our journey to the Promised Land unless God drew us (John 6:44). None of us would have even known we were living in sin and under the (eternal) death penalty unless God revealed it to us.

Today, many of us think of “That Night of the Lord” primarily as a time to gather and eat a wonderful meal. But that is not what happened during the Exodus. Remember, the Israelites had just spent a night in fear for their lives. They were then ordered to leave Egypt so, after Passover night during the daytime, they grabbed what they could and left that night (the beginning of the first day of the Days of Unleavened Bread). “That Night of the Lord” was not a night spent eating a big meal—it was when the Israelites fled with the clothes on their backs.

The personal connection of this story to every believer is truly significant and unique. Each of us remembers the first time we understood how sinful we really are, no matter

how “good” we might have thought we were otherwise. It brought *each of us* to the awareness that we killed the Passover Lamb—Jesus Christ. This led us to the revelation that we needed to change everything in our lives and flee our sinful ways (1 Cor. 6:18). For many, it was a time of many emotions including fear (of the death penalty), apprehension, and uncertainty. Then there was the startling realization we did not know what to do or where to go. Our only option was to turn to God in faith. As all of this was being revealed to us, we also had to face the fact that this was a lifetime commitment—the journey out of Egypt was not to the physical Promised Land, but to a spiritual one—one that ended at our physical death. But, it was by the faith of Jesus Christ that we took that first step toward baptism and receiving God’s earnest of the Holy Spirit for eternal life. When we look back, we realize that in spite of the uncertainty and disruption to our lives, we were also enriched by God just as were the Israelites. Those riches are not something we earned or gained through our own planning. We *asked* of God, and He mercifully gave to us the means to being that journey, just as He provided for the Israelites when *they* asked of the Egyptians.

Thinking upon these very important, personal, and unique events in our lives is how we are to truly observe “That Night of the Lord.” The Hebrew word for “much observed” (Exo. 12:42) means that it is a memory to be protected, hedged about, attended to, take heed of, and be circumspect about. We are to remember our calling from God and how He revealed His purpose unto each of us. Each one is a unique story, something we can SHARE with others on that night. We are to guard those memories lest we forget our calling; we are to protect those memories so we remember to persevere; and we are to share those memories with others so we are all encouraged in these dark days of Satan’s rule.

While having a meal on “That Night of the Lord.” is not at all wrong, it is certainly not the focus as many of us were led to believe. That was only a tradition. The real purpose and OBSERVANCE of that night is to ponder the story of Abraham, the Exodus of the Israelites, and our own personal calling unto the eternal Promised Land. (For more information, see the booklet “[That Night of the Lord—The Night to be Much Observed](#).¹”) It is a night of wonder for the unimaginable things that God has done for us and the wonderful promises He desires to give to each and every one us!

What is the story of your calling?

May God’s grace and peace be upon you!

Steven Greene

<https://sabbathreflections.org>

¹ <https://www.cbcg.org/night-to-be-much-observed-stenhouse.html>.

SABBATH THOUGHT 2022-04-02—DAYS OF UNLEAVENED BREAD

May God bless you on His Sabbath day!

Immediately following the Passover are the Days of Unleavened Bread. Scripture is very clear about the timing and dates that we are to observe. Passover is Nissan or Abib 14 and the seven days of Unleavened Bread follow it, in which the first and last days are holy convocations:

NUMBERS 28:16-18, 25 And in the **fourteenth day of the first [Nissan or Abib] month is the Passover** of the LORD. 17 And in the **fifteenth day of this month is the feast of Unleavened Bread]. Seven days** shall unleavened bread be eaten. 18 In the **first day shall be a holy convocation.** You shall do no kind of servile work. ... 25 And on the **seventh day you shall have a holy convocation.** You shall do no servile work.

When I first read about these days, my first thought was that this was the strangest of names. In fact, I was somewhat embarrassed to explain to my boss the first time that I needed to take off of work to observe some days “called Unleavened Bread.” Think of it. The other holydays are called Feast of Weeks or Pentecost, Day of Trumpets, Atonement, and Feast of Tabernacles. These names reflected events and times; but Unleavened Bread is a food. Odd, indeed.

The focus of these days in the Church as I began to keep them was the elimination of leavening agents and the avoidance of eating anything leavened. In fact, it seemed that every conversation leading up to the Days of Unleavened Bread revolved around the different leavening agents and past stories of where someone had overlooked a box of pancake mix or ate a doughnut at the office.

However, the focus on the Leaven was almost to the exclusion of Unleaven. After all, these days are not called the Days of Get-Rid-of-Leavened Bread. God always has a purpose for the names He chooses; therefore, calling them the Days of Unleavened Bread must be the focus. So, just what are God’s commandments for these days?

COMMANDMENT #1: We shall eat unleavened bread every day:

EXODUS 12:18 In the first *month*, **on the fourteenth day** of the month at sunset, **you shall eat unleavened bread, until the twenty-first day** of the month at sunset.

NOTE: These commandments are specific to the Days of Unleavened Bread only. My numbers have no connection to the Ten Commandments.

Notice that this commandment includes Passover day as well. This is why Passover is included when referring to the Days of Unleavened Bread as we find in Matthew 25:17; Mark 14:12; and Luke 22:1, 7. In other words, the commandment to eat unleavened bread also applies to Passover day and it begins with the unleavened bread of the Passover ceremony.

COMMANDMENT #2: No leaven shall be found in our houses:

EXODUS 12:19 Seven days there shall be **no leaven found in your houses**, for whoever eats that which is leavened, even that soul shall be cut off from the congregation of Israel, whether he be a stranger, or born in the land.

It was this second commandment for these days that was a focus of the Church in my early years. What exactly is leaven? Leaven is simply something that produces gases that permeate dough and cause it to rise. (It is also used in making beer, wine, etc. but I am focusing on bread.) Leavening agents include more than just yeast although that was likely the only source of leaven in the days of the ancient Israelites. What is yeast? It is a living fungus that comes in a number of different varieties. Yeast is actually quite interesting. Not only is it a *living*, single cell organism but it exists in the air almost everywhere in the world. Since the ancient Israelites could not buy packets of yeast at the store, they simply exposed their dough to the air for a few days. Yeast flourishes in dough or anything that is warm, moist, and has sugar. It converts the sugar to carbon dioxide (which causes dough to rise) and alcohol (that is eliminated during the baking process).

Today, people frequently use substitutes for yeast that consist mainly of baking soda (bicarbonates) and baking powder. These are certainly leavening agents but they are not living organisms. They produce gases through acid-base chemical reactions that leave behind various forms of salt. But are there other leavening agents? I can recall the list of items passed around long ago was extensive and included names that I could barely pronounce. They exist because corporations have spent a lot of time and money finding cheaper and faster ways to produce their products. Regarding any of those, I have to say I am not much of a cook but I can tell you that none of those are in my wife's pantry. When we de-leaven our house, we eliminate known leavening agents (yeast, baking soda, and baking powder) and packaged foods that are leavened such as pancake mix.

Yeast, above all other agents, is actually the perfect icon for leaven. We all know that leaven represents sin (1 Cor. 5:8) and Satan is the prince of the power of the air (Eph. 2:2). Given that yeast is also in the air all around the world, it is a most apropos symbol for sin and Satan's influence.

COMMANDMENT #3: We are not to eat anything leavened (bread or otherwise):

EXODUS 12:20 **You shall eat nothing leavened.** In all your dwelling places you shall eat unleavened bread.' "

This last commandment is the reason that we not only eliminate leavening agents, but also anything that was cooked with leaven. This is emphasized in the next chapter:

EXODUS 13:7 Unleavened bread shall be eaten seven days. And there shall be no leavened bread seen with you, nor shall there be leaven seen with you in all your borders.

The word for “borders” means territory or boundary, so it could apply to individual households or, as in the days of the ancient Israelites, on a national basis. In this world today, it applies to that which is under our personal control. That could be a house, office, car, bedroom, etc., depending upon the believer’s situation.

This brings me back to my point about the main emphasis of these days. In my experience, the Church years ago concentrated on the second (eliminating leavening agents) and third commandments (not eating leavened foods). Very little focus was given to eating unleavened bread. However, there are *three* commandments, not just two.

From the perspective of sin, leavening agents represent temptation. Yeast that is floating around in the air or in a packet in the pantry is not “puffed up” by itself. However, give it something to feed upon, such as dough, and it begins to eat and spread—just like sin. Once it has done its job, the dough is risen and ready for baking. The baking kills the yeast but leaves behind something that is incredibly appealing to the senses of smell and taste. The same thing occurs with temptation. Once we give into the temptation, it is gone and all that remains is sin.

So, once the risen dough is baked, we are ready to eat it. Is this not the enticement of sin? We want to have the gratification of eating the bread just like sin, which gives pleasure to the wicked (Heb. 11:25). So, we remove leavening agents like we would temptations. We eliminate leavened foods like we would sin. However, that leaves us hungry so that is why we eat unleavened bread. We are to fill the void of temptation and sin with the righteousness of God:

1 CORINTHIANS 5:7-8 Therefore, purge out the old leaven, so that you may become a new lump, even as you are unleavened. For Christ our Passover was sacrificed for us. **8 For this reason, let us keep the feast, not with old leaven, nor with *the* leaven of malice and wickedness, but with *the* unleavened *bread* of sincerity and truth.**

Becoming a new lump, however, is hard because yeast is everywhere in the air. How does one make dough and prevent it from becoming leavened? Wrap it in something that keeps the air out. The ancient Israelites wrapped it in their clothes (Exo. 12:34). Being a new lump means that we must use God’s Holy Spirit to guard against temptation and sin.

The analogy of baking continues to apply. Once leavened bread is baked, the yeast dies and the bread takes on the permanence of a risen loaf. It cannot ever be made unleavened.

Temptation is hard to refuse or eliminate; however, sin is even more difficult. So, too, is the case with unleavened bread. Once baked, it can never become leavened. Baking is simply exposing the dough to a hot temperature. Once we are a new, unleavened lump, God helps us to become permanently unleavened through “fiery trials” (1 Pet. 1:7; 4:12-13). The reference to baking and fire are interesting because the Days of Unleavened Bread required something else:

LEVITICUS 23:8 But **you shall offer a fire offering to the LORD seven days**. In the seventh day *is* a holy convocation. You shall do no servile work *therein.*’ “

We are to offer to God an offering made with fire. WE are that offering because Jesus Christ was sacrificed for us (1 Cor. 5:8). It is His sacrifice that makes us unleavened, so as a new lump we strive daily to keep the sin out, being wrapped in the Holy Spirit. During these days, focus your thoughts and efforts more intensely for the new year on remaining an unleavened lump of dough that is being baked according to God’s recipe for righteousness and perfection. He is the baker that is taking the unleavened lumps of dough that are His children, and making us into unleavened bread that is forever without sin. WE are the dough in the oven of this life. Staying unleavened is hard, but as we are being baked into perfection, remember that God is smelling the sweet savor (Rev. 8:3) as we are nearing the time when He takes us out of the oven of this life and sets us at His table of eternity.

May God’s grace and peace be upon you!

Steven Greene

<https://sabbathreflections.org>

SABBATH THOUGHT 2022-04-09—PROMISES OF GOD

May God bless you on His Sabbath day!

Passover—the memorial of the sacrifice of Jesus Christ—is the most notable event of all time. Why? Because God’s entire plan for all the heavens and earth for the eternity to come hinge upon the singular sacrifice of the Son of the Most High. David wrote:

PSALMS 102:25-28 Of old You have laid the foundation of the earth, and the heavens are the work of Your hands. 26 They shall perish, but You shall endure; yea, all of them shall become old like a garment; like a vesture **You shall change them [the heavens and earth], and they shall be changed;** 27 But You remain the same, and Your years shall have no end. **28 The children of Your servants shall continue, and their seed shall be established before You.**”

God envisions and wills to create a new heaven and new earth. The latter is where the Great King (Mat. 5:35) will have His throne and the former will be like a gloriously beautiful garden spread out across the universe for all His children to enjoy. How can anything we have known and seen in this life compare? I cannot envisage the most beautiful garden or sunset or snow-capped mountain or forest of majestic trees or field of flowers being but a pale shadow of the new things to come.

But only by the sacrifice of Jesus Christ will there be children who will sing and rejoice with all manner of praise and honor and glory to God the Father and Jesus Christ. It is that singular sacrifice that makes possible the *promises* of God to come to pass. For us, the greatest *promise* of God is to become children of the Almighty:

1 CORINTHIANS 6:18 And **I shall be a Father to you, and you shall be My sons and daughters,**” says *the Lord Almighty*.

There are truly no words to thank God for the calling to become His children. Who can imagine or even contemplate the new life that awaits? It is a *promise*! How does one even comprehend a new life of ETERNITY?

1 JOHN 2:25 And this is the promise that **He has promised us: eternal life.**

Have you considered the fact that you and I have a seed of that eternity within us? The Holy Spirit is of God so it is a speck of eternity in us. What is eternity? I am not certain I can define it with words. Some say eternity is the state of being timeless; however, that implies that time does not exist. Will that be the case in God’s kingdom? Perhaps. Others say eternity is life unaffected by time; that is, life continues without limit. Of this, I am certain because inside of each of us is that seed of eternal life!

1 PETER 1:3-4, 23 Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, Who, according to His abundant mercy, **has begotten us** again unto a living hope through *the* resurrection of Jesus Christ from *the* dead; 4 Unto **an inheritance incorruptible and undefiled and unfading**, reserved in heaven for us, ... 23 *For* you have been begotten again, not from corruptible seed, but **from incorruptible seed, by the living Word of God, which remains forever.**

Fulfillment of God's *promise* of eternal life as His children is our great hope; however, we still live in this physical life. And it is for that very reason that we have other *promises* of God to help us finish the course of this life:

MATTHEW 6:25-33 Because of this I say to you, **do not be anxious about your life as to what you shall eat and what you shall drink; nor about your body as to what you shall wear.** Is not life more than food, and the body *more* than clothing? ... 30 Now if God so arrays the grass of the field, which today is and tomorrow is cast into the oven, *shall* He not much rather clothe you, O *you* of little faith? 31 Therefore, do not be anxious, saying, 'What shall we eat?' or 'What shall we drink?' or 'With what shall we be clothed?' 32 For the nations seek after all these things. And your heavenly Father knows that you have need of all these things. 33 But *as for* you, seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and **all these things shall be added to you.**

The providence of God pertains not just to physical needs. He *promises* to help us in this life ("**shall** be added to you") to attain unto the eternity of the next. First of all, God *promises* never to abandon His children:

JOHN 14:18 **I will not leave you orphans;** I will come to you.

Though at times we may feel abandoned God *promised* "In no way will I ever leave you; no—I will never forsake you in any way." (Heb. 13:5). Never will we be left alone. While God had to forsake Jesus Christ when He was made sin for us (Mat. 27:46), we have His faithful word. Of all that matters in life—whether God heals us or allows us to suffer—this is the greatest comfort.

Being loved is a fundamental need. I have experienced being alone and it is a terrible state. I have also seen it in others. For several years mine was a place for foster children. I saw the pain they bore at being abandoned by their parents. One little boy, about the age of 5, stayed for a couple of months because his father could not support him. He later returned home and I never knew what became of him until I saw a sign that caught my attention at the entrance to the state fairgrounds. As I approached, there was a full-size picture of the little boy with a caption that read, "All I want is a family who loves me." To this day, it was one of the saddest moments in my life. That is why God's *promise* to never forsake us means so much—our parents do not or cannot always keep that promise.

But God is always there for us. And much more. He is ready to listen to us and provide for us:

HEBREWS 4:16 Therefore, we should come with boldness to the throne of grace, so that **we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.**

Through the vastness of space and time, we can come before God who hears us. I do not understand how it works, but I know it does. Whether we cry aloud or whisper, He *promises* He hears our prayers:

MATTHEW 21:22 And **everything that you shall ask in prayer, believing, you shall receive.**”

Perhaps the greatest *promise* of this life is that of forgiveness:

1 JOHN 1:9 If we confess our own sins, **He is faithful and righteous, to forgive us our sins,** and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.

It can be hard to comprehend how God is able to forgive some of the most heinous of sins. I imagine that David knows that better than most. Psalm 51 is a reflection of the emotional longings in his heart for God’s forgiveness. While we strive to have a loving heart, God IS love. His whole being and purpose and existence is love. His love is so great that He will be “all in all” (1 Cor. 15:28) of the billions and billions of His children. That the love of God finds fulfillment in so many it is beyond our capacity to grasp the depths of His love.

Another *promise* of God that we have all personally received and seen fulfilled is healings:

PSALM 103:2-3 Bless the LORD, O my soul, and forget not all His benefits; 3 Who forgives all your iniquities, **Who heals all your diseases.**

While all must suffer for the sake of the kingdom—and some now endure terrible afflictions—they are but for a short time (2 Cor. 4:17) compared to eternity. We also must realize that we suffer for the great *promises* yet to come:

HEBREWS 11:25-26 **Choosing to suffer affliction with the people of God,** rather than to enjoy *the* temporary pleasure of sin; 26 For he esteemed the reproach of Christ greater riches than the treasures of Egypt because he was **looking intently to the reward.**

Most of us did not choose to suffer but that is not what the Scripture says. It says we choose to suffer **with** the people of God—those that lived before us, those who suffer now, and those who will suffer. We also have God *promise* to help us endure our trials:

1 CORINTHIANS 10:13 No temptation has come upon you except what is common to mankind. For **God, Who is faithful, will not permit you to be tempted beyond what you are able to bear**, but with the temptation, He will make a way of escape, **so that you may be able to bear it**.

In fact, it says that God will not **permit** us to endure the unbearable. No matter how dire our situation, God knows our limits even if we do not. Sometimes it is hard to believe this. I have heard of the severe suffering others have endured, even to the point of giving up hope. I cannot remember a single case, though, when they did not receive extra hope or encouragement or healing just when they needed it most. God has never forsaken His children even if we sometimes feel that way.

God made all of His *promises* to ensure that we complete the judgment of this physical existence in order to enter into the true, spiritual life:

REVELATION 21:1-3 Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth were passed away, and there was no more sea. 2 And I, John, saw the holy city, *the* new Jerusalem, coming down from God out of heaven, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. 3 And I heard a great voice from heaven say, “Behold, **the tabernacle of God is with men; and He shall dwell with them, and they shall be His people; and God Himself shall be with them and be their God.**”

We endure and wait so we can see the new heaven and new earth—our new home. We are comforted in afflictions by the wonder of all that God has *promised* to give us. We are awed at the sight in our mind’s eye of the New Jerusalem descending to this earth. It is surrounded by a wall with twelve gates, each made out of a single pearl and setting atop twelve foundations made of precious stones. In the midst of the city is the throne of God the Father and Jesus Christ. From their throne flows a river along a street of transparent gold, which is lined on either side and in the middle with the tree of life. Each month, they produce twelve fruits; the sweetness of which no man has ever tasted nor can imagine. (Rev. 21-22.) Can you picture it? Do you have an image in your mind? Now, imagine you are there and, while taking the grandeur of it all, there in front of you is the abode in that city that God has prepared just for you (John 14:2-3)!

This will be the fulfillment of God’s *promises*. In all things, we stand on those *promises* and all of God’s *promises* exist because of the sacrifice of Jesus Christ, of whom is Passover the memorial. I hope this Passover brings to mind all of God’s wonderful and amazing eternal *promises* He has made to YOU!

May God’s grace and peace be upon you!

Steven Greene

<https://sabbathreflections.org>

SABBATH THOUGHT 2022-04-16—WAVESHEAF OFFERING

May God bless you on His Sabbath day!

Last night we spent a wonderful evening observing That Night of the Lord¹ with brethren. We talked for hours about our lives and experiences in our journey as part of the Body of Christ, so it was late when we returned home. While I was trying to wake up this morning, I heard a sound outside that prompted me to look out the window. In the distance was a neighbor mowing the yard. My immediate thought was, “What is he doing? This is a holyday!” Then reality returned—this is Satan’s world, not God’s. Being with brethren is truly a gift because we come out of this world in ways that we do not always realize. Fellowshiping with those who keep God’s commandments allows us to immerse ourselves in His ways and forget that we live in a blinded world.

Later, while eating breakfast, I was watching the news when they flashed up a banner—“Happy Passover!” They obviously did not understand that Passover was yesterday any more than they grasp it is not a “happy” occasion, but a solemn memorial of the sacrifice of Jesus Christ. That Passover mention was then followed by “Happy Easter.” At that point, I turned off the TV.

But it started me thinking about tomorrow, which is the first day of the week during the Days of Unleavened Bread, so it is the Wavesheaf Offering. While not a holyday for us, it has significance to God. The Wavesheaf Offering is described in Leviticus:

LEVITICUS 23:10-11 “Speak to the children of Israel and say to them, ‘When you have come into the land which I give to you, and shall reap the harvest of it, then **you shall bring the premier sheaf of the firstfruits of your harvest to the priest.** 11 And **he shall wave the sheaf before the LORD to be accepted for you.** On **the next day after the Sabbath** the priest shall wave it.

The wavesheaf offering is always the first day of the week (Sunday) during the Days of Unleavened Bread. Specifically, a *wave offering* is always a gift that is consecrated, or dedicated, in its *entirety* to the LORD. None of the wave offering is returned to the one bringing it—it belongs only to the priest at that point.

As part of the Days of Unleavened Bread, this particular offering pointed to the ascension of Jesus Christ after His resurrection. During that Passover in 30A.D., He died at end of the fourth day of the week (Wednesday) and was raised from the grave by God at the end of the seventh day (Saturday) exactly three days later. As Scriptures tells us, it was on the first day (Sunday) that He ascended to God the Father:

¹ The night of the first day of Unleavened Bread is called *That Night of the Lord* (Exo. 12:42). For more information, refer to the booklet, “That Night of the Lord—A Night to Be Much Observed.”

JOHN 20:1, 15-17 Now on the first *day* of the weeks [*the day of the Wavesheaf Offering*], while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene came early to the tomb; and she saw *that* the stone had been taken away from the tomb. ... 15 Jesus said to her, “Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you seeking?” Thinking that He was the gardener, she said to Him, “Sir, if you have carried Him off, tell me where you have laid Him, and I will take Him away.” 16 Jesus said to her, “Mary.” Turning around, she said to Him, “Rabboni”; that is to say, “Teacher.” 17 Jesus said to her, **“Do not touch Me, because I have not yet ascended to My Father. But go to My brethren and tell them that I am ascending to My Father and your Father, and My God and your God.”**

We find that Jesus did indeed ascend to God the Father on that day because He later met with the disciples:

JOHN 20:19-21 **“Afterwards, as evening was drawing near that day, the first day of the weeks [*the day of the Wavesheaf Offering*], and the doors were shut where the disciples had assembled for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood in the midst, and said to them, “Peace *be* to you.” 20 And after saying this, He showed them His hands and His side. Then the disciples rejoiced *because* they had seen the Lord. 21 Therefore, Jesus said to them again, “Peace *be* to you. As the Father sent Me, I am also sending you.”**

Jesus had not allowed Mary to touch Him before He ascended to God. While we know that Thomas later saw and touched Him (v26), that happened eight days later. The proof that Jesus actually ascended on the day of the Wavesheaf Offering is in verse 21. Standing among the disciples He said, “As the Father **sent** Me.” When did He say that? On the day of the Wavesheaf Offering (v19). From where was He sent? Heaven!

Jesus Christ was obviously the Passover Lamb of God (John 1:36, et al). But how do we know that the Wavesheaf Offering applies to Him? First of all, the sheaf of the firstfruits of the harvest used for the wavesheaf offering was “the **premier** sheaf of the firstfruits of your harvest.” (Lev. 23:10). While “premier” is not in the Hebrew text, it was added to reflect the requirement to bring the “**first** [*i.e., premier*] of the firstfruits” in Exodus 23:19. That Jesus was the *first* of the firstfruits was understood by Paul, of whom he wrote in 1 Corinthians 15:20, 23.

Another reason the Wavesheaf Offering pointed to Christ is seen in the animal offering itself. There were two specific days that required wave offerings—the Wavesheaf and Pentecost. Both of them required a burnt offering along with wave offerings. Note the one for the wavesheaf:

LEVITICUS 23:12 And **you shall offer that day when you wave the sheaf, a male lamb without blemish** of the first year **for a burnt offering to the LORD.**

The burnt offering was a single male lamb without blemish—obviously representing Jesus Christ. Sin requires a burnt offering. Quoting from Psalms, Paul wrote, “You did not delight in **burnt offerings and sacrifices for sin.**” He was referring to Jesus Christ’s sacrifice being THE burnt offering.

Another interesting point about the day of the Wavesheaf is the restriction of eating the new grain of the Promised Land (Lev. 23:10-11) until after the offering is accepted:

LEVITICUS 23:10-11, 14 “Speak to the children of Israel and say to them, **‘When you have come into the land which I give to you,** and shall reap the harvest of it, then you shall bring *the premier* sheaf of the firstfruits of your harvest to the priest. 11 And he shall wave the sheaf before the LORD to be accepted for you. On the next day after the Sabbath the priest shall wave it. ... 14 And **you shall eat neither bread, nor parched grain, nor green ears until the same day, until you have brought an offering to your God. It shall be** a statute forever throughout your generations in all your dwellings.”

You can read of the ancient Israelites finally eating of the new grain after crossing over into Canaan in Joshua 5:10-12. In my mind, the fulfillment of the Wavesheaf Offering portrays several things. It pictures the old covenant being in effect until after Jesus Christ was accepted by God the Father because His blood establishes the new covenant. In like manner, it shows the old priesthood being replaced by the Melchizedek priesthood as well as the Aaronic high priest being replaced by Jesus Christ. There is also an element of the spiritual Promised Land versus the physical land of Canaan. You can probably think of others, too. For us, the Wavesheaf Offering is absolutely vital because it begins the count to Pentecost:

LEVITICUS 23:15 And you shall **count to you beginning with the next day after the Sabbath, beginning with the day that you brought the sheaf of the wave offering;** seven Sabbaths shall be complete.

Jesus Christ was the sacrificial Lamb of the world. In fulfilling the Wavesheaf Offering, He was consecrated and dedicated to God as the sacrifice for sins, Savior of mankind (John 4:42, et al), Melchizedek High Priest (Heb. 5:5-6), Lord and King of the saints (Rev. 15:3), and Judge of the world (Rom. 14:10). Moreover, until the Wavesheaf Offering was fulfilled, God could not accept the wave offering of the two leavened loaves on Pentecost! Why is that important? Because the two loaves of the wave offering on Pentecost picture the firstfruits; that is, the saints (Jas. 1:17):

LEVITICUS 23:16-17 Even **unto the day after the seventh Sabbath you shall number fifty days.** And you shall offer a new grain offering to the LORD. 17 You shall bring out of your homes **two wave loaves** of two tenth parts. They shall be of fine flour. They shall be **baked with leaven, They are the firstfruits to the LORD.**

Pentecost is the only holyday that requires counting. In order to count something, there must be a beginning, i.e., a “first” thing. A series of numbers, called *ordinal numbers*, always require a beginning number. No one can count 1, 2, 3 ... etc. without the “1”. However, ordinal numbers do not require an end. If we start counting from “1,” we could continue it as an infinite series. So, without the fulfillment of the Wavesheaf Offering by Christ, Pentecost could never happen. The day of the Wavesheaf Offering is “one”, but without “one”, you cannot get to “fifty” and Pentecost.

While Jesus Christ’s sacrifice was utterly and completely required for our salvation, it also had to be accepted by God the Father as such! While it may sound like just “putting a bow” on the whole thing, it was vital. I imagine that the importance of the Wavesheaf Offering was more regarded and better understood in the heavenly places where it played out. This day is not a holyday for us, but I believe it was a singular event before God’s throne. Actually, the Bible gives us a glimpse of it:

PSALMS 24:3, 7-10 Who shall ascend into the hill [*heavenly Mount Zion*] of the LORD? Or who shall stand in His [*God the Father’s*] holy place? ... 7 Lift up your heads, O you gates; and be lifted up, O you everlasting doors; that the King of glory may come in. 8 Who is this King of glory? The LORD strong and mighty, the LORD mighty in battle. 9 Lift up your heads, O you gates; lift them up, you everlasting doors; that the King of glory may come in. 10 Who is this King of glory? The LORD of hosts, He is the King of glory. Selah.

The “gates” are the “everlasting doors” in heavenly Mount Zion (also Psa. 87:2). When Jesus ascended to heaven, the gates of Zion opened to Him where He was honored, praised, and worshipped by all the heavenly host. As He neared His Father’s throne, I picture God rising from His throne and embracing Him with joy unspeakable. Then, before the angelic multitude, the Lamb of the world was crowned King of all kings, bestowed with the many titles of glory and honor, and received all authority and power in heaven and earth to reign until death is destroyed (1 Cor. 15:26-28).

While the Wavesheaf Offering might not be a momentous day on earth, it certainly was in heaven. Praise be to God our Father who has ordained Jesus Christ King of all!

May God’s grace and peace be upon you!

Steven Greene

<https://sabbathreflections.org>

SABBATH THOUGHT 2022-04-23—BREAD OF AFFLICTION

May God bless you on His Sabbath day!

Yesterday was the last day of Unleavened Bread. For the ancient Israelites, it was a journey of seven days to escape their enslavement and bondage to the Egyptians. On the first day, they left their homes in Goshen (Ramses) and on the seventh day they crossed the Red Sea, which was the last time they saw the Egyptians (Exo. 14:13). The Days of Unleavened Bread encapsulated several meaningful events in their lives:

- 1) Each had to trust that God had indeed sent Moses and Aaron to facilitate their freedom.
- 2) Each witnessed God fulfilling His promise to Abraham to free them in spite of any human efforts to resist it.
- 3) Each had to trust that God would establish a new homeland and lead them to it. When they left Egypt, they had no place to go.
- 4) Each had to rely upon God to provide for them and their animals. While they brought some food with them, they had little water in the desert.
- 5) Each had to accept God's protection during their journey.
- 6) Each had to trust that God was leading them to liberty and not into enslavement in other lands by the wicked people who were all around them.

God's choice to focus on the term *unleavened bread* is both interesting and meaningfully broad. Initially, God called it:

DEUTERONOMY 16:3 You shall eat no leavened bread with it. Seven days you shall eat unleavened bread with it, **the bread of affliction**, for you came forth out of the land of Egypt in haste, so that you may remember the day that you came forth out of the land of Egypt all the days of your life.

Why “the bread of affliction?” Because they were slaves. In fact, God said to Abraham, “You must surely know that your seed shall be sojourners in a land that is not theirs, (and shall serve them and **afflict** them) four hundred years.” (Gen. 15:13). It was, at least in the beginning, a symbol of their bondage under an evil empire.

It also turned out that bread of affliction represented their doubts and fears *after* they left Egypt. God proved them through thirst and threats from enemies. He tested their willingness to obey His commandments. So, while the bread of affliction initially represented their 200 or so years of actual slavery, it also represented God testing their resolve and obedience by giving them trials and sufferings.

The earliest mention of unleavened bread in the Bible is when Lot fed the two angels who visited him in Sodom (Gen. 19:1-3). It was part of a banquet he prepared for those honored guests. While it may have been that Lot did not have leavened bread available, it is more likely that it had a special meaning not revealed to us.

But the meaning of unleavened bread is much deeper than just a reminder of slavery or fears of the unknown. Paul explains it this way:

1 CORINTHIANS 5:6-8 Your glorying *is* not good. Don't you know that a little leaven leavens the whole lump? 7 Therefore, purge out the old leaven, so that you may become a new lump, *even* as you are unleavened. For Christ our Passover was sacrificed for us. 8 For this reason, let us keep the feast, not with old leaven, nor **with the leaven of malice and wickedness, but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth.**

In fact, if it were not for Paul, the meaning of becoming “unleavened” would be obscure at best. Even the disciples did not understand the meaning of it until Jesus hinted at it:

MATTHEW 16:5-8, 11-12 Now when His disciples came to the other side, they had forgotten to take bread. 6 And Jesus said to them, “Watch out, and be on guard against the leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees.” 7 Then they reasoned among themselves, saying, “*It is* because we did not take bread.” 8 But when Jesus knew *this*, He said to them, “O *you* of little faith, why are you reasoning among yourselves that *it is* because you did not bring bread? ... 11 **How is it that you do not understand that I was not speaking of bread when I told you to beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees?**” 12 Then they understood that He did not say to beware of the leaven of bread, but of the doctrine of the Pharisees and Sadducees.

I think the spiritual meaning of unleavened is generally well understood today; however, what it meant to the ancient Israelites is something we should also reflect upon. When someone is being called, there comes a point in which a decision must be made—either commit fully to God or not. God gives us time to decide, but eventually we all have to make a choice (parable of the fig tree—Luke 13:6-9). It is during that time when unleavened bread can be the bread of *affliction*.

Think about it. The bread of affliction can either point to the evil of what we are leaving or the fears of where we must go. It is a reflection of a battle between our heart and mind that begins after we are called. Initially, our heart is full of joy at the prospect of the liberty in God, but our minds soon begin to warn us of the uncertainties we might face. How will this affect my job? What about my spouse or children? How can I afford to tithe? Our minds are full of questions, many of which can raise doubts or fears.

For the heart, the bread of affliction represents the evil world in which we are held captive. The heart desires to flee death and enter into salvation. The mind, however, has fears about the journey toward that salvation. In facing our fears of the unknown, the bread of affliction can embody the uncertainties of the physical life as we begin to obey the things God requires of us. At least up until one is called, there is usually some semblance of security in life. The problem is that change can raise doubts and fears. The bread of affliction means different things to the heart and mind in the struggle between them. In the end, we must decide to follow our heart as we pursue our calling. That also means our minds must be resolved to trust God as we facing those fears. The story of the Exodus portrays this perfectly.

The meaning of the bread of affliction to each of us personally is also why That Night of the Lord (the night of the first DUB) is significant. It is a time to reflect upon our heart's desire and our mind's fears when we were called. Obviously, if we chose to follow through on our calling, the desire of our heart outweighed the fears of the mind. Remembering the battle is not only important to us, but also to those being called. God told the ancient Israelites:

DEUTERONOMY 4:9 Only take heed to yourself and diligently keep yourself, **lest you forget the things which your eyes have seen, and lest they depart from your heart** all the days of your life. But teach them to your children, and your children's children,

There it is—the heart vs. the mind (eyes). The ancient Israelites wanted to leave Egypt (recall they left with a “high hand”; that is, with boldness and courage—Exo. 14:8). However, they faced many adversities along the way and were, at times, quite fearful. In these, God was *proving* them. Does He not do the same with each of us? Do we not remember all the times we have been afflicted, tested, and proven?

But there is another reason for the Days of Unleavened Bread—they are a time of *teaching* as it says in the last part of the verse. What were they to teach their children? All “the things your eyes have seen.” What did they see? They saw the plagues, the destruction of the Egyptians, God in the cloud and pillar of fire, the parting of the Red Sea in which their enemy was annihilated, God giving them water in the desert, God's power on Mount Horeb, and the list of what God did for them goes on.

Likewise, our own spiritual exodus is something we can also “teach to your children”; that is, the new “babes” in Christ (Heb. 5:13). It can be a stressful time as they count the cost as we all know and, as the saying goes, “**who knows whether you have come to such a royal position for a time such as this?**” (Est. 4:14). This can be said of every converted believer. We have all *come* to royal positions as God's faithful believers (Rev. 1:6) so we have a responsibility to teach and encourage other potential children of God. The when, where, and how of our lives can be instruments of God “for such a time” to serve and help them. Never miss an opportunity to encourage those being called

and those who are sincerely seeking God. This is part of fulfilling the Days of Unleavened Bread—remembering and telling our stories of “the things your eyes have seen” are meant for others as well as us.

Consider also the Days of Unleavened Bread that we have just kept and think about the meaning of them throughout the year. If we only think about them once a year, then we are missing the point of remembering:

EXODUS 13:3 And Moses said to the people, “**Remember this day in which you came out of Egypt, out of the house of bondage; for the LORD brought you out from this place by the strength of His hand.** There shall be no leavened bread eaten.”

To remember something means reflecting upon it from time to time. The meaning of our personal exodus is something to keep in mind throughout the year. For the ancient Israelites, this was a time:

- When they were filled with joy upon being liberated from slavery.
- When they had to face their fears.
- When they were tested by God.
- When they heard the voice of God.
- When they received God’s laws, statutes, precepts, and testimonies.
- When they saw the abundance of the Promised Land.

For many of us, our personal journey to the Promised Land is much longer than the 40 years the ancient Israelites had to wander. But then, we have a “superior covenant [and] superior promises.” (Heb. 8:6). Whatever the duration of our personal journey might be, God wants us to always remember the story of our own “exodus” and to tell it to the generations of believers coming after us. This is fitting with Philippians 4:8, which says, “Finally, brethren, whatever things are true, whatever things are honorable, whatever things are just, whatever things are pure, whatever things are lovely, **whatever things are of good report**; if there be any virtue and if there be any praise, **think on these things**.” What is your “good report?” Regardless of how different your story might be from others, each can surely say that the place where we are going “is an exceedingly good land” (Numbers 14:7).

May God’s grace and peace be upon you!

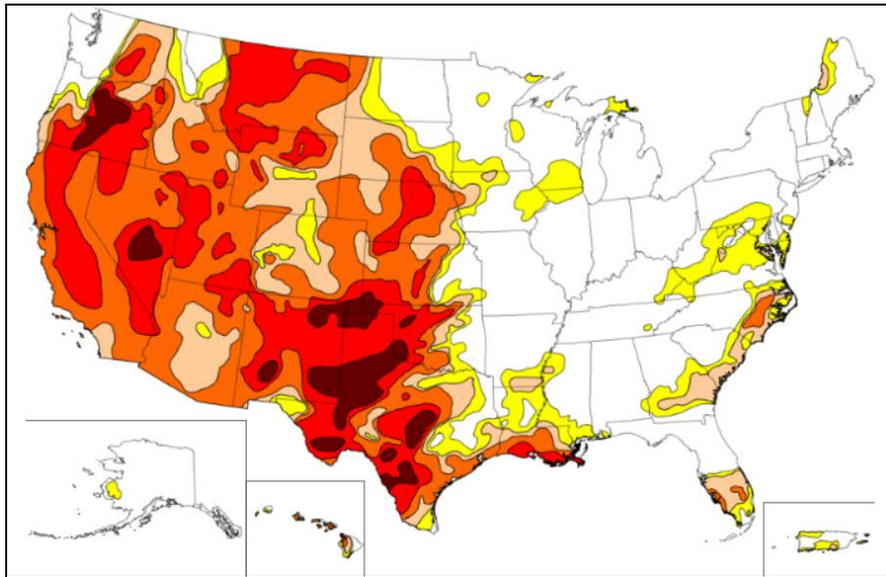
Steven Greene

<https://sabbathreflections.org>

SABBATH THOUGHT 2022-04-30—PHYSICAL HEALING

May God bless you on His Sabbath day!

I was looking at a map of the USA recently that shows the entire western half of the country in a moderate to severe drought. The eastern boundary includes Texas, Oklahoma, Kansas, Nebraska, South Dakota, and parts of North Dakota. From those states, it extends all the way to the west coast. Only the western portions of the state of Washington escape it.



This got me to thinking that all that rain must be going somewhere. The earth is, at least in terms of water, a closed system (in engineering terms). That means that the total amount of water on the earth rain never changes; therefore, a drought in the USA might indicate flooding somewhere else. However, a map showed a worldwide drought in varying degrees. It includes southern Europe, large parts of Africa, the Middle East, all but the eastern-most areas of China and Australia, all of Melanesia (the island nations north and east of Australia), and the majority of South America outside of the Amazon River basin. The bottom line is that the only places with normal rainfall are eastern USA, Canada, northern and eastern Europe, and Russia. Oddly enough, I could not any find regions with above average rainfall that would offset the dry conditions currently impacting most of the world.

Periods of drought have occurred for millennia. One during Abram's time forced him to move to Egypt due to lack of food (Gen. 12:10). The same thing happened to his son Isaac when he was forced to move south to the land of the Philistines in Gerar (Gen. 26:1). Even Jacob did not escape a severe seven year famine. The people only survived because his son Joseph planned for it. Others that lived through droughts included Ruth (Ruth 1:1), David (2 Sam 21:1), Elijah (1 Kings 18:2), to name a few.

It is common to think of drought as punishment from God, but was that the case with Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, or even David? Perhaps the nations around them were targeted, but drought has occurred periodically throughout the ages and afflicts God's people as well as unbelievers. Regardless of whether or not they were punishments of God, the world has always had cycles of plenty followed by times of extreme want.

We are entering one such time today and it is likely going to get worse. But there is one thing of which God takes an accounting during any lean times: whether or not His people turn to Him. Solomon, in the beginning of his reign, petitioned God to **always** listen to His people when they prayed for relief from drought—and God heard his prayer:

1 KINGS 8:37-39, 9:3 **If there is famine in the land**, if there is plague, blasting, mildew, locusts; if there are stripping locusts; if their enemy encircles them in the land of their cities, whatever plague, whatever sickness, 38 **Any prayer, any supplication from any man of all Your people** Israel, who shall each know the plague of his own heart, and shall spread forth his hands toward this house, 39 **Then hear in heaven Your dwelling place and forgive, and do, and give to every man according to all his ways**, whose heart You know; for You, You only, know the hearts of all the children of men. ... 9:3 And **the LORD said to him, "I have heard your prayer** and your cry which you have made before Me.

Drought is, perhaps, one of the most destructive curses of the earth. It is usually widespread resulting in failed crops, dead herds and flocks, extreme heat, dust storms, high winds, and consuming fires—and there is nothing man can do can stop it. It can kill both man and beast from lack of food and water. No one can survive a drought if it lasts long enough. Even underground water needs to be replenished with rain so wells dry up. This happened once to people I know. Have you seen the heart-wrenching scenes of people in Africa starving to death? People have committed heinous acts when driven by unimaginable hunger and thirst (2 Kings 6:25-30). Worst of all, those who linger past a certain point cannot be saved even if the drought lifts or supplies of food and water arrive. It is a terrible way to die.

So why am I writing about such depressing and terrible news? First, many believers have suffered with disease and loss over the last two-plus years due to a man-made virus and have become victims of governments that treat their citizenry as slaves and criminals. Second, there are promises of God that we all need to know AND rely upon. The first reason shows that, just like any drought, God's people are not always immune to the curses that come upon the world. However, even though we may be afflicted along with the world, God specifically promises to help His children and set us apart. David wrote of this very important promise:

PSALMS 37:18-20 The LORD knows the days of the upright, and their inheritance shall be forever. 19 **They [the saints] shall not be ashamed in**

the time of evil, and in the days of famine they shall be satisfied. 20 But the wicked shall perish, and the enemies of the LORD shall be like the beauty of pastures—they are consumed, and like smoke they vanish.

Pay particular attention to verse 19 as there are two specific points. First, believers will not be “ashamed in the time of evil”. That time generally points to the Day of the Lord; that is, the time of God’s vengeance upon the earth. On a personal level, however, it points to the times of evil that we experience during our lives even if we are not alive at the end of this age. What does it mean to be “ashamed”? In both the Hebrew and Greek, it has a meaning of disappointment or delay. In other words, we will not be disappointed when Jesus returns nor will He delay salvation as emphasized by the eternal inheritance in verse 18. But notice the last part of the verse. God promises that He will provide for us even in famine. The promise of being “satisfied” is a very physical one because we are never in a “spiritual” famine as long as we stay close to God and His word. In fact, “satisfied” literally means to be filled or to have plenty. Filled with what? Food and water. How? Perhaps from a rock as was done for the ancient Israelites.

What is most interesting about these verses is it combines a spiritual promise (“They shall not be ashamed in the time of evil”) with a very physical one (“In the days of famine they shall be satisfied.”) There are many promises of God, especially those for healing, that have both a spiritual and physical fulfillment. But not here. David also recorded the same promise in an earlier Psalm:

PSALMS 33:18-22 Behold, **the eye of the LORD is upon those who fear Him**, upon those who hope in His lovingkindness, 19 **To deliver their soul from [eternal] death and to keep them alive in famine.** 20 Our soul waits for the LORD; He is our help and our shield, 21 For our heart shall rejoice in Him because we have trusted in His holy name. 22 Let Your lovingkindness, O LORD, be upon us, according as we hope in You.

Solomon prayed that God would always help His children when they pray in their time of need. Recall the words. He asked God to hear “**any** prayer” from “**any** [person] of **all** your people” and then to “give to **every** [person] according to [their] needs.” Do we believe in God’s physical promises as assuredly as we believe in the spiritual ones? This is a very important question each of us should consider.

At times, it is easier to believe in spiritual promises than physical ones. There can be several reasons, I think. Perhaps the most common is time. If we ask God for healing and it is not immediate, then we might not see God’s hand if it takes time to recover. We might question it because we assume God’s healing is always immediate and whole. But is that always the case? When Hezekiah was sick unto death, he asked “What shall be the sign that the LORD will heal me?” (2 Kings 20:8). We, who have never had a true prophet of God speak to us, might accuse Hezekiah of faithlessness. But this could be us,

too. When we ask God for healing, do we need a sign? Do we believe that God will answer our prayer? If it takes weeks or months, do we feel abandoned?

Another reason we might not expect God to heal us is the story of Paul's "thorn in the flesh" (2 Cor. 12:7-10). God flatly told him "no." Do we use this as an example of why we might not be healed? "Sometimes the answer is no," we tell ourselves and in the process convince ourselves that God will likely not heal us.

Even if a healing required time, we have a choice—we can believe God truly healed us...or not. We can have faith that God will answer our pray with "yes"...or not. These are important choices and they can affect our faith. We can **choose** to believe that every day we are alive it is because God sustains each and every one of us PERSONALLY. We can **choose** to believe that God's answer to our prayers is "yes." Making these choices aligns with the very powerful faith of Jesus Christ in us (Rev. 14:12).

Choosing to believe that God will heal us physically no matter how long it takes and regardless of how great our doubt might be is the way to greater faith as well. Remember the man whose son was possessed (Mark 9:17-27)? Jesus asked him if he believed He could heal him and he said, "Lord, I believe. **Help my unbelief.**" Many of us feel this way at times; however, always remember that Jesus **did** indeed heal the man's son in spite of his admitted unbelief! So, just because our faith is not enough to move a mountain does not mean that God will say "no" or refuse to heal us. Quite the opposite! The vital thing to remember is that the man BELIEVED that Jesus would heal his son and He did! In other words, the man did not make excuses. He asked in complete humility and Jesus healed his son. He did not say that Jesus will likely say no or this is just my burden to bear. I think many of us have fallen into this way of thinking, myself included.

This is not to say that God never says "no" but I believe that it is a rare occurrence for anyone who sincerely and continually asks for healing. I encourage you to read Matthew 6:8, 25-34 because God has promised to care for us when we put Him first in our lives. There are also situations when we must endure things for awhile. Even so, God promises He will make certain we can bear it. In the following scripture, I replaced the word "tempt" with *test*, because that is what it means in the Greek:

1 CORINTHIANS 10:9, 13 Neither should we [*test*] Christ, as some of them also [*tested*] Him, and were killed by serpents. ... 13 No [*test*] has come upon you except what is common to mankind. For **God, Who is faithful, will not permit you to be [*tested*] beyond what you are able to bear**; but with the [*test*], He will make a way of escape, so that you may be able to bear *it*.

Do you believe that God **will not permit** you to be tested beyond what you can endure but will make a way to bear it? The word "not" in this sentence is the strongest Greek negative meaning it cannot ever happen; therefore, God guarantees it!

So, God has given us promises of help and healing that apply to our lives TODAY. Call upon God with a humble and contrite heart and EXPECT Him to provide for your needs. Only be surprised if He does **not** heal you or supply the physical things of this life!

Finally, dear brethren, remember to always give thanks and praise to God especially when you receive the answer to your prayers. While He knows what is in your hearts, He desires to hear it from **you** personally as a “sacrifice of praise continually to God ... with the fruit of our lips” (Heb. 13:15).

May God’s grace and peace be upon you!

Steven Greene

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SABBATH THOUGHT 2022-05-07—SCOTUS & ROE V. WADE

May God bless you on His Sabbath day!

A case¹ questioning the constitutionality of a 2018 Mississippi state abortion law made it to the Supreme Court who heard arguments in December, 2021. This past week a first draft of the Court's decision was illegally and publically released that could mean the end of the controversial 1973 landmark abortion case of *Roe v. Wade* (410 U.S. 113).

This has caused a major uproar throughout the nation but it is not abortion that concerns me right now. Do not misunderstand me. I discuss the evil of abortion in a past sermon² but this potential reversal of *Roe v. Wade* does not change anything. As shocking as that may sound, the Court's decision mirrors the *thinking* of a nation that has completely rejected God because of *how* they arrived at this decision.

I read the entire Court's decision³ and what I am about to relate comes directly from the so-called *conservative* justices on our nation's highest court. To begin with, it is important to understand the basis of the justice's decision. They stated, “[t]he standard grounds for constitutional decisionmaking [*sic*] [is] **text, history, and precedent.**” (pg. 51, emphases mine throughout). This means they looked at decisions made in related cases, historical governing documents, and principles from prior legal precedents to formulate their decision. All that may sound reasonable and it would be except for one problem. In researching their decision, the Court proudly referenced historical documents back to the early 1200s looking for some precedent that would confirm that murdering children is a right established by the Constitution, common law, or civil law. They found none but this is spectacularly idiotic since the whole idea of murdering children should be obviously wrong. Why did they even try to find a precedence to establish a moral “right” to murder?

Their search also failed to include the original “precedent”—the Bible. It is no where mentioned in the Court's treatise. The reason that this is a fatal flaw in the Court's thinking is that the government of this nation was supposedly founded upon the “Laws of ... **God**” to which all men are “endowed by their **Creator.**” These quotes come directly from the Declaration of Independence (July 4, 1776). From that document followed the Federalist Papers (1787-1788), the Constitution (1789), the Bill of Rights (first 10 amendments—1791), and an additional 17 amendments (1795-1992). These “honored” documents are supposedly THE foundation for the entire U.S. system of government but the Declaration of Independence set the *standard*, which was **God's Law**. So, if the

¹ *Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health Organization*, docket 19-1392. It concerns a 2018 Mississippi state law that bans abortion after the first 15 weeks of pregnancy. It was argued at the United States Court of Appeals for the Fifth Circuit in February, 2020, which resulted in an injunction against it.

² Video—<https://www.churchathome.org/video/abortion-ritual-child-sacrifice.html>.

³ U.S. Supreme Court, No. 19-1392, first draft dated 2022-02-10.

Constitution is based upon God’s Law then the Court should reference the original source used by the founding fathers—the Bible. I seriously doubt they even know that the Bible has laws specific to the murder of a fetus or infant⁴. Ignoring the instruction of the all wise Creator simply makes them fools and the Bible has *much* to say about that.

This significant omission led the Court to claim, “We hold that *Roe* and *Casey* must be overruled [*because*] the Constitution makes no reference to abortion, and **no such right is implicitly protected by any constitutional provision**” (pg. 5). Excuse me?!? No government in history has ever made murder a “right” of the people. Murder has always been a felony under the constitution⁵, so how could abortion can *ever* be an entitlement?

Regardless, the Bible is clear about murder⁶, which indisputably includes abortion and infanticide. To assess that abortion is wrong because it is not directly or indirectly a constitutional “right” just exposes the foolish thinking of these so-called *conservative* justices. In their own words, because abortion is not a *constitutional right*, “**the authority to regulate abortion must be returned to the people and their elected representatives**” (pg. 65). That is just an absurd way of saying that legalization of the murder of children is choice of the people, not a statute of God. So the Supreme Court, the highest court of the land, favors laws that permit murdering children as long as they are “properly” legislated by our elected officials. I truly have no words for how utterly ludicrous their thinking has become.

To further emphasize their foolish thinking, read what the conservative majority of justices said are the “standards” by which future abortion laws will be evaluated if they are elevated to the Supreme Court:

“We must now decide **what standard will govern** if state abortion regulations undergo constitutional challenge **and whether the law before us satisfies the appropriate standard** [*SG—Apparently, murdering babies is allowable as long as that law satisfies their standards!*].

“Under our precedents, rational-basis review **is the appropriate standard** for such challenges. These legitimate interests include **respect for and preservation of prenatal life at all stages** of development [*Can anyone tell me how abortion preserves life?!?—SG*]; ... **the elimination of particularly gruesome or barbaric medical procedures** [*Murdering babies is acceptable as long as the procedures are not cruel?!?—SG*]; **the preservation of the integrity of the medical profession** [*They are concerned that murdering babies disparages the medical profession. I*

⁴ Exodus 21:22-25; Leviticus 18:21; 20:2-5; Deuteronomy 18:10a.

⁵ Federal laws that set the punishment for murder were originally established by the *Federal Criminal Code of 1790* through the Necessary and Proper Clause (Article I, Section 8) of the Constitution.

⁶ Exodus 20:13.

have no words.—SG; **the mitigation of fetal pain** [*Murdering babies is unacceptable only if it causes pain!—SG*]” (pp. 66-67).

The Court is only repealing *Roe v. Wade* because it was not a “proper” ruling back in 1973 so, the closing statement from the justices shows just how disconnected this nation is from God and that they have utterly rejected His Laws. This kind of *thinking* will result in future legislation that legitimizes murdering children under federal law. The last paragraph of their conclusion is just as troubling:

Abortion presents a profound moral question. The **Constitution does not prohibit** the citizens of each State from regulating or prohibiting **abortion.** We now overrule those decisions [*Roe v. Wade, et al*] and **return that authority to the people and their elected representatives.**

The Court proclaims that the murder of children is “profound moral **question.**” Why is it a question at all? Is it a moral question because it is not a “right” under the constitution? Is it a moral question because they are concerned about the appearance of “respecting and preserving life” while murdering children? Is it a moral question because murdering children is “gruesome or barbaric?” Is it a moral question because murdering children disparages the medical profession? Is it a moral question because murdering children causes them incomprehensible pain? They are seemingly concerned with morality, yet they remind us that the Constitution (founded upon the “Laws of ... God” to which all men are “endowed by their Creator”) does not *expressly prohibit* abortion, so the people and their representatives are free to establish laws legalizing the murder of children.

At this moment, the country is divided between those who are angry and those who are rejoicing. The former stand on a nihilistic belief that abortion is a right enjoined upon all people while the latter believe they have won a victory for God. The ugly truth is that God is no longer involved in this nation. Their thinking is so evil that abortion will eventually be legalized—it is only a matter of time.

Remember when many of the monuments and plaques that referenced God or the Ten Commandments were being removed from government buildings, especially courthouses? I was in favor of it. Not because I think this country should abandon God’s Law but because the pretense is over. When have you ever seen a judge with a Bible on his/her bench? If they truly believe this is a “nation under God” all of them would have one and the pages of Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy—listing God’s laws—would be worn out with use. Instead, the Bible has not only been eliminated from public schools (1963) but God’s Law no longer exists in our legislative and judicial systems. They are so blind that they can no longer see **ABORTION AS MURDER** and a most grievous crime and sin. They have forgotten what God did to the Egyptians.

So, *Roe v. Wade* will likely be reversed. The Court’s injunction against *Roe v. Wade* is unimportant because the minds of the people are so far removed from God that they will

do whatsoever they desire. God said, “For My thoughts are not your thoughts, nor your ways My ways” (Isaiah 55:8). The Bible describes this nation perfectly:

ROMANS 1:18, 21-22, 28-32 Indeed, **the wrath of God is revealed from heaven upon all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men who suppress the truth in unrighteousness**; ... 21 Because when they knew God, they glorified *Him* not as God, neither were thankful; but **they became vain in their own reasonings**, and their foolish hearts were darkened. 22 While **professing themselves to be the wise ones, they became fools**. ... 28 And in exact proportion as **they did not consent to have God in their knowledge, God abandoned them to a reprobate mind, to practice those things that are immoral**; 29 Being filled with all unrighteousness, sexual immorality, wickedness, covetousness, malice; full of envy, **murder**, strife, guile, evil dispositions; whisperers, 30 Slanderers, **God-haters**, insolent, proud, boasters, **inventors of evil things and practices**; disobedient to parents, 31 Void of understanding, covenant-breakers, without natural affection, implacable *and* unmerciful; 32 Who, knowing the righteous judgment of God, that **those who commit such things are worthy of death**, not only practice these things themselves, **but also approve of those who commit them**.

The wickedness and evil of this people has “reached as far as heaven” (Rev. 18:5). But that is exactly why believers must draw close to God—the world needs us. Eventually, the people of this world will be raised up and they will need us to teach⁷ them a whole new way of *thinking*.

HEBREWS 8:8, 10-11 But since He found fault with them, He says, “ ‘Behold, *the days are coming,*’ says *the Lord*, ‘when I will establish a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah; ... 10 ‘For this *is* the covenant that I will establish with the house of Israel after those days,’ says *the Lord*: **I will give My laws into their minds, and I will inscribe them upon their hearts**; and I will be their God, and they will be My people. 11 And they will no longer teach every man his neighbor, and every man his brother, saying, “Know the Lord” because **all will know Me, from the least to the greatest of them**;

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Steven Greene

<https://sabbathreflections.org>

⁷ Isaiah 30:20.

SABBATH THOUGHT 2022-05-14—FIRST LOVE

May God bless you on His Sabbath day!

When we think of our relationship with God and Jesus Christ, it is a reflection of our human connections and experiences. When a child is born, it cannot speak. In fact, an infant has no capacity to think in normal terms. That is because we all think in a primary language, something that has yet to be learned by an infant. Instead, it responds emotionally. At birth, the mother already has a deep love toward her child whereas the infant does not know how to love—yet. At birth, it is overwhelmed by the new and full experience of sights, sounds, touches, and tastes. It is driven by its senses—nursing satisfies hunger, singing and talking are pleasant sounds, and cuddling is warm contentment. A mother has a profound need to love her child who responds completely to her nurturing. The fact that a life can be formed in a woman's body is truly amazing. This is an experience that no man can have so I can only stand in awe and wonder of the gift that God gave to women.

As a child grows, it relates to others from within the love, safety, and security of the family. In its early years, play with other children is a selfish role because they do not know how to love others. A young child is still driven by its needs, not an urge to put others first. As they grow, they start to have a real desire to be with other children but, again, it is part of satisfying the selfish needs of the child rather than from the perspective of what it can give to others. This is the beginning of learning how to love others. The family is critically important during these times because children must learn to see beyond their own needs and recognize the welfare of others. In other words, they must be taught how to love.

The urge for relationships with peers outside the family becomes very strong in the teenage years when children long to be with friends, sometimes more than parents. For some parents, this is hard to accept. They do not realize that children can only have a relationship beyond their parents if they are secure in the love of their family. This time, for a child, is important because it is when they first begin to consider the needs of others. As their desire grows and expands, they start having real feelings of love toward their friends.

This course of events leads to the next step—relationships between boys and girls. However, socialization with the opposite sex also does not happen except from within the safety and security of same-sex peer groups. Why? Because their ability to love is not yet a selfless one—they are fearful of being rejected by someone of the opposite sex. In simple terms, opening their heart up to others is something new. It is unique because, up to this point, they have shown love toward others who *first* loved them! That was the case for a child within the immediate and extended family. So, offering love to someone else *first* is a new and uncertain venture.

Obviously, there comes a point when a young man and young woman get past all the awkwardness of that time and discover how satisfying love can be when it is returned by someone to whom they unselfishly gave it. This is when they begin to understand how powerful and fulfilling love can be. In the circle of life, the birth of a child is the fulfillment of their love because it becomes focused on the life of another human being.

What an amazing creation we are! God made us to love and be loved. Love is the most amazing gift and desire. We begin life only being able to respond to it but unable to share it. However, love is something that can never remain selfish. In the end, love always strives to be shared between people.

The potential of love can only be truly understood when we give it **FIRST** to someone, as in the case of a young man and young woman before marriage. I think we all understand this. When we offer love to someone and it is reciprocated, it grows into a powerful connection. It is that kind of love that motivates people to give their physical life for someone.

Relationships in this physical life were always intended to lead to a relationship with God the Father and Jesus Christ. It began with their love for us:

1 JOHN 4:16-19 And we have known and have believed the love that God has toward us. **God is love**, and the one who dwells in love is dwelling in God, and God in him. 17 By this *spiritual indwelling*, the love of God is perfected within us, so that we may have confidence in the day of judgment because even as He is, so also are we in this world. 18 There is no fear in the love of God; rather, perfect love casts out fear because fear has torment. And the one who fears has not been made perfect in the love of God. 19 **We love Him because He loved us first.**

God the Father and Jesus Christ loved us *first* because we are like infants in the beginning—needing to be loved but not knowing exactly how to love others. In loving us first, they knew they risked sorrow by those who reject their love. But these verses say something powerful—“there is no fear in the love of God” (v. 18). Unlike the uncertainty of a young man and young woman who tentatively expose their feelings to each other not knowing if they will be reciprocated, God’s love is sure. They offered love **first** to us and *without reservation*. In fact, we can have absolute confidence in their love because Jesus Christ **died** out of His love for us even *before* we loved them. This is why no one should be fearful that they do not love us! They proved it beyond a shadow of a doubt before we were ever born.

1 JOHN 4:10-12 In this *act* is the love—not that we loved God; rather, that **He loved us and sent His Son to be the propitiation** for our sins. 11 Beloved, if God so loved us, we also are duty-bound to love one another. 12 No one has seen God at any time. Yet, **if we love one another**, God dwells in us, and **His own love is perfected in us.**

What is so amazing about these scriptures is that God is perfecting His love in us. How? As “we love one another”. An infant begins life not able to properly love others; however, every child begins with a *need* for love that grows into proper outgoing love through relationships with family, then friends, and finally a spouse. Love is matured along the way and the result is another baby born who can love others eventually.

While the pattern of life has evaded some—in particular those are unmarried or unable to have children—we all have the surety of God’s love. “God IS love!” The love of God the Father and Jesus Christ for every one of us is certain and sure. It was established at the creation of mankind when God made a man and woman for the purpose of multiplying people, it was made manifest by the way a child develops within a woman, and it was proven when Jesus Christ died for us. Their love is given to each of us and is being perfected in us. No one should doubt the love of God the Father and Jesus Christ because we are their CHILDREN. How much love do a mother and father have for their child? Their love is even greater! They loved us first, they sacrificed for us, and they personally called each one of us! When we are willing to love someone else **first**, it is the *beginning* of perfect love. God the Father and Jesus Christ loved us FIRST because they ARE perfect love. We are given a glimpse into the perfect love they desire with each of us in the prayer of Jesus Christ:

JOHN 17:20-23 I do not pray for these only, but also for those who shall believe in Me through their word; 21 **That they all may be one, even as You, Father, are in Me, and I in You; that they also may be one in Us**, in order that the world may believe that You did send Me. 22 And I **have given them the glory that You gave to Me, in order that they may be one, in the same way that We are one: 23 I in them, and You in Me, that they may be perfected into one; and that the world may know that You did send Me, and have loved them as You have loved Me.**

If anyone ever has doubts about the love of God the Father and Jesus Christ for us, read this scripture. For those who were withheld from the opportunities of life, read this scripture. God the Father and Jesus Christ want to be ONE IN LOVE with us—they want their singular perfection of love to exist IN us and between us in the exact same manner that they love each other. God gave you life so that you could become a vessel of their perfect, eternal, and abiding love. While physical relationships can experience a powerful, selfless love, it is nothing—I repeat—nothing compared to the perfect love of God the Father and Jesus Christ.

All who are called must suffer. Some suffer because they did not have love in their lives whether as a child or as an adult. In many ways, that is worse than those who suffer pain, sickness, illness, poverty, and so forth while being with others and cared by those who love us. But the message of God the Father and Jesus Christ to us all is their love—perfect, gentle, kind, comforting, eternal love. And They are perfecting all of us in Their love!

1 CORINTHIANS 13:10-13 But **when that which is perfect has come**, then that which is in part shall be set aside. 11 When I was a child, I spoke as a child, **I understood as a child**, I reasoned as a child; but when I became a man, **I set aside the things of a child**. 12 For now **we see through a glass darkly**, but then *we shall see face to face*; now **I know in part, but then I shall know exactly as I have been known**. 13 And now, these three remain: faith, hope *and* love; but the greatest of these *is* love.

Paul understood that God's love is being perfected in us. He talked about a child having a selfish desire for love to becoming an adult willing and able to give love to others (v. 11). He talked about when "that which is perfect" comes—i.e., the love God the Father and Jesus Christ—and it is completed in us at the resurrection (v. 10). He talked about only knowing "in part" now but truly knowing the fullness of the love God the Father and Jesus Christ when we are born of the spirit. He talked about these things because he understood that—beginning with Adam and Eve and is continuing with us—God's greatest creation is the perfection of love in us.

Revelation 2:4 says this to the Ephesian church, "I have this against you, that you have left your **first love**." Whose was the *very first love*? That of God the Father and Jesus Christ. Their ultimate desire is for us to love Them. A man and woman enter into marriage because both were willing to love the other person before knowing if the love was mutual. Once that love took root, it grew to the point where they needed to tell the world of their special love in their wedding day. God the Father and Jesus Christ have offered their love to us *first* and are looking for us to love them because Jesus Christ desires an eternal bride and God the Father desires children. They have proven their love for us and we are proving our love for them. Each and every day their love grows in us if we draw close to Them and continually seek first "that [*love*] which is perfect" that God the Father and Jesus Christ are bringing to us.

May God's grace and peace be upon you!

Steven Greene

<https://sabbathreflections.org>

SABBATH THOUGHT 2022-05-21—PEACE OF PENTECOST

May God bless you on His Sabbath day!

There are five basic sacrifices consisting of the burnt, sin, trespass, peace, and grain offerings¹. Of these, the burnt offering was the main one because it was required before all the other offerings (although there were exceptions). The burnt offering was completely consumed by fire and represented absolute devotion and service to God. The sacrifice of Jesus Christ was a burnt offering².

The sin and trespass offerings are fairly obvious, but the peace offering is interesting. It always followed a sin or trespass offering (although it could be a separate and complete offering itself). The root word means *completion* and is appropriate because peace with God was restored to a repentant sinner following a sin offering. Included in the peace offering was a wave offering. It simply means that part of the animal was waved before God to be accepted by Him during the sacrifice. A remarkable aspect of the peace offering was that the offerer could eat the sacrifice on the first and second days, but anything that remained on the third day had to be burned.

The grain offering accompanied the burnt and peace offerings but never the sin or trespass offerings. It was a product of man's labor. Part of the grain offering was burned on the altar while the rest was given to the officiating priest. Leviticus 2:3 says that the grain offering was "**a most holy part** of the offerings of the LORD." The grain offering honored and glorified God and acknowledged that all things belong to Him.

When it came to Pentecost, four of these were required: the grain, burnt, sin, and peace offerings:

LEVITICUS 23:15-20 And you shall count to you beginning with the next day after the Sabbath, beginning with the day that you brought the sheaf of the wave offering; seven Sabbaths shall be complete. 16 Even unto the day after the seventh Sabbath you shall number fifty days. And you shall offer **a new grain offering** to the LORD. 17 You shall bring out of your homes two wave loaves of two tenth parts. They shall be of fine flour. They shall be baked with leaven, *They are* the firstfruits to the LORD. 18 And you shall offer with the bread seven lambs without blemish of the first year, and one young bull, and two rams. They shall be *for* **a burnt offering** to the LORD with their grain offering, and their drink offerings, *even* an offering made by fire, of sweet savor to the LORD. 19 Then you shall sacrifice one male goat for **a sin offering**, and two lambs of the first year for a sacrifice of **peace offerings**. 20 And the priest shall wave them with the bread of the firstfruits, a wave offering

¹ Details of the five offerings are found in Leviticus chapters 1-7, and 19.

² Hebrews 10:5-10.

before the LORD, with the two lambs. They shall be holy to the LORD for the priest.

People's eyes usually glaze over when talking about animal sacrifices (and genealogies), but the Bible contains incredible detail about how and when they were to be performed. There is a lot of meaning in them even for today. One example is that it was mandatory for grain offerings to be *unleavened*:

LEVITICUS 2:11 Any **grain offering** which you shall bring to the LORD **shall not be made with leaven**, for you shall burn no leaven, nor any honey, in any offering of the LORD made by fire.

However, Pentecost is the singular exception:

LEVITICUS 23:16 ... And you shall offer **a new grain offering** to the LORD.
17 You shall bring out of your homes **two wave loaves** of two tenth parts. They shall be of fine flour. **They shall be baked with leaven**, *They are* the firstfruits to the LORD.

There are actually four reasons I believe it was called a **new** grain offering. First, they were *wave* loaves. As such, they were required to be waved before the LORD to be accepted by God (no other grain offering was waved). Second, they consisted of *two* wave loaves. Grain offerings in general could be one or more³, depending upon the circumstances, but were never specified in number except for Pentecost. Third, the wave loaves contained *leaven* (all other grain offerings were unleavened). Fourth, the wave loaves, called “bread of the firstfruits,” were offered with **both** the burnt and peace offerings *in addition* to—not instead of—the normal grain offerings (Lev. 23:17-18, 20).

On Pentecost, the burnt offering was sacrificed first along with **both** the normal grain offering **and** a wave loaf. This was followed by the sin offering and, finally, the peace offering. The burnt offering was completely consumed on the altar in the fire. It portrays the complete surrender of one's life to God. Those whom God calls must be willing to make a total sacrifice to His way of life. There is no middle ground.

The grain offering that accompanied the burnt offering required man's labor to make it. Grain had to be planted, tended, harvested, beaten into fine flour, and, finally, baked with fire into bread. As a part of the burnt offering, it portrayed the works that are required of us by Him. The grain offering also had to include the “salt of the covenant” (Lev. 2:13). Salt represents the covenant that God establishes with those who are willing to devote their lives to him (burnt offering) and beg forgiveness for their sins (sin offering). Of all the offerings, God only called the grain offering “a most holy part” (Lev. 2:3).

³ Leviticus 2:4 – “cakes” plural.

The sin offering that followed was a sacrifice for sins. It required the blood of the animal to be shed and sprinkled in front of the sanctuary and placed upon the four horns of the altar. It represented coming to the throne of God and asking for forgiveness.

Lastly, the Pentecost ceremony was concluded with a peace offering. It was thanksgiving to God for His love for us, His mercy toward our sins, and for establishing a covenant relationship with the offerer. Actually, the peace offering could be offered at other times for various reasons. It followed and completed the sin offering and could be eaten over **two** days but the remainder was burned on the third day. Likewise, when it was offered for a vow, the offerer had two days to eat it. However, as an offering of thanksgiving it had to be eaten on that day only. Any remainder had to be burned the next day. This was likely the case for Pentecost—it was a thanksgiving to God that was consumed that day only since it was a holyday and not a general offering.

There are three unique aspects to the peace offering (I will describe the third below). The first was the waving of the breast of the animals to be accepted by God. Only God can establish peace with us. None can force peace upon Him. The other was it required one of the wave loaves to be waved alongside it. The peace offering represents the covenant of peace God establishes with those He chooses to accept⁴. This is especially poignant for Pentecost when the Holy Spirit was given.

Much has been speculated about meaning of the *two* wave loaves. Because they include salt, the loaves could represent the old and new covenants. Another possibility tossed about is they were made from the firstfruits of one's harvest⁵. In that sense, one represents the saints of the "church of the firstborn" (Heb. 12:23) in the first resurrection and the other is for those who receive eternal life in the white throne judgment. There are several other ideas, but I do not have the space to describe them.

However, as a grain offering the two wave loaves are absolutely unique. Both the burnt and peace offerings already required and included a separate grain offering but the two wave loaves were added just for the Pentecost offering. Therefore, one of the wave loaves was likely used for the burnt offering and the other for the peace offering. It is a common and reasonable assumption that the leavened loaves represent the physical firstfruits of God. Including wave loaf for the burnt offering could highlight that the firstfruits are selected and dedicated to become the children of God by the burnt offering. A wave loaf with the peace offering could emphasize that we have been chosen to have a covenant of peace with Him.

Looking at the third unique aspect of the peace offering we find that, of all the holydays, only Pentecost requires it. No other holydays included the peace offering. How is peace connected with Pentecost? Because God gave His holy spirit on that day. A believer is

⁴ Numbers 25:12; Isaiah 54:10; Ezekiel 34:25; 37:26; Hebrews 13:20, et al.

⁵ Leviticus 2:14.

given the holy spirit to seal the covenant of peace with God. It is also the day that Jesus Christ will complete the peace process that began when we received the holy spirit. It will be the day that our hopes are fulfilled at the first resurrection when we become the firstborn sons and daughters of God.

Pentecost is truly a day of peace with God. While I included a lot of detail about the offerings performed on that day, the main point is that Pentecost is the only holyday that requires a peace offering.

God talks a lot about peace. God's plan of salvation established peace through the blood of the cross to reconcile us to Him⁶. God establishes a covenant of peace with us and He grows the fruit peace in us by His Holy Spirit. Complete, total, and perfect peace is the foundation of our eternal existence in God's kingdom. Pentecost encapsulates the holy spirit and the resurrection—it is a day founded upon making peace with God the Father and Jesus Christ. And making peace is the one of greatest of all professions:

MATTHEW 5:9 Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called the sons of God.

Peacemakers will become the children of God. God the Father is the Great King⁷ of Peace and Jesus Christ is the Prince of Peace:

ISAIAH 9:6 For unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given; and the government shall be upon His shoulder; and His name shall be called Wonderful, Counselor, The Mighty God, The Everlasting Father, The Prince of Peace.

They are establishing a kingdom based upon peace. We will be part of the greatest and most glorious work in the eternity to come because the PEACE of Their kingdom will increase forever and ever and ever and ever:

ISAIAH 9:7 Of the increase of His government and peace there shall be no end, upon the throne of David, and over His kingdom, to order it and to establish it with judgment and with righteousness from henceforth, even forever. The zeal of the LORD of hosts will do this.

May God's grace and peace be upon you!

Steven Greene

<https://sabbathreflections.org>

⁶ Colossians 1:20.

⁷ Matthew 5:35.

SABBATH THOUGHT 2022-05-28—TRUTH

May God bless you on His Sabbath day!

When I think of all the available material pertaining to Biblical doctrine, instructions, prophecies, etc., much, if not most, of it was motivated to counter false teachings, wrong beliefs, and ignorance. There are sermons, books, and booklets that refute the Trinity doctrine, Sunday-keeping, evolution, Christmas, and Easter. Other topics include proving that God's Law and holydays are not obsolete, refuting the many wrong calendars, discounting a Passover 15th date, addressing the heresy of "once saved, always saved," and proving that the ten tribes are not "lost." It seems most of the work goes into defending the truth rather than establishing it. Paul and the other authors of the NT wrote against the false teachings of their day, but most of their writings were about things pertaining to the kingdom and our calling to become God's children.

Believers in times past endured persecutions and martyrdoms. They faced direct and open threats to their physical lives. Deception is designed to destroy the spirit instead of the body. Today's lies are a danger worse than those of the first century Church. Deception does not rely upon fear of physical torture or death. Rather, it comes as smooth words that are designed to kill the spirit.

Without truth, we are lost. Truth is required to be born into God's kingdom. If we do not know the key doctrines, and live by them, then the kingdom is out of reach for us. Doctrines "of baptisms, and of laying on of hands, and of the resurrection of the dead, and of eternal judgment" (Heb. 6:2) are absolutely required for salvation. But so is keeping God's Law because it establishes the weekly Sabbaths, Passover, and holydays. By it we also know sin, which is the foundation for the doctrine of repentance and forgiveness made possible by the sacrifice of Jesus Christ.

There is a difference between *teaching* and *guarding* God's truth. The former assumes a mind willing to learn whereas the latter is a fight against the works of Satan. As the end of this age approaches, Satan's lust for destruction will turn him into a "a roaring lion, seeking anyone he may devour" (1 Pet. 5:8). As his aggression and anger intensifies, the modern nations descended from Abraham become all the more irrational, angry, hateful, and destructive. Is there any leader, high-ranking official, or wealthy business owner who does not lie these days?

The truth has become scarce. Few tell the truth and even fewer abide by it. Bribes are everywhere. Wealth and power is the ultimate goal of the majority. Gone are the days when judges are honored and leaders are respected. Generals no longer protectors of the nation because they guard their own political bias. Religious leaders preach heresies and many have been caught in adulterous affairs or abuse of children while others own

mansions that are opulent beyond belief. Elijah, John the Baptist, and Paul all lived next to poverty and would absolutely condemn them for plundering God's sheep.

All of this comes at the expense of the general population who are not wealthy or powerful or well-known. There is terrible injustice, oppression, and destruction being inflicted upon the nations whose ancestry extends back to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Were they not to be an example of God's ways to the world?

ZEPHANIAH 3:3-4 Her [Israel's] **princes [rulers]** within her are roaring lions; her **judges** evening wolves. They gnaw bones and leave nothing for the morning. 4 Her **prophets** are proud, men of deceit; her **priests** have defiled the sanctuary; they have done violence to the law.

This is not only a message for today, but it perfectly fits the Israelite nations. Notice also a few words from the prophet Ezekiel:

EZEKIEL 22:25-29 There is a conspiracy of her [*the house of Israel—v. 18*] **prophets** in her midst, like a roaring lion tearing the prey. They have devoured souls; they have taken the treasure and precious things; they made many widows in her midst. 26 Her **priests** have done violence to My law and have profaned My holy things. They have put no difference between the holy and the profane, and have not taught the difference between the unclean and the clean, and they have hidden their eyes from My Sabbaths, and I am profaned among them. 27 Her **rulers** in her midst *are* like wolves tearing the prey, to shed blood and to destroy souls, to get unjust gain. 28 And her **prophets** have covered themselves *with* whitewash, seeing false visions and divining lies unto them, saying, 'Thus says the Lord GOD;' when the LORD has not spoken. 29 The **people** of the land have used oppression and committed robbery, and **they have troubled the poor and needy. Yea, they have oppressed the stranger wrongfully.**

If you read the major and minor prophets in the Bible, God spent a LOT of time describing the evil of today. Yes, God knew it would happen and we are now seeing prophecy fulfilled. Unbelievably, it just keeps getting worse.

One of the most insidious inventions in the last few years is deepfake videos. Basically, this is the ability to manipulate a real video of someone into showing the person saying something they never did—and it cannot be distinguished from reality. Deepfakes can manipulate a person's facial expressions as well as words, adding looks of anger, sadness, or happiness that reflect the scripted words being uttered.

Why would anyone create this? Because it allows the wicked to **LIE** even more convincingly. These are people who "love and **devise** a lie" (Rev. 22:15). It is no longer a matter of promoting lies while ignoring or hiding evidence to the contrary, people are creating ("devising") lies that look and sound incredibly legitimate and truthful. This

allows the wicked to present evil ideas, false accusations and testimonies, and cover up the truth to control anyone who does not support their narrative.

We live in a world where the wicked can truly “call evil good and good evil” (Isa. 5:20). The word “call” means to *declare as an edict*. Who can pronounce an edict? Only a king or leader. Our presidents and prime ministers lie so much that their every word is suspect. Now when the wicked lie, they will be able produce false evidence to back up their egregious words. It has become almost impossible to avoid being deceived.

Jesus Christ gave believers a serious warning against being deceived FOUR times in Matthew 24. The deceptions will be so believable that He said the wicked “*shall deceive **many***” of the SAINTS (Mat. 24:5)! Do not let any believer think this refers to someone else. We must acknowledge that the level of deception in the world today could easily lead us astray if we are not utterly reliant upon God. If you think the technology to create deepfake videos is frightful, imagine the kind of deception possible when the False Prophet comes on the scene:

REVELATION 13:13-15 And **he [the False Prophet] performs great wonders**, so that he even causes fire to come down to the earth from heaven in the sight of men. 14 And **he deceives those who dwell on the earth** by means of the wonders that were given to him to perform in the sight of the beast, saying to those who dwell on the earth that they should make an image for the beast, which had the wound by the sword, yet was alive. 15 And **he was given power to give life to the image of the beast**, so that the image of the beast also could speak; and he causes everyone who will not worship the image of the beast to be killed.

This man is under the direct influence of, and receives great power from, Satan. His work will result many being deceived into worshipping the Beast. Who can escape?

2 THESSALONIANS 2:3-10 Do not let anyone deceive you by any means because *that day will not* come unless the apostasy shall come first, and **the man of sin shall be revealed—the son of perdition**, 4 The one who opposes and exalts himself above all that is called God, or that is an object of worship; so that he comes into the temple of God and sits down as God, proclaiming that he himself is God. 5 Do you not remember that when I was still with you, I told you these things? 6 And now you understand what is holding *him* back in order for him to be revealed in his own set time. 7 For the mystery of lawlessness is already working; only *there is* one Who is restraining at the present *time* until it arises out of *the* midst. 8 And then the lawless one will be revealed (whom the Lord will consume with the breath of His mouth, and will destroy with the brightness of His coming); 9 *Even* the one whose coming is according to *the* inner working of Satan, with all power and signs and lying wonders, 10 And **with all deceivableness** of unrighteousness

in those who are perishing because they did not receive the love of the truth, so that they might be saved.

Only those who **love** God's *truth* will be saved. How does one love the Truth? Through prayer, study, fasting, keeping God's Law, and having a humble and contrite heart. Solomon describes the heart of a person who does these things:

PROVERBS 3:3, 5-7 **Do not let mercy and truth forsake you**; bind them around your neck; write them upon the tablet of your heart; 5 **Trust in the LORD** with all your heart, and **lean not to your own understanding**. 6 In all your ways **acknowledge Him**, and He shall direct your paths. 7 **Do not be wise in your own eyes; fear the LORD and depart from evil**.

There are seven things we are told to do: 1) stay close to God's Truth 2) trust God, 3) rely upon God, 4) learn from God, 5) be humble toward God, 6) revere God, and 6) shun evil. Did you notice the very first one? "Do not let ... **truth forsake you**." Practicing these thing will ensure that the "righteousness [*imputed by God*] of the perfect shall direct [our] way" (Pro. 11:5).

Brethren, God's truth is precious but it is getting harder to find in this world, even among some in the Church of God. The "famine of hearing of words [*of Truth*] of the LORD" (Amos 8:11) has already begun. Doctrines are being perverted, laws of God are being ignored, and people are leaning unto their own understanding. Truth will become so rare that God said to Jeremiah:

JEREMIAH 5:1 "Run to and fro through the streets of Jerusalem, and see now, and know, and seek in her open places, **if you can find a man, if there is one** who does justice, **who seeks the truth**; and I will pardon her."

I said at the beginning of this article that without truth, we are lost. On the other hand, having God's truth will bring us through it all:

2 PETER 1:4 Through which **He [God] has given to us the greatest and most precious promises**, that through these you may become partakers of *the* divine nature, **having escaped the corruption that is in the world** through lust.

In the end, God's Truth will ensure we escape the lies and deception of the world and fulfill the promises of God in us—for all eternity in His kingdom of Truth.

May God's grace and peace be upon you!

Steven Greene

<https://sabbathreflections.org>

SABBATH THOUGHT 2022-06-04—VISION OF PENTECOST

May God bless you on His Sabbath day!

Understanding the timing and purpose of Pentecost in God's plan is important. In addition to the primary portrayal, there are always several facets (think "here a little, there a little"—Isaiah 28:10, 13) that are always inspirational. A good friend of mine would call them "golden nuggets." But Pentecost, above all other holydays, is unique because there were two primary historical fulfillments as well as a future one. On that day, the ancient Israelites received the Law of God at Mount Sinai and, later, He baptized the first century Church with His Holy Spirit. The third fulfillment takes place at the seventh trumpet of God when Jesus Christ returns and the saints are resurrected.

However, if we only see this day from an intellectual perspective then we are missing the vision of the greatest event yet to happen in mankind's history. Aside from Passover, it is a day that is most personal. The holydays are a timeline of God's plan of salvation, but the sequence of events focus on Jesus Christ and the firstfruits in modern times. Only after the coming fulfillment of Pentecost will worldwide events shift to focus on the final, worldwide salvation of mankind. Think about it. Passover has been fulfilled with the sacrifice of Jesus Christ. The Wavesheaf Offering has been fulfilled as well:

DANIEL 7:13-14 | *[Daniel]* saw visions in the night and, behold, **One like the Son of man came with the clouds of heaven, and came to the Ancient of Days [God the Father],** and they brought Him near before Him *[on the Wavesheaf Offering]*. 14 And **dominion and glory was given to Him, and a kingdom,** that all people, nations and languages should serve Him. **His dominion is an everlasting dominion** which shall not pass away, and His kingdom that which shall not be destroyed.

Today we cycle through the annual keeping of the Passover and the holydays anticipating the next fulfillment—the Day of Trumpets. It is the next event because the Holy Spirit was given on Pentecost in 30 A.D. However, once the first six trumpet plagues are accomplished beginning on the future Day of Trumpets, Pentecost returns to the forefront of prophecy. It is the day when the seventh and last trumpet is sounded:

REVELATION 11:15 Then **the seventh angel sounded his trumpet;** and *there* were great voices in heaven, saying, "**The kingdoms of this world have become the kingdoms of our Lord and His Christ,** and He shall reign into the ages of eternity."

The seventh trumpet of God is blown by the angel to announce the return of the King to this earth along with His angels:

MATTHEW 26:64 Jesus said to him, “You have said *it*. Moreover, I say to you, in the future **you shall see the Son of man** sitting at *the* right hand of power, and **coming in the clouds of heaven.**”

MATTHEW 24:31 And **He [Jesus Christ] shall send His angels with a great sound of a trumpet; and they shall gather together His elect** from the four winds, from one end of heaven to *the* other.

Can you see this with your mind’s eye? The Son of the “Ancient of Days” appears in the sky above on clouds *of heaven*. (These are not earthly clouds!) It **will** happen! It is not a fictional tale or story to entertain children. The LAMB HIMSELF will appear for all the world to see! We have “eternity in our hearts” (Ecc. 3:11) so our desire above all else is to see that day. Who can read the scriptures describing the events to come without a heartfelt longing and zeal?

Those who are alive at that time will be captivated by the sight in the sky. Looking up, they see Jesus Christ sitting upon a magnificent white horse and “His eyes [are] like a flame of fire, and on His head [are] many crowns. He [is] clothed with a garment dipped in blood and His name is The Word of God. Out of His mouth goes a sharp sword.” (Rev. 19:11-15 paraphrased). Many in the world will be overcome with fear and terror, but those who love God will be amazed and rejoice. No words could ever prepare someone for such a sight.

What occurs next happens “**in an instant**, in the twinkling of an eye” when “the dead [are] raised incorruptible.” (1 Cor. 15:52). Imagine it if you can! The next moment of your life, you are standing next to an angelic being who is shining with the glory of a spirit body. As you look around, you see thousands upon thousands of angels and saints in white robes—every one of them in radiant glory! As your bewilderment turns to joy, you realize that you are now an eternal, spirit being. No more pain or fear or worry, only a feeling of joy beyond words!

The next thing you know, the angel beside you guides your first steps as you lift off this earth, rising slowly at first, toward the cloud above that is brilliantly lit by the glory of our Savior. As you step onto it, you find yourself standing (on a cloud!) before our great and mighty King of all kings who is sitting on a beautiful white horse. I imagine that, without a word, all kneel and shout “Hallelujah” (praise Jehovah!) in unison. Who can think upon these things and not be overcome with tears of rejoicing. Salvation has come! But there is more; much more:

HEBREWS 12:22-23 But **you have come to Mount Zion**, and to **the city of the living God, heavenly Jerusalem**; and to **an innumerable company of angels**; **23 To the joyous festival gathering**; and **to the church of the firstborn**, registered *in the book of life* in heaven; and to God, *the Judge of all*; and to *the spirits of the just who have been perfected*;

Traveling without the limits of space and time, the multitude of saints and angels are led by Jesus Christ to the city of our God atop the true Mount Zion, somewhere in the heavens. There, Jesus Christ will “bring [us] into the presence of [God the Father’s] own glory” (Jude 1:24).

REVELATION 14:1-2 And I looked, and I beheld **the Lamb standing on Mount Sion, and with Him one hundred and forty-four thousand**, having His Father’s name written on their foreheads. 2 Then I heard a **voice from heaven, like the sound of many waters, and like the sound of great thunder**;

There, the Father of us all is sitting upon a throne in the heavenly temple, having an “appearance like a jasper stone and a sardius stone; and a rainbow was around the throne, like an emerald in its appearance” (Rev. 4:3). In front of His throne are the twenty four elders sitting upon thrones and we watch in awe and silence as they cast their crowns before the Great King and proclaim together, “Worthy are You, O Lord, to receive glory and honor and power.” (Rev. 4:11). Seeing God the Father in all His glory would be a terrifying sight if we were flesh but, for the firstborn saints, it is one of incredible wonder, delight, and “exceeding joy” (Jude 1:24). Such joy cannot be put into words—it is something that only our hearts will be able to describe.

Who can imagine the reality of our arrival in the third heaven? As we look out from the top of Mount Zion, we are surrounded by the incredible vista of the vast universe of stars, galaxies of all shapes, exploding supernovae, and planets of all sizes and colors:

PSALMS 19:1-3 **The heavens declare the glory of God**, and the firmament proclaims His handiwork. 2 Day after day they pour forth speech, and night after night they reveal knowledge. 3 There is no speech nor language where their voice is not heard.

All of us long for the moment that we hear God speak for the first time and we will never forget it when it happens. His voice, sounding like many rushing waters and thunder all mixed together, will bring joy and peace and comfort. His words will be like a blanket of love and kindness that comforts each of His children who endured this evil world.

At some point after arriving, our loving Father personally seals each one of us by writing **His name** on our foreheads! From that moment on through eternity, we are the children of the Most High God. If someone were to ask who our father is, we can now say, “the high and lofty everlasting Creator God!” I can think of no greater honor than to be a son (or daughter) of God. Not just *called* a son of God, but to actually BE His son in the spirit.

But then the time comes when our Lord Jesus Christ, standing next to His Father, calls us one by one to approach Their throne. As we stand before the throne, Jesus personally presents to each one of us a gift from both of Them—a pure, white stone with our new name written upon it in beautiful gold lettering (Rev. 2:17)! After receiving it, we look up

and see the faces of God the Father and Jesus Christ shining upon us. God the Father then speaks the words our hearts longed to hear the most, “Well done, my child!” Perhaps we will exchange a holy kiss of love (1 Thes. 5:26, et al; 1 Pet. 5:14). After all have received their new names, the sound of music falls upon our ears and the words of a song appear in our minds:

REVELATION 14:2 ... and I heard **the sound of lyre players** playing their lyres. 3 And **they were singing a new song** before the throne, and before the four living creatures and the elders. And no one was able to learn the song except the hundred *and* forty-four thousand, who were redeemed from the earth.

What will we sing? No except Jesus Christ knows. He has reserved those words only for the firstfruits:

PSALM 40:3 And **He [Jesus Christ] has put a new song in my mouth, even praise to our God [the Father]** ...

But the irresistible desire in our hearts will cause us to perfectly sing a song of praises to God the Father. We suffered and are healed! We endured and are saved! We died and are alive! We obeyed and are rewarded! We were flesh and are spirit!

Then comes the moment that God the Father presents the bride of firstfruits to His Son. The Father pronounces them Husband and wife, finalizing the marriage. God then honors all with a wedding supper:

REVELATION 19:7-9 Let us be glad and shout with joy; and let us give glory to Him; for **the marriage of the Lamb has come, and His wife has made herself ready.** 8 And it was granted to her that she should be clothed in fine linen, pure and bright; for the fine linen is the righteousness of the saints. 9 And he said to me, “Write: Blessed are those who are called to **the marriage supper of the Lamb.**” And he said to me, “These are the true words of God.”

Brethren, while I have taken poetic license in a couple of places, this is my vision and this is your vision. This is the vision of the next fulfillment of Pentecost. Hold onto this vision! Can there be anything else for us in this life? Who would trade anything for such a glory, such an honor, such a joy, and such an eternity!

May God’s grace and peace be upon you!

Steven Greene

<https://sabbathreflections.org>

SABBATH THOUGHT 2022-06-11—A WORLD DECEIVED

May God bless you on His Sabbath day!

Satan is the name of the wicked god of this world. It is a Hebrew word that means adversary or opponent. He is also called the Devil—*diabolos* in the Greek—meaning slanderer. He is also variously called the Tempter, Prince of Demons, Beelzebul (meaning “Lord of Flies” or “Lord of Dung”), and Father of Lies. The Bible describes him as a serpent-like being:

REVELATION 12:9 And **the great dragon** was cast out, **the ancient serpent** who is called the Devil and Satan, who is deceiving the whole world; he was cast down to the earth, and his angels were cast down with him.

When the earth only consisted of two people, Satan came to Eve having the form of a serpent with legs. The Greek word for *ancient* can also mean *original*. I have wondered if he appeared in that form either because it fit his own self-image or because God forbade him to take the form of a man and he chose the serpent. Regardless, the Bible never really describes his physical appearance aside from that of a serpent or dragon. Here is the best detail we have:

REVELATION 12:3 And another sign was seen in heaven: and behold, a great **red** dragon, having **seven heads** and **ten horns**, and **seven crowns on his heads**;

Satan was originally a cherub and Ezekiel provides us with details of their appearance. Cherubim look “like burning coals of fire” (Eze. 1:13), so red is a dominant color. Seven heads are possibly unique to Satan because other cherubim are described as having four faces (Eze. 1:10-11). Why does Satan have seven heads and other cherubim seemingly one? No one knows.

There is little reliable information about dragons. There are, however, many pictures, paintings, and sculptures. From these, there are a few things that seem to be a common theme. Many times they are depicted as a serpent with legs. This fits with the original description of the serpent in Genesis 3 before God cursed it to crawl upon its belly (Gen. 3:14). Dragons are usually portrayed with wings that are also a feature of cherubim (Eze. 10). This fits since Satan was a cherub at the throne of God (Eze. 28:14-16). Many pictures of dragons show a skull with prominent horns, also consistent with the description of Satan. Knowledge of ancient people and their evil practices was transmitted across the great flood and Ham and his wife were likely the source of much of it, so the paintings and sculptures we see today likely have a basis in reality.

Buildings throughout the world, whether ancient or modern, are dominated by “artistic” displays of serpents, dragons, pagan gods, gargoyles, and many other terrible beings.

Visitors to historic homes of the ultra-wealthy find these are common centerpieces that adorn their structures and gardens. In fact, for all their wealth, they proudly decorate them with all manner of evil icons and pagan sculptures. Even their paintings, especially family portraits, include medallions, coat-of-arms, or societal memberships that have a basis in evil leagues and organizations. I challenge anyone to show me a family of great wealth and power whose buildings feature anything but evil works of art.

Did you know that 20 out of 45 U.S. presidents were known members of one or more secret societies, including George Washington? They were members of the Freemasons, Order of Odd Fellows, Flat Hat Club Society, Skull & Bones, Order of Hoo-Hoo, Order of the Red Friars, etc. Does God do anything in secret? No! There is a difference between a society that has limited membership and a secret one. Limiting membership to gender, age, or common interests or activities is not necessarily evil; however, a secret one is obviously doing things they do not want to publish.

ISAIAH 29:15 Woe to **those who go deep to hide their purpose** from the LORD! And **their works are in the dark**, and they say, "Who sees us? And who knows us?"

The sad part is many of them know that "the triumphing of the wicked *is* short" (Job 20:5) but still refuse to turn to God and rather suffer the poverty and trials of this life so they can have the hope of eternal life.

Excluding Saul, David, and Solomon who were kings over all 12 tribes of Israel, there were only seven of the twenty kings over Judah that were righteous before God. Two others, Joash and Amaziah, while not entirely evil had many failings. In contrast, all nineteen kings over the ten tribes were evil. Not a single one was called righteous by God. Moreover, their legacy continues for all of the nations descended from Abraham today. We have been ruled by wicked men from our beginnings and today is no exception. The sole reason for whatever we might call "good" where we live is because God was merciful in fulfilling His promises to Abraham.

George Washington belonged to a secret evil society and, even though he fought to establish the U.S., God ensured that everything he did brought about His promises to Abraham. Men such as these were much like Balaam who was forced to bless Israel even though he desired to curse it. Regardless, they are all either deceived or in full knowledge of their wickedness.

We like to imagine that the country we live in was founded on the righteousness of God, but the reality is quite different. Visit any historic home or building and you will see magnificent displays of opulence. Guides will tell the stories of how the elite built their wealth. I have not heard of a single one who established their life by good and righteous works to God. It seems most visitors are so distracted by the "shiny" things of the homes and monuments that they cannot see or just ignore the evil in them. Today, many statues

of leading men and women as well plaques with Bible verses are being removed or destroyed. Do these same people demand the estates and monuments built by those who worship Satan be torn down? No! The nations who are supposedly “under God” continue in the ways of the evil kings of the ten tribes. Worse yet, they not only glorify their handiwork but continue to build even more.

From the time of the apostles, the mission of what is now the Catholic Church has been to destroy the first century Christians and their descendent believers. Have you wondered why they do not openly continue their persecution of Christian organizations today? Is it because the world is more civilized? I think not. While the bloodshed actually continues in parts of the world today, I think the Catholic Church is satisfied that few of the world’s corporate church organizations keep the seventh-day Sabbath. Because it is the sign of God’s covenant people, they are satisfied to allow, at least for now, the world to call the first day of the week (Sunday) their “Sabbath.” This narrative also fits with the Muslim countries who keep the sixth day of the week (Friday). Curiously, Muslim was started with the approval of the Catholic Church and they still have a close relationship behind the scenes to this day. Of course, other so-called religions such as Shintoism, Buddhism, Hinduism, etc. have no Sabbath day at all. As long as the world rejects the Sabbath, Satan and the Catholic Church are content to leave them alone in their deception and lies.

In concert with the Catholic Church are the ultra-wealthy and powerful who are not ashamed to display their loyalty to Satan in all of their dwelling places. Oddly enough, very few of these people (none that I know about) ever promote the theory of evolution. Could this be because they know it is a false teaching and that God created everything? Satan certainly knows it because he witnessed it. Would followers of Satan deny it since he can attest to God’s creation? I have found that scientists who believe in evolution are the most ignorant of all people—they reject any idea of a spirit realm. If you have ever been around such people, you do not have to wait long for them to talk about their great accomplishments, promoting themselves above all others. They are consumed with their own pride.

ROMANS 1:22-23 While **professing themselves** to be **the wise ones**, they became fools 23 And changed the glory of the incorruptible God **into the likeness of an image of corruptible man, and of birds, and four-footed creatures, and creeping things.**

The last part sounds like evolution in several regards. They think that mankind, made in the image of God, evolved from “creeping things.” I love that phrase because, for all their smugness, they still proudly proclaim they came from the lowest of life forms. I have worked with a number of “wise ones” who reject any idea that God exists. They truly believe the physical world is all there is, so evolution is the “religion” that satisfies them. The Catholic Church does not put much effort into denying it because Satan would rather have them believe in nothing than the true God.

The reality is that Satan has deceived the entire world (Rev. 12:9). Not some or even most of it—**all** of it; except for the Catholic Church and the few ultra-powerful elite. For them, nothing need change as long as the world worships God on any day but the seventh-day Sabbath or rejects God very existence. As long as those are true, the Satan has achieved his goals.

Most concerning is that believers often have a world view that does not reflect the extent to which this world has been corrupted by Satan. The reality is that the majority of people are deceived. While the Bible is freely available to the world, they receive the truth of God's word built upon lies of Satan—just like Eve did. The great lie about the seventh-day Sabbath is a barrier to true knowledge and understanding of salvation. It is the key to all things pertaining to God, which is why it was the very first thing God taught the ancient Israelites. It came in the form of a lesson that they were taught every week for forty years with the manna. God emphasized the Sabbath 2,080 times over the majority of their lifetime through the most basic of human needs—physical food. However, Satan's influence is so powerful that he caused them to forget the Sabbath in a short time. If nothing else, I hope you have a greater appreciation for the power of Satan's ability to deceive. Though the wicked of this world loudly proclaim their evil through their statues and works of art, the world does not even question it much less denounce it.

Brethren, do not underestimate Satan's power and influence upon this world. Pentecost is past but I hope you resolve to continue in the remembrance of that day. Pentecost is about our COVENANT of eternal life. It is when God instituted the new covenant when the Holy Spirit was given in 30 A.D. It will also be the day when the new covenant is fulfilled with the resurrection of the firstfruits of His children. I pray you continue in these things—always:

MALACHI 3:16-18 Then **those fearing the LORD spoke together**, *each* man to his neighbor. And the LORD listened and heard. And a book of remembrance was written before Him **for those who feared the LORD, and for those who thought upon His name**. 17 "And they shall be Mine," says the LORD of hosts, "in the day that I will make up My own special jewels. And I will spare them as a man spares his own son who serves him." 18 Then you shall return, and discern between the righteous and the wicked, between the one who serves God, and the one who does not serve Him.

May God's grace and peace be upon you!

Steven Greene

<https://sabbathreflections.org>

SABBATH THOUGHT 2022-06-18—BEWARE FALSE PROPHETS

May God bless you on His Sabbath day!

Beginning with Donald Trump’s campaign for the presidency, the wicked of the world emerged en-masse from their dark places wherein they whispered the thoughts of their black hearts. They no longer now even bother to try to conceal their hatred. They have discarded any veils of rational speech and good works in which they cloaked their evil deeds. Over the decades, they put on false appearances of truth and national service in order to infiltrate critical levels of all governments, law enforcement, military, judicial systems, and media around the world. And they have massive funding behind them that ensnares the young and innocent into their circle of iniquity.

Everything is reversed. The wicked no longer fear public exposure because the media has become a unified global voice that buries truth and promotes lies. Those who look for truth find a few voices here and there that can barely be heard above the din of hostile deceit. Good is evil and evil is good¹, they say. Satan has literally unleashed his bitter hatred and destruction upon this world.

Those that are even remotely familiar with terms and people such as One World Order, Blackrock, World Economic Forum, the Elite, the 300, the Great Reset, George Soros, Bill Gates, Plandemic, Big Pharma, and so on are encouraged by some alternative claims that there are nameless people working against the onslaught of wickedness. In the background of all the evil are reports of a semblance of growing freedom-loving resistance movements to counter this world of evil.

The problem is that these stories have been preached for decades and none have ever come to fruition. The Bible never speaks of a “reprieve” before the Great Tribulation or the Day of the Lord. God says our times will be full of “dogs, and sorcerers, and fornicators, and murderers, and idolaters, and everyone who **loves and devises a lie**” (Revelation 22:15). Does it matter if a lie comes from someone who is evil or one who is well-intentioned? Put your trust in no man but nowadays I must caution against even trusting those who appear to fight against the evil of the world.²

EZEKIEL 13:16 **“The prophets of Israel** who prophesy concerning Jerusalem, and **who see visions of peace for her, when there is no peace,**” says the LORD.

¹ Isaiah 5:20.

² Psalm 118:8.

While this is generally against the truly wicked, does this not apply to those who promise better times? Some claim that there is a covert resistance that will rise up against the evil, but have you ever known any of their prophecies to come to pass? In fact, it is the wicked of this world who are *fulfilling* end-time prophetic events while those who preach of a reprieve have no end-time biblical prophecy to stand upon. If we are waiting for a time when the latter-day nations turn back to God before the return of Jesus Christ, we may find that the Tribulation is upon us and catch us unprepared. Such wishful thinking is just not indicated anywhere in the Bible and it is unlikely that wickedness will be turned to righteousness in this age. In fact, in the end-times there will be those who falsely prophesy against the evil in the world today:

JEREMIAH 14:11-14 Then the LORD said to me, “**Do not pray for this people for good.** 12 When they fast, I will not hear their cry; and when they offer burnt offering and a grain offering, I will not accept them. But I will consume them by the sword, and by the famine, and by the plague.” 13 Then I said, “Ah, O Lord GOD! Behold, **the prophets are saying to them, ‘You shall not see the sword, nor shall you have famine; but I will give you true peace in this place.’**” 14 And the LORD said to me, “**The prophets prophesy lies in My name; I did not send them, nor have I commanded them, nor did I speak to them. They prophesy to you a false vision and a worthless divination, and a thing of no value, and the deceit of their heart.**”

One problem is that the U.S. legislated against our children praying to God and reading the Bible. All of mankind are born with knowledge of good and evil. The Bible is the only influence for a child to “know to refuse the evil and choose the good” (Isaiah 7:16). As the previous generations who were taught to respect the Bible grow older and go to their graves, their void is being continuously filled by the ungodly. So, even those who try to resist the wicked of this world cannot properly distinguish between good and evil any longer—they never learned how to worship God as a child. Instead, they speak deceitful words even if they are from a sincere heart.

Even so, God did promise that “If My people, who are called by My name, shall humble themselves and pray, and seek My face, and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven and will forgive their sin and will heal their land.” (2 Chr. 7:14). However, it is not enough to only fight *against* evil—the people must also *turn back* and start **obeying** God.

The world is no longer even a shadow of the moral state of fifty years ago (as sad as that was even then). God’s people are playing a long end-game now. What we do at this time is important to our salvation. It is certainly prudent to prepare physically for the hard times to come. If possible, having extra food, water, fuel, etc. is not only useful in case of natural calamities, but it can be helpful when the disaster comes at the hand of men. However, whether we are physically able to endure for a week, a month, or more, our

physical stores and supplies will eventually run out if they are not stolen by stealth or force. (Still, these things are sensible for those with the means.)

But what about those who are unable to provide emergency stocks for themselves either due to poverty, health, or living situations? Without electricity a diabetic cannot store insulin. Others who require live-saving medications will run out eventually. Many are bedridden and invalid due to terrible diseases and sufferings. They are completely reliant upon a spouse or caregiver. God's people are, in most cases, scattered apart. Even if some have the means to provide for others, how would those that have the provisions help others that live hours apart from them?

While we are physical beings who are utterly dependent upon daily things for physical life, spiritual preparation is our only true hope. Seek God with all your heart, mind, soul, and strength³. Fast often. Pray more than often. As you have opportunity, do good works for others. Grow in agape love—first toward God, then to the brethren, then to neighbors, and, finally, toward enemies. This is having, giving, living, and being filled with the love of God. Do not be anxious about physical needs even as we see the catastrophe of evil approaching. Verse 34 of Matthew 6 comes to our minds fairly often: “do not be anxious about tomorrow; for tomorrow shall take care of the *things* of itself. Sufficient for the day *is* the evil of that *day*.” but the entire chapter is intended to get us to focus on God rather than the physical. I encourage you to read it.

Verses 1-4 focus on giving alms, not for our own glory, but out of a humble and contrite heart. We learn from verses 5-8 that our prayers are a very personal matter and God desires to hear from us so He can provide for our needs. If our prayers are patterned after Jesus Christ (verses 9-15), God and His kingdom are first in our lives. He is also the one who supplies our “daily bread,” both physical **and** spiritual food. Lastly, we must always reconcile offenses where possible and seek God's protection against evil.

Beginning in verse 16 is a reminder to fast. This is especially true for those who are not suffering major afflictions so that we stay close to God and do not become prideful. Those under heavy burdens and trials are likely already mentally, emotionally, and spiritually in a state of fasting even if they are unable to do so. The rest of the chapter warns against taking our minds away from God or letting fear and worry of physical problems distract from the eternal spiritual goal.

All of us know of the Beatitudes. They describe the perfect mind of Christ during His life on this earth. However, have you ever noticed that all of these “blessings” require suffering for the kingdom of God?

³ Mark 12:30.

MATTHEW 5:2-11 And He [*Jesus Christ*] opened His mouth *and* taught them, saying, 3 “Blessed *are* the **poor in spirit**, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. 4 Blessed *are* those who **mourn**, for they shall be comforted. 5 Blessed *are* the **meek**, for they shall inherit the earth. 6 Blessed *are* those who **hunger and thirst after righteousness**, for they shall be filled. 7 Blessed *are* the **merciful**, for they shall find mercy. 8 Blessed *are* the **pure in heart**, for they shall see God. 9 Blessed *are* the **peacemakers**, for they shall be called *the* sons of God. 10 Blessed *are* those who have been **persecuted for the sake of righteousness**, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. 11 Blessed *are* you when they shall **reproach you, and shall persecute you, and shall falsely say every wicked thing against you**, for My sake.

Every condition that is a blessing is the exact opposite of this present evil age. Because the world disregards righteousness, we will suffer accordingly. Consider how hard it is to be “poor in spirit,” to “mourn,” to be “meek,” to “hunger and thirst after righteousness,” to be “merciful,” to be “pure in heart,” and be “peacemakers.” The world mocks those who are poor in spirit, laughs at those who mourn, trample on the meek, persecute those who seek after righteousness, scorn the merciful, sneer at the pure in heart, and war against peacemakers. The world will persecute, reproach, and lie about us because they hate God and Jesus Christ and we reject their evil ways. However, though we suffer in this life and are preparing to stand against Satan himself, the promises of God are sure and eternal. Jesus Christ said:

MATTHEW 5:12 Rejoice and be filled with joy, for **great is your reward in heaven; for in this same manner they persecuted the prophets who were before you.**

Matthew chapters 5 and 6 were spoken consecutively by Jesus Christ. Chapter 5 tells us we must suffer to have the blessings of eternal life and chapter 6 tells us how to endure. Remember, God’s great desire is for us to be in His Family but the Great King and God Almighty is there to help in the coming time of need. Rest assured because—against Him—evil will never prevail.

May God’s grace and peace be upon you!

Steven Greene

<https://sabbathreflections.org>

SABBATH THOUGHT 2022-06-25—GARDEN IN EDEN

May God bless you on His Sabbath day!

This week we found a fawn that was several weeks old bedding down in our yard. Since it was not a newborn, it must have been moved there by its mother recently. Curious, I was able to get close enough to notice that it had injuries around its nose and eyes from being attacked, likely by coyotes that roam around or vultures or hawks.

AUTHOR’S NOTE: Before anyone suggests I call the wildlife department, there is little they could do except clean its wounds, nurse it until it is weaned, and then release it, hoping it survives on its own or finds a herd that accepts it (not usually the case). The mother, on the other hand, will keep the wounds cleaned, nurse it, and tend to it until it is ready to follow the doe herd. Also, the best protection for a fawn is to remain in its bed where the mother can find it. A doe does not stay with a fawn except to nurse it. A fawn has very little scent, unlike an adult doe, so it is difficult for a predator to locate one by scent alone. Its protection lies in concealment apart from the mother.

The constant battles of predator and prey are the way of nature. Even insects have a daily and nightly battle. Apparently, all of this is a continuation of the original Genesis creation. Notice where Adam was formed:

GENESIS 2:7-8, 15 Then the LORD **God formed man of the dust of the ground**, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living being. 8 And the LORD **God planted a garden eastward in Eden; and there He put the man [Adam]** whom He had formed. ... 15 And the LORD **God took the man and put him into the garden of Eden** to dress it and keep it.

Adam was originally formed from ground outside of the garden. Placing him in the garden provided Adam a very special place to live. Notice that God filled the garden with pleasant and good things:

GENESIS 2:9 And out of the ground the LORD **God caused to grow every tree that is pleasant to the sight and good for food**. The tree of life also was in the middle of the garden, and the tree of *the* knowledge of good and evil.

The garden was different from the rest of the world. When God formed the world, He filled it with EVERY plant, animal, bird, fish, and insect that is both good **and** bad. However, God Himself intentionally and carefully PLANTED the garden. In a garden, weeds, thorns, thistles, etc. are anything but desirable. God’s garden **only** included that which is “pleasant to the sight and good for food.” So the garden in Eden was a special

place for Adam and Eve to live. It was also a safe place for them, free of dangerous plants, animals, and insects. If it was not, then it would be very uncomfortable considering that they were completely naked¹. Where my wife and I live, clothes are sometimes not even enough to protect against just ticks, chiggers, and ants.

Notice that God created all these things **before** He planted the garden in Eden. Except for that singular place, from the beginning the world was a harsh environment in which to live. When God proclaimed everything He made was *good*, it must have been in the sense that nature was balanced by all that He made. Every physical thing has a lifespan—they live and die and return to dust. It was all in equilibrium.

God also made different types of animals. He created two categories: “livestock” and “beasts of the earth”:

GENESIS 1:24-25 And God said, “Let the earth bring forth living creatures after their kind—**livestock, creeping things, and beasts of the earth**—each after its kind.” And it was so. 25 And God made the beasts of the earth after their kind, and the livestock after their kind, and every creeping thing upon the earth after their kind. And God saw that it was good.

GENESIS 2:19-20 And out of the ground the LORD God *had* formed every animal of the field and every fowl of the air—and brought *them* to Adam to see what he would call them. And whatever Adam called *each* living creature, that *became* its name. 20 And Adam gave names to all the **livestock**, and to the birds of the air, and to every **animal of the field**, but there was not found a helper compatible for Adam.

“Livestock” and “animals of the field” (or “beasts of the earth”) are different. When used together, livestock refers to clean animals that can be eaten for food and were usually meant to be raised and bred on farms. In contrast, “animals of the field” are usually unclean. It applies to carnivores, herbivores, and omnivores but ones that are not meant to be eaten. Many times in the Bible it refers to dangerous animals. For example:

LEVITICUS 26:22 I will also send **wild beasts** among you which shall bereave you. And I will destroy your livestock, and make you few. And your highways shall be deserted.

The phrase “wild beasts” is from the same two Hebrew words as “animals of the field.” The same Hebrew words are also used when talking about the sheep (God’s people) being a prey to dangerous animals, i.e., “beasts of the field”:

EZEKIEL 34:5, 8 And they were scattered for lack of a shepherd. And **they [the sheep] became food to all the beasts of the field** when they were

¹ Genesis 2:25.

scattered. ... 8 “As I live,” says the Lord GOD, “surely because **My flock became a prey, and My flock became food to every beast of the field** because *there was* no shepherd, nor did My shepherds search *for* My flock, but the shepherds fed themselves and did not feed My flock,”

Because the earth can be a harsh environment, God put Adam and Eve into a protected garden with only the most beautiful and fruitful plants and beneficial weather. The Bible does not specify, but any animals in the garden were likely not a threat to them. However, after they sinned, God gave Adam and Eve animal skins to wear. This was just prior to expelling them from the garden² because they needed clothes to protect them outside of it. From the time they were created, God intended to provide a protected place for them to live and prosper. But all of that changed when they sinned. Since then, mankind has had to deal with dangerous and harmful animals, poisonous plants, biting insects, weeds, thorns, thistles, etc. In addition, there can be hazardous and destructive weather. The world is, to say the least, not a kind and gentle place at times.

Who wouldn't like to live in God's garden? Enjoying beautiful things is part of who we are—most people plant their properties with beautiful flowers, trees, vegetable plants, grass, etc. The problem is, as all gardeners know, it is a continual job to keep out weeds, insects, and animals that would otherwise destroy them. Weather can also be a problem—the drought of summer can quickly kill off a garden, flowerbed, or lawn. In other words, it is a constant battle to keep a garden or yard beautiful.

Our lives are similar. Within believers is the seed of the beauty of God's holiness³. God planted that seed when He gave us His Holy Spirit. We are God's garden⁴ and, like all gardens, we need to tend it with care. We know to watch for the worst dangers such as false doctrines. We also try hard to be cognizant of Satan's devices⁵ so we can avoid idolatry or breaking the Sabbath among his many never-ending temptations. In other words, the threat of the “beasts of the field” are many, but sometimes they are also the easiest to see and avoid. Just like big animals, we can protect ourselves with a spiritual “fence”.

However, there are many “creeping things” that we need to watch for. No fence can guard against them. And even if it did, a garden requires insects such as butterflies and bees to pollinate, lady bugs to eat aphids, and earthworms to compost it. The hard part is keeping out the caterpillars, moles, squirrels, rabbits, and other things that easily slip through a fence. Maintaining our gardens in Satan's world is an entirely different matter than those protected by God in a special place such as Eden.

² Genesis 3:21, 23-24.

³ Psalms 29:2; 96:9.

⁴ 1 Corinthians 3:6-8.

⁵ 2 Corinthians 2:11.

That is why there is a greater reward for the firstfruits. We are “gardens” that we must tend in the face of our enemy, Satan, who wants to destroy the fruits we try so hard to produce. Future children of God will not have to deal with those same threats, so the firstfruits face the greater challenge. The reality is that we seek to become a beautiful garden to God in the midst of evil. Without us, the world would be one full of ugly and useless plants. Look at the garden God is preparing in heaven:

REVELATION 22:1-2 Then he showed me a pure river of *the* water of life, clear as crystal, flowing out from the throne of God and of the Lamb. 2 **And in the middle of the street, and on this side and that side of the river, was the tree of life**, producing twelve *manner of* fruits, each month yielding its fruit; and the leaves of the tree *are* for *the* healing of the nations.

The Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil still exists upon this earth—it was never removed by God. While it was likely a beautiful tree, the fruit of it is poisonous and deadly. The Tree of Life, on the other hand, was “transplanted” from the garden in Eden after Adam and Eve’s sin to the new garden in heavenly Jerusalem⁶. There are now more than one and they line the street and river in front of God’s throne. The fruit and leaves of the Tree of Life provide the only cure for the poison of the fruit of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil.

Those God has called and chosen are now on a journey away from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil to find the Tree of Life. We desire to eat the fruit of it and be healed forever. However, the trek is narrow and difficult⁷ because the path is strewn with all manner of dangerous plants, animals, and insects. This world is not a garden of God’s choosing, but one tended by Satan to trip us up, cause us injury, or afflict us with deadly poison. It is sometimes hard to see very far ahead, but we know the destination ends at the Tree of Life. And when we arrive, we will eat of the most delicious fruit and be healed for ever and ever and ever. Amen.

REVELATION 22:14 Blessed *are* those who keep His commandments, that they may have the right **to eat of the tree of life**, and may enter by the gates into the city.

May God’s grace and peace be upon you!

Steven Greene

<https://sabbathreflections.org>

⁶ Revelation 21:10.

⁷ Matthew 7:13-14.

SABBATH THOUGHT 2022-07-02—AGAPE LOVE OF GOD

Baptism is a spiritual miracle. Simply put, a person must be immersed in water to symbolize being baptized into the death of Jesus Christ, hands are laid on his or her head, and an elder prays for God to give the person the Holy Spirit. When I was baptized years ago, it just seemed to be something that was perfectly right and normal. But if you think about it, water baptism could be a rather odd ceremony when someone hears about it for the first time.

Why water baptism? Because we are physical beings and there are certain physical acts that God requires of physical people that are an outward sign of our love, faith, and commitment to Him. It also establishes that moment forever in *our* memories. If that physical act was not required, would that day be as unforgettable for us or others who witness it?

Have you ever thought about how you felt prior to your baptism? While you probably recall the excitement of anticipation, I reckon (I have always liked that word) the vast majority of us felt an urgent longing to be baptized once we understood it. There comes a time when we realize the absolute need to have God's Holy Spirit for a deeper understanding of His word and to more fully obey Him. All who will be—or are already—baptized have felt that kind of burning desire. It is also a sign someone is ready.

It all begins with God calling us. As Christ said, “No one can come to Me unless the Father, Who sent Me, draws him; and I will raise him up at the last day.” (John 6:44). When a person's mind is opened by God, a yearning is awakened to obey His Law and commandments. This is *beginning* of God's agape love working in a person:

2 JOHN 1:6 And **this is the love of God: that we walk according to His commandments.** This is the commandment, exactly as you heard from *the* beginning, that you might walk in it.

A growing desire to obey God is a sign that a person is developing agape love. Why did John say this was something we heard from the “beginning?” Because that is exactly what God told the ancient Israelites:

DEUTERONOMY 11:1 “Therefore **you shall love the LORD your God, and keep His charge and His statutes and His judgments and His commandments** always.

A relationship with God begins in our minds—a desire to obey Him and know His truth. Keeping God's laws, statutes, precepts, judgments, and testimonies can, however, be a daunting task, which is why we must understand the sacrifice of Jesus Christ, repentance of sins, and God's forgiveness before baptism. Without understanding these (and without the Holy Spirit working with or being in a person), no one can truly obey God.

However, is agape love nothing more than obedience to God's Law? No! There is much more to it but it is the BEGINNINGS of it. Keeping His Law shows we commit to His way of life. It starts in our minds when we realize we have committed crimes—or sins—against the Most High Creator God. At that point, our conscience is convicting us and we seek repentance to God. God is then faithful to forgive us through the sacrifice of Jesus Christ¹. Coming to realize that we had a part in the death of Jesus Christ because of our sins is humbling, to say the least, especially since He died for us **while** we were still sinners². That is how much God agape-loves US!

As we continue growing in obedience and faithfulness to God, His agape love is growing as well. Even though the seed of agape love is manifested in our minds as obedience to God's Law, it continues to grow into something greater—something MUCH greater. Notice the first, great commandment:

MATTHEW 22:37 And Jesus said to him, “ ‘You shall **love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul**, and with all your mind.’

All begotten children of God are growing in agape love. Agape love begins in our minds but will eventually take root in our hearts. What does it mean to agape-love God with our hearts?

LUKE 14:26 “If anyone comes to Me and **does not hate [love less by comparison] his father, and mother, and wife, and children, and brothers and sisters, and, in addition, his own life** also, he cannot be My disciple.

Love for family or a friend is a heartfelt one. While all relationships begin in our minds, love must reside in our hearts to be true love. The heart is the core of our feelings and longings for the company of others. As the seed of agape love in us grows, we will begin to do things that *please* Him—not just keep the letter of the law. We spend more time with God and Jesus Christ in prayer. Real joy comes when we pray and study the Bible. Our lives become centered around the weekly Sabbaths, Passover, and the holydays. We also seek opportunities to be in the company of other saints who agape-love God where and when possible. At some point, agape love for God and Jesus Christ becomes greater than our love for family and friends. It does not mean we love them less. It just means we are agape-loving God more. Why? Because agape love is **God's perfect love in us**. His agape love is much greater than any human love for family and friends. How much greater?

1 JOHN 3:16 By this *very act [the sacrifice of Christ]* **we have known the love of God because He laid down His life for us: ...**

¹ 1 John 1:9.

² Romans 5:8.

God's agape love toward us is so great that He asked—and then watched—His Son suffer and die at the very hands of those He is bringing into His Family. The fullness of God's agape love is more than we can ever completely know in this physical life. This kind of agape love is why we many times relate to brethren more than those we are close to who are not yet converted:

JOHN 13:34 A **new commandment** I give to you: that **you love one another in the same way that I have loved you**, that *is how* you are to love one another.

How much did Jesus Christ agape-love us? He willingly endured torments and tortures unto death to save our lives even though He is God and we are weak, sinful, mortal humans. Notice that agape-loving the brethren is actually a *commandment*. In fact, both of the great commandments to agape-love God and our brethren are just that—commandments. But can anyone truly agape love God or the brethren simply by being obedient? No! That is why obedience to God's commandments is the *beginning* of agape love. In our hearts, agape love is something deeper than human love. Jesus Christ was the example of perfect agape love and we are commanded to agape-love each other in the same manner. Can we really have this kind of agape love? Yes!

1 JOHN 3:16 By this *very act [the sacrifice of Christ]* we have known the love of God because He laid down His life for us: and **we ourselves are to lay down our lives for the brethren.**

Notice the last part of 1 John 3:16 that I omitted before. Being willing to lay down our lives is proof of agape love being fulfilled in us. There have been many saints who laid down their lives for God's people **and** the world. Obviously not for the remission of sins, but out of agape love for God and the people who He will call to be a part of His kingdom.

There have been many martyrs for God. I think John often reflected upon this. He saw that kind of agape love in the other apostles who willingly sacrificed their lives for God, the gospel, His people, and this world. Read Hebrews 11, especially verses 32-37, and think about all the martyrs (the Greek word means *witness*) since the creation of Adam and Eve. John not only knew the ancient stories, but personally knew many who were murdered because they agape-loved God more than their lives. Of this, Jesus Christ said:

JOHN 15:13 **No one has greater love than this: that one lay down his life for his friends.**

That kind of heart—one that goes beyond just obeying the commandments—is truly someone who not only obeys God but is willing to give his or her life for Him and others. This is the *fullness* of agape love. It is the heart of someone who loves “God with all [their] heart, and with all [their] soul, and with all [their] mind, and with all [their]

strength.” (Mark 12:30). It begins in our minds, is our strength for living, and eventually takes root in our hearts. At that point, agape love is truly of the **soul**—our being.

And this is exactly what God is doing with His children. He is filling our human vessel with His agape love. But this is not something of this earth, so having agape love literally makes us into a new creation:

2 CORINTHIANS 5:17 Therefore, if anyone *be* in Christ, **he is a new creation**; the old things have passed away; behold, **all things have become new**.

How are we a NEW creation even though we are in the flesh? Our perspective toward God and the world is seen through the eyes of God. This is why all things are “new.” We see everything through the agape love of God and we are forever changed. This is how we can even obey God’s command to love our enemies:

MATTHEW 5:44 But I say to you, **love your enemies, bless those who curse you, do good to those who hate you, and pray for those who spitefully use you and persecute you,**

Few have ever lived who agape-loved their enemies, blessed their enemies, done good for their enemies, and prayed for their enemies with all sincerity. But God’s people do so because it is the perfection that God is working in us. He wants His children to have agape love in their very **souls**!

All of us are at different stages of growth as we continue life in this womb called the Earth, but God will bring all to the perfection of agape love. Some who are perfected are waiting in that temporary state of sleep called the grave while others will witness the return of Jesus Christ. However, we must ask God continually to us help grow in agape love—it is a prayer that He WILL answer. Ultimately, there is nothing more important in this physical life than having agape-love for God, Jesus Christ, the brethren, the world, and even our enemies. Why? Because we seek to be a part of the **Family of God** who are joined together through the fullness of agape love for each other. Our earthly family is but a shadow of the coming spiritual Family of God. God IS agape love³ and we also will BE agape love when we are born again! Not just in our mind, strength, and heart but in the very soul of our being.

May God’s grace and peace be upon you!

Steven Greene

<https://sabbathreflections.org>

³ 1 John 4:8, 16.

SABBATH THOUGHT 2022-07-09—THE ENEMY OF AGAPE LOVE

Agape love is a very powerful motive. It is thoughts and intents of the heart¹ to do good unto others². Anger, however, is a very dominating emotion that produces a desire to cause harm to others—it is lust for destruction and vengeance. But isn't there such a thing as "righteous anger"? The Bible has many examples of God's anger, so surely there must be a time and place for God's people to be angry. Take for example this scripture:

EPHESIANS 4:26 **When you become angry, do not sin.** Do not let the sun go down on your anger;

At first blush this appears to tell us how to be angry without sinning by assuaging our anger before the end of the day. Is it even possible to be angry and turn it off at the end of the day? How long does anger stay with us when someone offends us and refuses to repent or reconcile? How long is it before we put away anger when someone gossips about us? Is anger okay if it has a time limit? Notice some scriptures that address anger:

COLOSSIANS 3:8 But now, **you should also put off all these things: wrath, indignation, malice, blasphemy, and foul language from your mouth.**

PSALMS 37:8 **Cease from anger, and forsake wrath;** do not fret yourself, it leads only to evil.

GALATIANS 5:19-20 Now **the works of the flesh are** manifest, which are *these*: adultery, fornication, uncleanness, licentiousness, 20 Idolatry, witchcraft, **hatred**, strifes, jealousies, indignations, contentions, divisions, sects,

MATTHEW 5:22 But I say to you, **everyone who is angry with his brother without cause shall be subject to judgment.** Now *you have heard it said*, 'Whoever shall say to his brother, "Raca," shall be subject to *the judgment of the council.*' But *I say to you*, whoever shall say, 'You fool,' shall be subject to the fire of Gehenna.

PROVERBS 19:11 The discretion of **a man puts off his anger; and it is his glory to pass over a transgression.**

JAMES 1:20 Because **man's wrath does not work out God's righteousness.**

ROMANS 12:19 Beloved, **do not avenge yourselves; rather, leave this to God's wrath;** for it is written, " 'Vengeance is Mine! I will recompense,' says *the Lord.*"

¹ Hebrews 4:12.

² Galatians 6:10.

The word *leave* in Romans 12:19 is translated from two words: *give (didomi) place (topos)*. But *topos* can also mean *scabbard*. A scabbard is the place a sword is kept so that it does no harm. Figuratively, we must sheath our anger just as a sword is put into a scabbard so that it will not cause injury. We are to put away anger—only God has a right to anger and vengeance. I am not even certain what righteous anger is other than we use it to justify holding onto anger. In reality, **no scripture condones anger!**

So what was Paul talking about in Ephesians 4:26? Put it into context with the surrounding verses where Paul addressed relationships between brethren, reminding us that we were once like the gentiles—vain and alienated from God because of the hardness of our own hearts:

EPHESIANS 4:17-27, 30-32 So then, I declare and testify this in *the* Lord that you are no longer to walk even as the rest of *the* Gentiles are walking, in *the* vanity of their minds, 18 Having *their* understanding darkened, being alienated from the life of God through the ignorance that is in them, because of the hardness of their hearts. 19 They have cast off all feelings [*of love toward others*], and have given themselves up to licentiousness, to work every uncleanness with insatiable desire. 20 But you have not so learned Christ; 21 If indeed you have heard Him and have been taught in Him, according to *the* truth in Jesus: 22 That concerning your former conduct, you **put off the old man, which is corrupt according to deceitful lusts**; 23 And that you be renewed in the spirit of your mind; 24 And that you **put on the new man**, which according to God is created in righteousness and holiness of the truth. 25 Therefore, let each one put away lies and speak the truth with his neighbor because **we are members of one another**. 26 *When* you become angry, do not sin. Do not let the sun go down on your anger; 27 Neither give place to the devil. ... 30 And grieve not the Holy Spirit of God by which you have been sealed for *the* day of redemption. 31 Let all bitterness, and indignation, and wrath, and clamor, and evil speaking be removed from you, together with all malice; 32 And be kind and tenderhearted toward one another, forgiving one another, even as God has also in Christ forgiven you.

Paul said we are to walk in “righteousness and holiness of the truth.” The truth is that there is no place for anger in the Body of Christ. We must put away anger toward our brethren because it is something from our “old man”—an unconverted mind and heart. Anger is an opening for Satan because it grieves the Holy Spirit. What does it mean to grieve the Holy Spirit? It means to cause heavy sorrow. How can we cause sorrow to the Holy Spirit, since it is the power of God? By suppressing the agape love and the fruits it produces in us. Anger prevents God’s power working in us to nurture agape love. In other words, anger is the enemy of agape love. But verse 26 above is a quote from a Psalm:

PSALMS 4:4 Tremble [with anger], and sin not: commune with your own heart upon your bed, and be still. Selah.

The word tremble means to quiver with extreme emotion, especially anger. Paul quoted this scripture but said instead “be angry, and sin not”. The Psalmist said that we are to “commune with your own heart upon your bed.” Commune means to utter or declare. In essence, this says to declare the anger that is in our hearts in our prayers and put our trust in God. Anger is contrary to agape love. As we pray about our thoughts and feelings, we are to “be still”; that is, wait. Wait for what? For God. When angry, we are agitated in our minds and bodies. We must replace the anger with forbearance, peace, quiet, and calm within our hearts by trusting God to help. In doing so, we are letting God perfect His agape love in us!

Is there a timetable for being angry? Yes, but it is not what most think. Ephesians 4:26 does not expect us to entirely eliminate anger by “sundown.” Instead, we are to begin dealing with it as soon as possible in prayer to God. When we have feelings of anger, commune with God and ask for His help and peace to replace the anger. Prayer is a sacrifice³ on the altar before God’s throne; therefore, pray that “the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, shall guard your hearts and your thoughts” (Philippians 4:7). Anger that festers long will lead to hatred and hatred leads to a root of bitterness⁴.

God doesn’t want our hearts filled with anger but, rather, with His peace. He promises that peace will rule in our hearts⁵ if we resist the anger that is the enemy of agape love. Jesus Christ dealt with the anger and hatred that the world threw at Him in His prayer: “**Father, forgive them**, for they do not know what they are doing.” (Luke 23:34). Mankind laid upon Him the worst of their angry hearts—and He forgave them. How was it even possible for Jesus Christ to forgive the entire world? He did not allow anger to limit the Holy Spirit in Him. God’s agape love and forgiveness produces a peace that the world does not comprehend—and He promises to give us that same peace:

JOHN 14:27 Peace I leave with you; **My peace I give to you**; not as the world gives do I give *it* to you. **Let not your heart be troubled**, nor let it fear.

Putting aside anger is challenging; it requires time in prayer with God. But there is more to it than that. We must also “**pursue** righteousness, faith, love *and* peace with those who are calling on the Lord out of a pure heart.” (Timothy 2:22). *Pursue* is the Greek word *dioko* and it is a very strange word. It means to *pursue* after something good or to *persecute* others for destruction. We have a choice: persecute others in our angry thoughts or pursue agape love with others to their good. Either way, we are *dioko*-ing.

The fact is that God forbears and suffers long with **us**: “Or do **you** despise the riches of His [God’s] kindness and forbearance and long-suffering, not knowing that the graciousness of God leads you to repentance?” The reality is that none of us have any

³ Psalms 141:2; Hebrews 13:15.

⁴ Hebrews 12:15.

⁵ Colossians 3:15.

right to be angry with **anyone** (“righteous anger”). The only one who does is Jesus Christ but He is so full of agape love that He asked His Father to forgive the whole world—including us. If we continue in anger in this life, do we expect it to just disappear when we are in the Kingdom? If we are angry with one of the brethren, how will we be able to agape-love them for ALL ETERNITY? Does anyone actually believe we can put off reconciling until Christ returns? There is a warning for anyone who believes as such:

1 JOHN 3:15 **Everyone who hates his brother is a murderer, and you know that no murderer has eternal life dwelling within him.**

Do we hate someone and refuse to reconcile? Have we been angry with someone for years? If we fail to reconcile in this life, then there is only “a terrifying expectation of inevitable judgment and of fierce fire, which will devour the adversaries of God.” (Hebrews 10:27). Anger is like the sword in a scabbard we wear on our belt. Even though we are sometimes tempted to draw that sword, we must pursue agape love to keep it sheathed and refrain from using it. Anger is something that we should not have toward God’s people or the world. We must put away anger. Always. The whole of Colossians chapter 3 is a message of dealing with anger but notice these verses in particular:

COLOSSIANS 3:13-14 **Forbearing one another, and forgiving one another** if anyone has a complaint against another; even **as Christ forgave you, so also you should forgive.** 14 And **above all these things put on love,** which is *the* bond of perfection.

The phrase at the end of Colossians 3:13 is worded very similarly to the new commandment pronounced by Jesus Christ: “in the same way that I have loved you, that *is how* you are to love one another” (John 13:34). We are commanded to follow the example of Jesus Christ in both agape love, forgiving others, and putting away anger.

Everyone gets angry on occasion. The “sons of thunder” (James and John) knew anger. They once wanted to call down fire on a city⁶. In response, Jesus said “the Son of man did not come to destroy men’s lives, **but to save them**”⁷. Just as Christ forgave us for our own salvation, putting away anger toward others allows God to work to save them—AND us. In the kingdom of God, there will only be those in the fullness of agape love.

May God’s grace and peace be upon you!

Steven Greene

<https://sabbathreflections.org>

⁶ Luke 9:51-56.

⁷ Luke 9:56.

SABBATH THOUGHT 2022-07-16—JESHURUN GREW FAT

If you want to know what the tribulation could be like, look no further than the country of India today. The majority religion is Hindu but it is not the kind that the music group called the Beatles swooned about in the 1960s. The members of that popular band brought back with them concepts of karma and reincarnation. As wonderful as they made those sound, those ideas are actually completely foreign to Hinduism. There are only two kinds of Hindu believers: oppressors and victims. This is due to a rigidly imposed caste system that enslaves the majority of adherents to a life of poverty under those in the higher tiers. Worse yet, Hinduism is less tolerant of those not born into it. That includes those in other religions, agnostics, and atheists. Basically, the entire rest of the world has no tier—they are lower than the lowest caste.

The current Indian government fervently supports the radical belief that Hinduism must purge everyone and everything that is not Hindu. They have even passed anti-conversion laws against all other religions. In fact, the government has encouraged, supported, formed, and trained groups of thugs (the RSS) throughout the country who use threats, violence, and murder against all who preach a different religion. It is part of a national pogrom to “purify” India. These criminals even have the blessing of, and coordinate with, the local police and judicial systems. Those most hated are Protestant Christians—even more than Muslims.

A husband disappeared in the night only to be found the next day dead in a roadside ditch. A son is kidnapped and beaten to death in the jungle. When his remains were found, they were unrecognizable. A thirteen-year old girl begged her father’s attackers to spare his life so they kicked her in the stomach and she almost died from internal hemorrhaging. A pregnant woman was so badly injured that her unborn baby died and she was in a coma for three days. Whole groups were locked in their church buildings and beaten repeatedly for long periods. A sleeping farmer woke up to find his house engulfed in fire and he barely escaped only to discover many of his cattle and other stock animals dead from the inferno—his family’s only livelihood. In spite of the constant threat of harm and death, many refuse to recant. Instead, they forgive the neighbors who murdered their loved ones.

India is one of almost 30 countries in which religious persecution continues in this modern age. The worst offenders are Burma, China, Eritrea, India, Iran, Nigeria, North Korea, Pakistan, Russia, Saudi Arabia, Syria, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Vietnam¹. Want to know what it will be like in the Tribulation? Move to any one of these countries and try proclaiming the gospel. Even if you say nothing, eventually they will wonder why you do not work on the Sabbath or they will catch you with a Bible.

¹ *US Commission on International Religious Freedom, 2020.*

But not so in the good ole USA. On average, people here live in houses that have four rooms per occupant; three toilets; indoor heating, cooling, and plumbing; two cars; ten electronic devices including TVs, cellphones, tablets, video games, smartwatches, etc; eight guns; and enough food to last 33 days. On top of that, they only work an average of 34 hours per week but get 20 vacation days per year. The abundance is unspeakable.

Annual income is \$56,310 and, yet, most live paycheck to paycheck. How do they spend that much money? Each month they spend \$2,064 on a mortgage, \$1,296 for their two cars that cost \$42,380 each, \$411 on groceries, \$127 for cellphones, \$100 for TV, streaming, and satellite, \$243 on entertainment, \$83 for gifts, \$152 on electricity, and much, MUCH more. The average household is spending 120% more than they ~~earn~~. Scratch that. Many do not actually EARN what they are paid—they are subsidized.

People have too much free time. Restaurants, night clubs, movie theaters, stadiums, and fun parks are everywhere to provide respite from the boredom. Everyone, including children, have so much STUFF that money is a substitute for gifts because people have everything. When they do receive a gift, many times it is just a new replacement for something they already have. People have so many clothes that closets are now large enough to walk into.

No one goes to bed fearing they will be attacked in the middle of the night or wake up wondering whether they will be able to feed our family today. They are easily slighted and hang on to anger, hate, and bitterness. They complain about the smallest inconveniences, gripe when grocery store shelves are not filled to overflowing, criticize the clothes others wear, and drive empty vehicles that could comfortably seat four to eight people. The news presents tragedies in twenty-second sound bites that are followed by ten minute interviews with celebrities, popular singers, or tours of 20,000 square foot second (or third or fourth) homes of the rich and famous. The ultra-rich are always talking about how much the average person is oppressed and in need of handouts but they do not personally seek out the poor and help. They leave it to so-called charities to deal with the “untouchables.”

Houses are filled with decorations and paintings made by others and replicated in factories. Fake flowers adorn coffee tables (why is there a table just for coffee?) because it is too much work to water a real plant. No one lacks necessities so they spend money to adorn their homes and yards as proof to others of their financial success and prowess. Maids are hired to clean because using that \$500 vacuum cleaner is too much work. City dwellers spend \$ 47,035 to \$112,605 on pickups and then customize them further so they can accelerate to 60mph in less than 6 seconds. (Buy a pickup from some urbanite because their trucks have never been used for heavy loads, the only scratches are from the parking lot, and the interior stains are from 64-ounce sodas too big for the cup holders.)

A doctor visit is necessary for every cut, cough, and complaint. There are pills and potions for hair loss, stained teeth, wrinkles, and every other minor “affliction” with a

Latin name. Sugar and sweeteners are in so much of our food that each meal is more like dessert. For our indulgences, doctors test our blood for sugar and cholesterol.

Some of the most profitable companies in the world made great wealth selling one thing: coffee that cost \$7 for the “grande” size. People bemoan gasoline prices but still drive ten miles to get a double latte before work. (I never even heard the word “latte” or “cappuccino” growing up.) In a “crisis” they buy toilet paper, baby wipes, and generators. Thanksgiving Day is a time to add ten pounds. (How is “thanksgiving” about eating our favorite things and watching football rather than praying?) Neighbors are complete strangers to one another. People say, “You are in my prayers” but do they?

Who are these people? Americans, including most of the children of God. Are we really different than the rest of this country? The USA received the greatest of God’s blessings:

DEUTERONOMY 32:9-14 For the LORD’S portion *is* His people. Jacob *is* the lot of His inheritance. 10 He found him in a desert land, and in the waste of a howling wilderness. He led him about, He cared for him, He kept him as the apple of His eye. 11 As an eagle stirs up her nest, flutters over her young, spreads abroad her wings, takes them and bears them on her wings, 12 The LORD alone led him, and *there was* no strange god with him. 13 He made him **//Israel/ ride on the high places of the earth so that he might eat the increase of the fields. And He made him suck honey out of the rock, and oil out of the flinty rock, 14 Butter from cows, and milk from sheep, with fat of lambs, and rams of the sons of Bashan, and goats, with the finest wheat. And you drank wine, the blood of the grape.**

This country has forgotten God. They are blind to God because they no longer see Him from behind the mountain of their wealth. And now there will be consequences:

DEUTERONOMY 32:15, 19-25 But **Jeshurun //Israel/ grew fat and kicked.** You grew fat, thick, *and* satisfied. Then he forsook God Who made him and lightly esteemed the Rock of his salvation. ... 19 And **the LORD saw and despised them** because of the provoking of His sons and of His daughters. 20 And He said, ‘I will hide My face from them; I will see what their end *shall be*, for they *are* a very perverse generation, children in whom *is* no faithfulness. 21 They have moved Me to jealousy with *that which is* not God. They have provoked Me to anger with their vanities. And I will move them to jealousy with *those which are* not a people. **I will provoke them to anger with a foolish nation,** 22 For a fire is kindled in My anger, and shall burn to the grave beneath, and shall consume the earth with its increase, and set on fire the foundations of the mountains. 23 I will heap up evils upon them. I will spend My arrows on them. 24 **Exhaustion by famine, and consumption by burning heat, and bitter destruction, and the teeth of beasts I will send on them, with the poison of serpents of the dust.** **25 The sword outside, and the terror inside,** shall destroy both the young man and the virgin, the suckling *also* with the man of grey hairs.

What will the Tribulation be like? Imagine being a true believer in India—and then add the worst possible famines, droughts, sicknesses, and diseases. Unlike the Protestant Christians there now who, in their poverty still eke out a meager living, this country will be devastated. Only then will anyone turn back to God.

Why such a terrible message of doom and gloom? It came about when I was thinking about fasting. What is fasting? It is afflicting our souls:

ISAIAH 58:3, 5 *They say, ‘**Why have we fasted**, and You do not see? Why **have we afflicted our soul** and You take no knowledge?’ Behold, in the day of your fast you pursue your business and exploit all your workers. ... 5 Is this such **a fast** that I have chosen? **A day for a man to afflict his soul?** Is it to bow down his head like a bulrush, and to spread sackcloth and ashes under him? Will you call this a fast and a day pleasing to the LORD?*

Denying ourselves food and drink is how we “afflict our souls” when we are not already suffering “a great trial of affliction.”² Too many have so much abundance that they have to deny themselves food in order to be afflicted. What is the point of affliction? To be humble before God³. **Because** of our wealth and comfort, God’s people need to draw close to God in fasting and prayer because our lives depend upon it. We can either be humble when the Tribulation comes upon us or we will learn humility during it⁴.

LUKE 21:34, 36 Watch yourselves, **lest your hearts be preoccupied with high living and drinking and the cares of this life**, and that day come upon you suddenly. ... 36 **Watch therefore, and pray [and fast] at all times** that you may be accounted worthy to escape all these things that shall come to pass, and **to stand before the Son of man.**”

Jeshurun is fat and has kicked at God but it should not be so with God’s people. We are called to stand before God the Father and Jesus Christ. Come out of this world. Draw close to Them now, so that we can stand WITH Them at the end of this age.

May God’s grace and peace be upon you!

Steven Greene

<https://sabbathreflections.org>

² 2 Corinthians 8:2.

³ Deuteronomy 8:2.

⁴ Revelation 7:14.

SABBATH THOUGHT 2022-07-23—HEAPING COALS OF FIRE

Paul wrote, “[W]e know that **the law is spiritual**” (Heb. 7:11). What exactly does that mean? Actually, it means several things. From a physical perspective, it means that no man or woman can keep it without God’s Holy Spirit IN them:

JEREMIAH 31:33-34 “But this *shall be* the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel: After those days,” says the LORD, “**I will put My law in their inward parts, and write it in their hearts**; and I will be their God, and they shall be My people. 34 And **they shall no more teach each man** his neighbor and each man his brother, saying, ‘Know the LORD;’ for they shall all know Me, from the least of them to the greatest of them,” says the LORD. “For I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sins no more.”

This is a simple enough concept because we all know that it is impossible to fully understand God’s Law, much less keep it, without His Holy Spirit. That is why, in verse 34, no one will teach the Law to others—the Holy Spirit will be IN them. No one will *have* to teach it because it will be a desire in their hearts.

But there is another reason that the Law¹ is spiritual and it is one of the two main reasons for the ministry of Jesus Christ (the other was to preach the gospel of the kingdom):

MATTHEW 5:17-20 Do not think that **I [Jesus Christ] have come** to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I did not come to abolish, but **to fulfill [the Law]**. 18 For truly I say to you, until the heaven and the earth shall pass away, one jot or one tittle shall in no way pass from the Law until everything has been fulfilled. 19 Therefore, whoever shall break one of these least commandments, and shall teach men so, shall be called least in the kingdom of heaven; but whoever shall practice and teach *them*, this one shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven. 20 For I say to you, **unless your righteousness shall exceed the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees**, there is no way *that* you shall enter into the kingdom of heaven.

How did Jesus fulfill the Law? By teaching that keeping the Law spiritually was not a matter of strength of will in the mind, but something WITHIN the heart. The scribes and Pharisees kept the Law to the letter but Jesus condemned them because their hearts were still evil. God’s Law is a way of agape love rather than strict adherence without mercy. He gave several examples in Mat. 5:21-44 but the one that really makes my point is:

¹ In this context, Law with a capital “L” refers to all of God’s commandments, statutes, judgments, testimonies, and precepts.

MATTHEW 5:27-28 You have heard that it was said to those *in ancient times*, 'You shall not commit adultery.' 28 But I say to you, everyone who looks upon a woman to lust after her has already committed adultery with her **in his heart**.

Fulfilling the Law *spiritually* changed how the Law ruled over a person. For anyone to perfectly obey God, the Law had to come from the heart of a person. Why?

COLOSSIANS 3:15 And let the peace of God **rule in your hearts**, to which you were called into one body, and be thankful.

Rule means to govern. Interestingly, it also means to *prevail*. The problem with keeping the Law is that the heart rules over the mind. Why does someone murder? Because feelings of anger in the heart overcome the mind that knows it is wrong. Many times the heart **prevails** over the mind. This was the fault with the Old Covenant:

HEBREWS 8:7-8 For if **the first covenant had been faultless**, *then* no provision for a second *covenant* would have been made. 8 But since **He found fault with them**, He says, " 'Behold, *the days are coming*,' says *the Lord*, 'when I will establish a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah;

The first covenant was faulty because the people did not have the Holy Spirit. After writing this, Paul also said:

HEBREWS 8:9-10 Not according to the covenant that I made with their fathers in *the day* that I took hold of their hand to lead them out of *the land* of Egypt because they did not continue in My covenant, and I disregarded them,' says *the Lord*. 10 'For **this is the covenant that I will establish** with the house of Israel after those days,' says *the Lord*: 'I will give my laws into their minds, and **I will inscribe them upon their hearts**; and I will be their God, and they will be My people.

Obviously, Paul was quoting Jeremiah 31:33-34. Under the New Covenant, God not only writes His Law in our minds but also our hearts. How? By the Holy Spirit that imparts God's agape love to us—"For **the one who loves** another **has fulfilled the law**" (Rom. 13:8). That is why Jesus said:

MARK 12:30-31 And **you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart**, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.' This *is the first commandment*. 31 And *the second is* like this: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' There is no other commandment greater than these."

It comes down this: knowing and understanding God's Law are not enough. Yes, it must be written in our minds, but unless our hearts DESIRE to keep it no one can perfectly obey the Law. Our hearts prevail over our minds all too often. Are our hearts filled with fear, anger, and jealousy or are they filled with agape love? Whichever it is, that will

prevail. In fact, if true agape love reigns in our hearts then we will even be capable of loving our **enemies**. This is a great example of the Law being spiritual:

MATTHEW 5:43-44 You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' 44 But I say to you, **love your enemies**, bless those who curse you, do good to those who hate you, and pray for those who spitefully use you and persecute you,

It is easy to love those who love us, but loving an enemy is only possible with God's agape love. God proved this is possible because He had agape love toward His enemies. Who were His enemies? **Us**—when we were sinners². But there is a Scripture that seemingly contradicts everything that has been discussed so far:

ROMANS 12:19-20 19 Beloved, do not avenge yourselves; rather, leave *this* to God's wrath; for it is written, " 'Vengeance is Mine! I will recompense,' says the Lord." 20 Therefore, **if your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him drink; for in doing this you will be heaping coals of fire on his head.**

It is almost saying that we should do good for our enemies *because* God's vengeance will be upon them. Is it agape love to hope that God punishes someone? Is our motive for doing good to our enemies that they receive a harsh punishment? Is that what Jesus preached? Notice Paul's conclusion:

ROMANS 12:21 **Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.**

How do we overcome evil with good if our motivation is that God's wrath comes upon them? To figure this out requires looking at the Greek. Just like there are several Greek words (*agape, eros, storge, and phileo*) that can be translated *love*, there are a couple of Greek words that are translated *evil*. You might be familiar with *poneros*, which means *evil* in the way that Satan is evil. It is the opposite of God's goodness and righteousness. However, the word Paul used is *kakos*, meaning *bad* or the opposite of good in the sense of **works**.

Paul might be saying to overcome the evil of others by doing good to them. But I think he is emphasizing that we must overcome our OWN desires to do evil to our enemies with good. What is "good?" It is good intentions or works. It is the motivation of a heart filled with agape love. So, Paul is not contradicting the commandment of Jesus to love our enemies. But, still, there is the question of why he talks about heaping judgment upon them. Paul was actually quoting Solomon:

PROVERBS 25:21-22 If your enemy is hungry, give him bread to eat; and if he is thirsty, give him water to drink, 22 For you shall heap coals of fire upon his head, **and the LORD shall reward you.**

² 1 John 4:19.

Notice that last phrase that Paul omitted—“the LORD shall reward you.” God will reward us how? By heaping coals of fire on the head of our enemy? No, for the agape love IN OUR HEARTS:

LUKE 6:35 But **love your enemies**, and do good, and lend, hoping for nothing again; **and your reward [in the kingdom] shall be great**, and **you shall be the children of the Highest; for He is good** to the unthankful and *the* wicked.

Those who have agape love for their enemies will be in the kingdom and rewarded. Why? Because they overcame their carnal desire to repay evil with evil. Instead, they had agape love to do good even to their enemies. We do this because agape love in our hearts prevails over our minds. If our hearts are filled with anger, then we will desire to see our enemies suffer. If they are filled with agape love, then we are like our Father in heaven whereby we love our enemies and show them mercy.

The fact is that all who practice evil (Gk. *poneros*) face the coming vengeance of God unless they repent³. THIS WILL HAPPEN REGARDLESS OF WHETHER WE DO EVIL OR GOOD TO THEM. But doing good to our enemies should NOT be motivated by vengeance. Regardless of what our enemies do, God will reward us in the kingdom for showing them agape love. But repaying evil with evil brings God’s vengeance upon US as well as them. The bottom line is that doing good to our enemies breaks the chain of evil. God’s people must be willing to endure the evil works of our enemies with agape love in return.

LUKE 6:45 **The good man out of the good treasure of his heart brings forth that which is good**; and the wicked man out of the wicked treasure of his heart brings forth that which *is* wicked; for out of the abundance of the heart his mouth speaks.

The Law is spiritual because it has to be. No matter how hard we try to obey the Law, if our hearts are filled with fear, anger, and jealousy then those things will prevail over our minds. Only with hearts of agape love can the Law of God be perfected in us.

May God’s grace and peace be upon you!

Steven Greene

<https://sabbathreflections.org>

³ John 3:20-21.

SABBATH THOUGHT 2022-07-29—TITHING—A MATTER OF THE HEART

May God bless you on His Sabbath day!

Many of God's people have tithed for years and even decades. It is such a common practice that sometimes we do it without much thought. But it is, perhaps, not always that way especially in the beginning. All believers go through tests and trials to prove our commitment to God. Many times the first trials a new convert faces involve keeping the weekly Sabbaths, Passover, and the holydays. However, sooner or later many are faced with challenges in keeping God's commandment to tithe.

Someone who did not grow up in the Church may find the prospect of tithing a daunting one because of a tight budget, job uncertainty or loss, unexpected expenses, young children, health problems, etc. When I started tithing, things were very tight but manageable. However, during my third tithe year, my financial situation quickly became serious and I recall when it all came to a head. Back then, tithes were based upon gross income, too, instead of the net as it should be. I had just written a tithe check but the financial numbers were dismal. I went outside and was pacing back and forth—I was really worried but did not want my family to know. Looking up into the night sky, I told God how bad things were. I was at the point of tears and fearful that the worst would happen. I did not know what to do. As the sole provider for my family, I did not see how I could afford to keep tithing. I went back inside but nothing had changed. How nice it would have been to find an envelope in the mailbox with money or, at the very least, hear God tell me everything would be alright. As reluctant as I was, I put the check in an envelope and went to bed.

You are probably anticipating a story that ends with a stunning miracle against the backdrop of a heavenly choir singing in the heavens. Nope. Nothing changed. At least that was what I thought. Throughout that year I continued to send in my first and third tithes and save my second tithe for the Feast of Tabernacles. At the end of that third tithe year when I looked back at my finances, I just shook my head because I could not for the life of me figure out how it had worked out. Numbers do not lie but how in the world had there been just enough for the mortgage, bills, food, clothing, cars, gasoline, etc. as well as my tithes? How exactly it had worked out is still a mystery.

Besides the fact that God somehow worked everything out, the big lesson came the following year when God's blessings just poured in. A promotion, raise, and bonus at work were a big part of them but there were many other things: no major home repairs, visits to the doctor or hospital, etc. And God has continued to bless me tremendously ever since. Tithing helped me to truly begin trusting in HIM:

MALACHI 3:10 Bring all the tithes into the treasure house, so that there may be food in My house. And prove Me now with this," says the LORD of hosts, "to see if I will not surely open the windows of heaven for you, and pour out a blessing for you, until there is not enough room to receive it."

In the beginning, I gave tithes out of reluctant obedience. After all, they are a commandment of God¹. But the whole experience taught me that there is much more to tithing than money. While I proved through much angst God is faithful, I also realized that He had tested my resolve to obey Him. God will always fulfill His promises but they can be conditional upon us having to occasionally PROVE our obedience.

Tithing goes beyond the promises of God's blessings, too, because they are a way in which we can have a part in fulfilling Jesus Christ's commission to the Church—to preach the Gospel to the world and feed His sheep. At times, I wish I could thank those whose tithes allowed me to begin reading the truth of God.

Third tithe is very special because it allows us to be directly involved with others. It is, perhaps, the tithe that brings the most joy because it is an opportunity to personally give to others in their times of need. Notice the emphasis is on those “within our gates;” that is, those we can personally help:

DEUTERONOMY 26:12 When you have made an end of tithing all the tithes of your increase the third year, which is the year of tithing, and have given it to the Levite, the stranger, the fatherless, and the widow (that they may eat inside your gates and be filled),

This is one of the few laws of God where we are **commanded** to tell God that we have been faithful to take care of those in need and **remind** Him of His promise to bless us:

DEUTERONOMY 26:13-15 Then you shall say before the LORD your God, ‘I have brought away the holy things out of my house, and also have given them to the Levite, and to the stranger, to the fatherless, and to the widow, according to all Your commandments which You have commanded me. I have not broken Your commandments, neither have I forgotten *them*. 14 I have not eaten of it in my mourning, neither have I put *any* of it away for unclean *use*, nor have I given of it for the dead. I have hearkened to the voice of the LORD my God, and have done according to all that You have commanded me. 15 **Look down from Your holy dwelling, from Heaven, and bless Your people Israel and the land** which You have given us as You swore to our fathers, a land that flows with milk and honey.’

Few of us are directly involved in preaching the gospel to the world even though first tithe supports that work. What many do not recognize is that third tithes are an even greater work within the Body of Christ—they are a direct blessing. Third tithes are the means we came to know some of the most wonderful and loving brethren. We also would not have known to pray for them if God had not revealed their needs to us. Giving to others is a great blessing. But the astounding part of godly giving is that those who receive something from us give even more back to us. There are certain scriptures that

¹ Lev. 27:30-31.

just have a wonderful poetry about them, and one of them is a quote of Jesus Christ on giving and receiving:

LUKE 6:38 Give, and it shall be given to you. Good measure, pressed down and shaken together and running over, shall they give into your bosom. For with the same measure that you mete out, it shall be measured again to you.”

Even though I am writing about tithing, giving and receiving are about so much more than money. My experience with tithing happened before I understood it was a matter of the heart. In the beginning, it was a financial concern. Now it is much more than that. Another scripture that talks about giving and receiving being from the heart is in Paul’s words:

2 CORINTHIANS 9:5 Therefore, I thought it necessary to exhort the brethren to go ahead of us to you, and to complete the preparations of **this your bounty** beforehand, since **you had already proclaimed a willingness; so that it might be received as a blessing,** and not as it were of covetousness.

The Corinthians wanted to give to the needy brethren in Judea. God’s blessings upon them produced a “bounty” that they determined should be given to others who were in need. While it does not say whether this was an offering or a particular tithe, the Corinthians had a **desire** to give. Read on:

2 CORINTHIANS 9:6-10 But this I say: **the one who sows sparingly shall also reap sparingly; and the one who sows bountifully shall also reap bountifully.** **7 Each one as he purposes in his heart, so let him give,** but not grudgingly or by compulsion; for **God loves a cheerful giver.** **8** For God is able to make all grace abound toward you so that in every way you may always have sufficiency in all things, and may abound unto every good work, **9** According as it is written: “He has scattered abroad, and he has given to the poor; his righteousness remains forever.” **10** Now may He Who supplies seed to the sower, and bread to eat, **supply your seed and multiply your sowing; and may He increase the fruits of your righteousness,**

Giving as we have abundance to those in need affects the hearts of both the giver and recipient—and God blesses both. Amazingly, it also results in **thanksgiving to GOD:**

2 CORINTHIANS 9:11-12 So that **you may in every way be enriched unto all bountifulness, which causes thanksgiving to God** through us. **12** For the administration of this service is not only filling to overflowing the deficiencies of the saints, **but is also abounding by the giving of many thanks to God.** **13** **Through the performance of this service, they are glorifying God** for your professed subjection to the gospel of Christ, and for the liberality of the distribution toward them and toward all the saints;

Both those who give and those who receive are motivated to glorify and give thanks to God! Have you ever thought about that? Everything done out of agape love working in us glorifies HIM. Both the giver and recipient abound in thanksgiving to God. Those who

give are thankful for the means to do so and those who receive are thankful for being taken care of in their times of need. Although I did not understand this in the beginning, tithing is one way God works to create agape love in us:

MARK 12:33 “And **to love Him [God]** with all the heart, and with all the understanding, and with all the soul, and with all the strength, **and to love one’s neighbor as oneself, is more than all burnt offerings and sacrifices.**”

Love toward God and love toward mankind is a **result** of tithing! This kind of love was the motive behind the poor widow giving her two coins:

LUKE 21:1-4 When He looked up, He saw the rich men tossing their offerings into the treasury. 2 Then He also saw a certain poor widow drop in two small coins. 3 And He said, “Of a truth, I tell you, this poor widow has put in more than all of them; 4 For all these have from their abundance cast into the offerings to God; but **she, out of her poverty, did put in all the livelihood that she had.**”

While no one should tithe if it puts them into poverty, this poor widow gave all out of love for God, His work, and the needs of others. Obviously, she was not coerced because even the hypocritical scribes and Pharisees would not profit from such meager resources. (Note—these two coins were equivalent to one of the least valuable Roman coins, rather like two half-pennies.) By giving **in her time of need**, she glorified God more than all of the others because of the abundance of love in her heart. This is the true lesson we are to learn and the one that God will continue teaching us until the day we go to our graves—ALL His ways are love². Giving and receiving are acts of love that glorify Him. This kind of love is reflected in Jesus Christ whose love for the potential children of God is so deep that He gave the greatest sacrifice anyone can—His own **life**! It was unconditionally from His heart. THIS is our standard for giving tithes and offerings:

EPHESIANS 5:1-2 Therefore, be imitators of God, as beloved children; 2 And walk in love, even as Christ also loved us, and **gave Himself for us as an offering and a sacrifice** to God for a sweet-smelling savor.

Whether we are blessed with abundance or tried by poverty, God uses our circumstances to work in us His greatest gift—agape love. Sometimes it is a hard lesson and other times it is a joyous one but God’s work in us is for the same purpose: to make us like He is.

May God’s grace and peace be upon you!

Steven Greene

<https://sabbathreflections.org>

² Psa. 145:17.

May God bless you on His Sabbath day!

I was talking to an elder some time ago who mentioned the battle going on between believers and Satan. I am guessing it was on his mind because he was preparing a message on it. He said that the weapons Satan uses against God's children are "anxiety, worry, and fear." This is absolutely true and everyone deals with them from time to time. These weapons are subtle so they can be hard to know when we are afflicted by them.

2 CORINTHIANS 10:3-5 For although we walk in *the* flesh, **we do not war according to *the* flesh.** 4 For **the weapons of our warfare are not carnal, but mighty through God to *the* overthrowing of strongholds,** 5 **Casting down *vain* imaginations, and every high thing that exalts itself against the knowledge of God, and bringing into captivity every thought into the obedience of Christ;**

We are engaged in a CONTINUAL spiritual war against Satan. The difficulty believers face is that Satan attacks us in very subtle ways. He uses tactics that are hard to recognize because we are flesh fighting against a powerful, wicked spirit enemy. Fighting such an enemy requires constant vigilance because Satan is a master of cunning and trickery:

GENESIS 3:1 Now **the serpent was more cunning than any** creature ...

2 CORINTHIANS 11:3 But I fear, lest by any means, as **the serpent deceived** Eve **by his craftiness,** so your minds might be corrupted from *the* simplicity that *is* in Christ.

Just how cunning is Satan?

2 CORINTHIANS 2:11 So that **we may not be outwitted by Satan,** for we are not ignorant of his schemes.

Satan tries to outwit us! We are in a war against incredibly vicious attacks. The fact that he is spirit and we are flesh is a completely unfair advantage without God on our side. So, what are strongholds? Spiritual strongholds are thoughts and behaviors that influence a person to the extent that they "exalt itself against the knowledge of God" (2 Cor. 10:5). This may sound simple, but what in the world does that really mean? It means that anxiety, worry, and fear are thoughts that are contrary to KNOWING¹ we are of God and that God is WORKING in us for good².

Do we doubt our conversion and the Holy Spirit within us? Those doubts are exalted against—lifted up—and contrary to the knowledge that we are the children of God by His Spirit dwelling in us. Are we lacking faith? Is it because God has not answered prayers

¹ 1 Cor. 2:12; 3:16; 1 John 2:5; 4:6; 5:19.

² Rom. 8:28; Phil. 2:13.

for help or healing? Many if not most of the saints have experienced times like those, including the apostle Paul:

2 CORINTHIANS 12:7-9 But in order that I might not be exalted by the abundance of the revelations, **there was given to me a thorn in the flesh, an angel of Satan to buffet me, so that I might not be exalted.** 8 **I besought the Lord three times for this, that it might depart from me;** 9 **But He said to me, “My grace is sufficient for you; for My power is made perfect in weakness.”** Therefore, most gladly will I boast in my weaknesses that the power of Christ may dwell in me.

During those times of doubt, do we think about the many miracles God HAS done for us? After being denied healing THREE times, Paul must have been very depressed since he had been the instrument of healing to so many others. But notice what Paul said:

2 CORINTHIANS 12:10, 12 For this reason, I take pleasure in weaknesses, in insults, in necessities, in persecutions, in distresses for Christ; for **when I am weak, then I am [spiritually] strong.** ... 12 Indeed, **the signs of an apostle were demonstrated by me in all patience, in signs and wonders and miracles** among you.

However, it was thinking about the many miracles God did through him that was the key to fighting his own spiritual war against Satan and the demons. He learned through hard-won personal experience that this life is a constant battle—for ALL of God’s people. He talks about this very thing in his letter to the Ephesians, but have you *really* read it?

EPHESIANS 6:10-13 Finally, my brethren, **be strong [empowered] in the Lord,** and in the might of His strength. 11 Put on the whole armor of God so that you **may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil** 12 Because we are not wrestling against flesh and blood, but **against principalities and against powers, against the world rulers of the darkness of this age, against the spiritual power of wickedness in high places.** 13 Therefore, take up the whole armor of God so that you may be able to resist in the evil day, and having worked out all things, to stand.

Paul says first of all to be EMPOWERED by God. How? By not doubting the POWER of God in you through the Holy Spirit, which he likens to the armor of God. Verse 11 says that the armor of the Holy Spirit allows us to stand against the TRICKERY of the devil. So, what are OUR weapons that can defeat Satan?

EPHESIANS 6:14-18 Stand therefore, having your loins girded about with **truth,** and wearing the breastplate of righteousness, 15 And having your feet shod with *the* preparation of the gospel of **peace.** 16 Besides all *these*, take up the shield of the **faith,** with which you will have the power to quench all **the fiery darts of the wicked one;** 17 And put on the helmet of **salvation,** and the sword of the **[Holy] Spirit, which is the Word of God;** 18 Praying at all times with all prayer and supplication in *the* Spirit, and in this very thing being watchful with all perseverance and supplication for all the saints;

The TRUTH of God, the PEACE of God, the FAITH of Jesus Christ, God's promise of SALVATION, the HOLY SPIRIT in us, and the WORD of God! The apostles were keenly aware of this spiritual battle that takes place. Today, however, this godless world rejects the idea of wicked spirit beings deceiving and afflicting us. Peter warned:

1 PETER 2:11 Beloved, I exhort *you*, as strangers and sojourners, to **restrain yourselves from fleshly lusts which war against the soul**;

Living in a world that denies the existence of Satan and the demons can cause us to be less vigilant against the “fleshly lusts” that are actually a spiritual attack. Even Jesus Christ was afflicted by Satan, but He also knew exactly who was attacking Him and it is common to all believers³. God's people can be attacked and influenced by wicked spirits. This does not mean God's children are possessed. In fact, no one who has God's Holy Spirit can be possessed by demons. Remember Peter? Jesus told him, “Simon, Simon, listen well. **Satan has demanded to have you, to sift you as wheat.**” (Luke 22:31). Peter was protected by God's Holy Spirit even before it was IN him. The reason for these spiritual attacks is because God's Holy Spirit is a spiritual light that makes us stand out against those who love darkness:

LUKE 11:36 Now then, **if your whole body is light, not having any part dark, it shall be full of light, as when a lamp shining brightly** gives you light.”

So, putting on the armor of God sounds simple enough but exactly HOW do we do that?

PHILIPPIANS 4:6 **Do not be anxious** about anything; but by **prayer and supplication** with thanksgiving, **let your requests be made known to God** in everything;

Fasting along with prayers and supplications. What is the difference between a prayer and a supplication? The intensity of the heart and mind. Prayers can be a general petition before God such as a prayer at services. A supplication is a prayer that has a deep emotional need and desire behind it. In other words, it is a prayer of GREAT earnestness. David speaks of his supplications in many of the Psalms where he “cried unto the Lord.” The word *cried* means to loudly proclaim distress, pain, or sorrow. When Satan and the demons afflict us with anxiety, worry, and fear we must take it to God in tears and humility. That is when the miracle happens:

PHILIPPIANS 4:7 And the **peace of God**, which surpasses all understanding, **shall guard your hearts and your thoughts** in Christ Jesus.

In place of anxiety, worry, and fear God gives us His peace to GUARD our hearts and minds. Jesus Christ knew that we would be attacked and made us this same promise, so peace comes from Him AND God the Father:

³ 1 Cor. 10:13.

JOHN 14:27 Peace I leave with you; **My peace I give to you**; not as the world gives do I give *it* to you. **Let not your heart be troubled, nor let it fear.**

What is that peace? It is a peace to believe that we are begotten children of God, it is a peace that God is doing a work in us⁴ unto salvation, it is a peace that God will never leave nor forsake us⁵, and it is a peace that God knows our needs and will provide for us⁶. But believers have to “work out your own salvation⁷” as well. Beyond fasting, prayer, and supplications we must be filling our minds with, and growing in, truth, peace, faith, salvation, the Holy Spirit, and the Word of God⁸. How? Think about them. Replace the anxiety, worry, and fear with the thoughts of God⁹:

PHILIPPIANS 4:8-10 Finally, brethren, whatever **things are true**, whatever **things are honorable**, whatever **things are just**, whatever **things are pure**, whatever **things are lovely**, whatever **things are of good report**; if *there be* any virtue and if *there be* any praise, **think on these things**. 9 Whatever things you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, you do also; and **the God of peace shall be with you**.

It says God SHALL be with you. This is an absolute PROMISE of God that He will never withhold from anyone.

PHILIPPIANS 4:11-13 I am not saying *this* in respect to being destitute; for I have learned *that* in whatever *circumstances* I am, to be content. 12 For **I have experienced being brought low**, and I have experienced abounding. In everything and in all things **I have been taught both to be full and to hunger, both to abound and to be without. 13 I can do all things through Christ, Who empowers me.**

Finally, Paul said that he endured many trials that brought him LOW. The Greek word means *depressed or humiliated*. The reality is that today most of God’s people live in relative peace and prosperity so now is the time to fight against anxiety, worry, and fear to prepare for the return of our Lord and Savior. This is a war that God promises we can WIN with His help! Aside from salvation, is there any greater promise?

May God’s grace and peace be upon you!

Steven Greene

<https://sabbathreflections.org>

⁴ Heb. 4:16.

⁵ Heb. 13:5.

⁶ Matt. 6:25-34.

⁷ Phil. 2:12.

⁸ Eph. 6:10-18.

⁹ Jer. 29:11.

SABBATH THOUGHT 2022-08-13—INJUSTICE FOR ALL

May God bless you on His Sabbath day!

Law, judgment, and justice are now completely meaningless in the nations that are descendants of Abraham. Injustice has always existed but it was usually done in secret behind closed doors. Nowadays, no one should expect to ever obtain justice. Judges do not even need to be bribed because they are driven by their own political biases. Whichever party aligns with the political views of the judge receives the favorable ruling.

The recent case that special counsel John Durham brought to trial in Washington, D.C. against Hillary Clinton campaign lawyer Michael Sussman proves that law and justice no longer exist. In fact, people are not even ashamed to admit their corruption. The evidence was incontrovertible against Sussman and, yet, the jury found him not guilty. Who was the jury? Supporters of Hillary Clinton—every one of them. Who was the judge? Christopher Cooper who was appointed by Obama and openly admitted he had conflicts of interest with some of those involved in the case itself.

This has been going on for years now because of the hatred in the hearts of liberals. Russia-gate, BLM, Antifa, defund the police, perverted teachings in public schools, overwhelming numbers of illegal aliens, the corruption of the last presidential election, massive deficit spending, rampant inflation and economic recession, the unprecedented raid on an ex-president's home, etc. are all the result of the perversion of law and withholding of justice. The liberals oppress law-abiding citizens while the wicked people just ignore the law because they are protected by their own. Isaiah prophesied about the lack of justice in the nations of the children of Abraham during the latter days:

ISAIAH 59:2-16 But your iniquities have come between you and your God, and your sins have hid *His* face from you, that He will not hear, 3 For your hands are defiled with blood, and your fingers with iniquity; your lips have spoken lies, your tongue has muttered perverseness. 4 **None calls for justice, nor does anyone plead for truth; they trust in vanity and speak lies. They conceive mischief and bring forth iniquity.** 5 They hatch adders' eggs and weave the spider's web; he who eats their eggs dies, and that which is crushed breaks out into a viper. 6 Their webs shall not become clothing, nor shall they cover themselves with their works; their works *are* works of iniquity, and the acts of violence *are* in their hands. 7 **Their feet run to evil, and they make haste to shed innocent blood; their thoughts are thoughts of iniquity; wasting and destruction are in their paths.** 8 They have not known the way of peace, and *there is* no justice in their ways. **They have made crooked paths for themselves; whoever goes therein shall not know peace.** 9 Therefore **justice is far from us**; nor does righteousness overtake us. We wait for light, but behold, darkness; for brightness, *but* we walk in deep shadows. 10 We grope along the wall like the blind, and we grope as if *we had* no eyes. We stumble at noonday as in the night; among those who are strong, we are like dead men. 11 We all roar like bears, and mourn grievously like doves; **we look for justice, but there is none**, we *look* for salvation, yet it is far off from us; 12 For our transgressions *are* multiplied

before You, and our sins testify against us; for our transgressions are with us; and *as for* our iniquities, we know them; 13 In rebellion and denial of the LORD, and turning away from our God, talking perversity and revolt, conceiving and speaking from the heart words of falsehood. 14 And **justice is driven backward**, and righteousness stands afar off; for **truth has fallen** in the street, and uprightness cannot enter. 15 Yea, truth fails; and **he who departs from evil makes himself a prey**. And the LORD saw, and it was evil in His eyes that **there was no justice**. 16 And He saw that *there was* no man, and was astonished that there was no intercessor. Therefore His own arm brought salvation to Him; and His righteousness sustained Him,

Did you notice verse 15? “**He who departs from evil makes himself a prey**.” Without judgments and justice, law is useless. Those who obey the law are helpless against those who are willing to break the law because there are no consequences.

So, where is God? What is He doing about all the wicked and their evil works going on today? True believers are just now starting to witness the destruction that is coming:

EZEKIEL 14:13-21 “Son of man, when a land sins against Me by trespassing [*cover up wickedness*] grievously, and **I stretch out My hand on it, and break the staff of its bread, and send famine on it**, and will cut off man and beast from it, 14 And *though* these three men, Noah, Daniel, and Job, were in it, they should deliver *only* their own lives by their righteousness,” says the Lord GOD. 15 “If **I cause wild beasts to come through the land**, and they spoil it and it becomes desolate, so that no one may pass through because of the beasts, 16 *Though* these three men were in its midst, as I live,” says the Lord GOD, “they shall deliver neither sons nor daughters. They only shall be delivered, but the land shall be desolate. 17 Or *if* **I bring a sword upon that land**, and say, ‘Sword, go through the land;’ so that I cut off man and beast from it; 18 *Though* these three men *were* in it, as I live,” says the Lord GOD, “they shall deliver neither sons nor daughters, but they *only* shall be delivered themselves. 19 Or *if* **I send a pestilence** into that land, and pour out My fury upon it in blood, to cut off man and beast from it; 20 *Though* Noah, Daniel, and Job *were* in it, as I live,” says the Lord GOD, “they shall deliver neither son nor daughter. They shall *only* deliver their own lives by their righteousness.” 21 For thus says the Lord GOD, “How much more when **I send My four evil judgments against Jerusalem, the sword, and the famine, and the destroying beast, and the pestilence**, to cut off man and beast from it.

The sword is already here. Criminals murder without consequence, youths brutally attack unsuspecting elderly, and thieves steal while business owners watch helplessly. Does anyone feel safe in the nation’s largest cities anymore? One recent example of the sword being here is the liberals have made provision to quadruple the size of the IRS and establish an army of **armed** tax agents. Did you know that the IRS purchased almost 5,000 guns and five million rounds of ammunition? Why in the world does a tax collector require a gun? They already have absolute authority to garnish paychecks and throw violators in prison. Does that not sound like a sword?!?

What about famine? Texas and Kansas have lost tens of thousands of cattle due to drought and hay is too expensive for farmers to feed them. Lake Mead, which supplies water to Arizona, Nevada, California, and parts of Mexico, is about to completely dry up after 23 years of drought. It is so severe that Nevada is building a huge tunnel under the lake so they can drain the last drop of water from it. Europe has seen such terrible drought that whole rivers have dried up and fires are burning many French vineyards. The country of Ukraine, which supplies 20% of the world's high-grade wheat, is being destroyed in a war with Russia. You probably have not heard that about 13.5 million acres of olives tree orchards, half of the world's orchards, have been neglected or abandoned because of economics and a deadly pathogen. Sounds like the precursor to the third seal:

REVELATION 6:5-6 And when He opened the third seal, I heard the third living creature say, "Come and see." And I looked, and behold, *there was* a black horse; and the one sitting on it had a balance in his hand. 6 And I heard a voice in *the* midst of the four living creatures say, "**A measure of wheat for a silver coin, and three measures of barley for a silver coin: and see that you do not damage the oil and the wine.**"

Then there is pestilence. The wicked of this nation plotted, developed, and released a virus upon the world. They then withheld traditional medicines so that they could become rich and gain control over the world. When that virus ran its course, they sought and found another—monkeypox. Interestingly, it is primarily found in rodents. Is this an example of a "destroying beast" (Ezek. 14:21)?

Playing upon Winston Churchill's famous quote, I think all this is "not the end of the beginning," but perhaps it is the start of the beginning of the end. These days it seems there are none who even want to stop the madness of the wicked and their evil:

JEREMIAH 5:1-2 "Run to and fro through the streets of Jerusalem, and see now, and know, and seek in her open places, if you can find a man, **if there is one who does justice, who seeks the truth; and I will pardon her. 2 And though they say, 'As the LORD lives;' surely they swear falsely.**"

Even though the world now feels like it cannot get any worse, we all know that it will. The U.S.A. is well past the point of turning back to God. Just this week, the city council of Seattle spent their time condemning the use of the phrase "under God" in the Pledge of Allegiance because it excludes other religions. They blatantly reject God in everything:

HOSEA 4:1-8 Hear the Word of the LORD, children of Israel, for the LORD *has* a controversy with the inhabitants of the land, "There is no truth, nor mercy, **nor knowledge of God** in the land. 2 **By swearing, and lying, and killing, and stealing, and the committing of adultery** they break out; and blood touches blood. 3 **Therefore shall the land mourn, and everyone who dwells in it shall languish, with the beasts of the field and with the birds of the heavens. Yes, the fish of the sea shall also be taken away.** 4 Yet let no man strive, nor reprove another, for your people *are* as those who strive with the priest. 5 And you shall stumble in the day, and the prophet also shall stumble with you *in the*

night, and I will destroy your mother. 6 **My people are destroyed for lack of knowledge. Because you have rejected knowledge, I will also reject you** from being as a priest to Me. Since **you have forgotten the law of your God**, I will also forget your children. 7 As they were increased, so they sinned against Me. I will change their glory into shame. 8 They eat up the sin of My people, and they set their heart on their iniquity.

Surely the land is already mourning with drought and record heat. In the last two weeks, the Oder River, a major waterway in Poland and Germany, has seen massive numbers of dead fish. While no one has been able to determine the cause as yet, everyone is warned against going near the poisonous water. In fact, no one has been able to establish that it was a manmade disaster. Perhaps, it is a fulfillment of this prophecy:

JEREMIAH 23:15 Therefore thus says the LORD of hosts concerning the prophets, 'Behold, **I will feed them wormwood, and make them drink poisonous water**; for from the prophets of Jerusalem **ungodliness has gone forth into all the land.**'

Yes, brethren, the prophecies of the end-times are being fulfilled before our very eyes. Our hearts and minds must be firm and set toward God. This wicked world is firmly on the path to destruction and God is our only fortress against it. The time is rapidly approaching when:

REVELATION 22:11 Let the one who is unrighteous be unrighteous still; and let the one who is filthy be filthy still; and let the one who *is* righteous be righteous still; and let the one who *is* holy be holy still.

Establish yourselves in the agape love of God, the faith of Jesus Christ, and endure suffering in obedience to the Law of God. The promises of God are sure and eternal:

ISAIAH 50:7-10 For **the Lord GOD will help Me**; therefore I have not been disgraced. On account of this **I have set My face like a flint, and I know that I shall not be ashamed.** 8 *He is* near who justifies Me; who will contend with Me? Let us stand together; who *is* My adversary? Let him come near Me. 9 Behold, **the Lord GOD will help Me**; who *is* he *who* shall condemn Me? Lo, they all shall grow old like a garment; the moth shall eat them. 10 Who among you fears the LORD, who obeys the voice of His servant, who walks *in* darkness and has no light? Let him **trust in the name of the LORD and rely upon his God.**

“Devote yourselves to fasting and prayer” (1 Cor. 7:5) and be about “encouraging *one another*, and all *the* more as you see the day drawing near” (Heb. 10:25).

May God’s grace and peace be upon you!

Steven Greene

<https://sabbathreflections.org>

SABBATH THOUGHT 2022-08-20—FEAR OF THE LORD

May God bless you on His Sabbath day!

When talking about fearing the Lord, I have heard some try to explain it as “respect” for God. The word *fear* in the Bible means, well, just that—terror, fear, fright, etc. Claiming that it means some form of respect just does not fit with Scripture. In truth, that way of thinking is just an attempt to soften the reality that the God of this vast universe will render terrible judgments upon those who practice evil in this world.

The idea that fear of the Lord is just respect is a very Protestant one that came about over the last 100 years or so. People wanted to worship a god they see as only loving and kind because they do not want to have to keep God’s Law. It is also the view many have of God judging the world in righteousness. To judge in *righteousness* sounds almost congenial. But it was not always the dominant view. Sermons of this nation’s early preachers are referred to as “fire and brimstone” because they were strong warnings of the destruction that God promised to bring upon those who rejected His commandments.

The reality is that God’s righteous judgment against the wicked will be anything but pleasant. It says in Heb. 10:27 there will be “a **terrifying** expectation of inevitable **judgment** and of fierce fire, which will devour the adversaries of God.”

So why does God want us to view Him as both fearful AND loving? We can find a clear example with Pharaoh during the times of Moses. During the seventh plague of hail, Pharaoh spoke with Moses:

EXODUS 9:28-30 Pray to the LORD, *for it is enough*. Let there be no *more* mighty thunderings and hail. And I will let you go, and you shall stay no longer.”
29 And Moses said to him, “As soon as I go out of the city, I will spread abroad my hands to the LORD. The thunder shall stop, and the hail will not be any more, so that you may know that the earth is the LORD’S. 30 But *as for you and your servants, **I know that you do not yet fear the LORD God.***”

The plagues upon Egypt were also meant as a lesson for the ancient Israelites:

EXODUS 14:31 And **Israel saw that great work which the LORD did upon the Egyptians.** And **the people feared the LORD,** and believed the LORD and His servant Moses.

The terrible plagues that God brought upon the Egyptians also brought fear into the hearts of the ancient Israelites. But why did God want them to fear Him? It is very simple—fear is the beginning motivation for obedience! God said:

DEUTERONOMY 6:2 That **you might fear the LORD your God, to keep all His statutes and His commandments** which I command you, you, and your son, and your son’s son, all the days of your life, and **so that your days may be prolonged.**

The way of the human heart is deceitful above all things and desperately wicked¹. When God first made His presence known to the ancient Israelites, they needed motivation to obey. Recall how many times the people rebelled in the journey from Egypt to Mount Sinai. Even after witnessing God's great power and wrath upon the Egyptians, they still could not bring themselves to obey God except when He brought destruction upon them.

Rebellion is the result of the law of sin and death² that prevails in the hearts of all mankind. This was the mind that entered into all people after the sin of Adam—everyone claims the right to decide what is right and wrong in their own eyes. They reject being told what is good or evil by God (or others, for that matter). This kind of attitude requires a strong motivator to overcome.

It is why a child must first know fear of punishment in order to learn obedience to the parents. Children do not naturally obey them in the beginning. A child who is punished for disobedience early on will usually have a healthy fear as an adult of those responsible for enforcing governmental laws when they are broken. This is the principle behind “Train up a child **in the way** he should go; and **when he is old**, he will not depart from it.” (Prov. 22:6). A child who fears punishment for disobedience to the parents is unlikely to become an adult criminal.

When the Bible talks about fearing God, it is truly one of terror, fear, and fright because that is what is required to get our attention—at least in the beginning. With a child, the hope of the parents is that the blessings for obedience eventually replace fear with love. A child who initially obeys out of fear of punishment will become an adult who teaches his or her own children to obey the very same laws their parents taught them. Why? Because a child can only begin to appreciate and love the family rules AFTER they begin to obey them and receive the blessings they bring. Eventually, they come to understand that the blessings are a result of OBEYING the rules.

This is the way of all people since the beginning. Mankind will only keep God's Law if they fear the consequences of disobedience. But it is through **keeping** God's Law that they begin to understand God promises are a blessing. The formula for this was given by Moses:

DEUTERONOMY 10:12-13 And now, Israel, what does the LORD your God require of you, but **to fear the LORD** your God, to **walk in all His ways**, and to **love Him**, and to **serve the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul**, 13 To **keep the commandments of the LORD, and His statutes** which I command you today **for your good?**

Did you notice the order? First is fear of God. Next, as they walk in His ways (obey Him) they learn to love and willingly serve God because they realize that keeping His Law produces GOOD! God *blesses* them for obedience.

¹ Jer. 17:9.

² Rom. 8:2.

The same is true of us. There are few believers who did not have a healthy fear of punishment (death) once we understood we had sinned against God. Many times the first major trial a believer endures involves the Sabbaths or holydays, usually because an employer or unconverted spouse demands they compromise those days. The heartfelt reaction to such a temptation is often one of fear, at least in the beginning. Once someone determines to keep Sabbaths or holydays regardless of what other people do³, God strengthens them with His Holy Spirit and even blesses them. That leads us to loving God's Law and His ways. The churches during the time of the apostles knew this in a very personal way because of the persecution that abounded:

ACTS 9:31 Then the churches throughout the whole of Judea and Galilee and Samaria had peace indeed. *And* they increased, being edified and **walking in the fear of the Lord** and **in the comfort of the Holy Spirit**.

It is only natural to fear threats of punishment, whether of God or of evil men. The difference is that men have nothing more to offer than fear. The wicked of this world use FEAR to force people to **obey**. Who has ever been BLESSED for keeping the laws of man? There is only punishment for NOT keeping them.

God, on the other hand, gives us a spirit of power, love, and a sound mind⁴ to obey His Law. Obedience to Him is never done out of fear because “the purpose of the commandment is love out of a pure heart, and a good conscience, and genuine faith” (1 Tim. 1:5). The fact that God blesses those who keep His Law is absolutely contrary to man's ways of enforcing obedience through fear. Obeying God brings blessings of joy and peace from above⁵. There is NO fear for those who obey Him.

The most wonderful reason to obey God is that fear no longer rules in our hearts. In fact, no one who loves God and keeps His commandments should fear anything in this life, including death. Jesus Christ said:

JOHN 16:33 These things I have spoken to you, so that in Me you may have peace. **In the world you shall have tribulation. But be courageous! I have overcome the world.**”

Fear is the way of the world and it is the motivation for many believers when they are first called. In fact, the Bible says that “fear is the beginning of wisdom” in numerous places⁶. But fear is just a beginning; it is not the end. God uses fear to get our attention so we will stop and listen to Him. God wants us to fear the judgment that is coming upon those who practice evil but move past fear and grow to love Him. Perhaps this is why the Scripture says:

³ Heb. 13:6.

⁴ 2 Tim. 1:7.

⁵ Rom. 15:13.

⁶ Job 28:28; Ps. 111:10; Prov. 1:7; 9:10; 15:3; Isa. 11:2.

DEUTERONOMY 6:5 And **you shall love** the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might.

It always seemed a bit strange that God would COMMAND people to love Him. How does anyone, even God, command someone to love another? I think the answer lies in the prior verses:

DEUTERONOMY 6:1-5 “Now these *are* the commandments, the statutes, and the judgments which the LORD our God commanded to teach you so that you might do *them* in the land where you go to possess it, 2 **That you might fear the LORD your God, to keep all His statutes and His commandments** which I command you, you, and your son, and your son’s son, all the days of your life, and so that your days may be prolonged. 3 Hear therefore, O Israel, and **be diligent to observe it, so that it may be well with you**, and that you may greatly multiply, as the LORD God of our fathers has promised you, in the land that flows with milk and honey. 5 And **you shall love the LORD your God** with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might.

God commanded the ancient Israelites to obey His Law out of fear of punishment for disobedience. However, as they obeyed, God blessed them more and more. They learned that obedience brought blessings! What child does not naturally love blessings from the parents? So, it was through the blessings of God that they were to grow to love God; that is, “they shall [*come to (future tense)*] love the Lord”.

While fear is a beginning motivation for many, believers are to put away fear because it will not exist in God’s kingdom:

1 JOHN 4:18-19 **There is no fear in the love of God**; rather, perfect **love casts out fear** because fear has torment. And **the one who fears has not been made perfect in the love of God**. 19 We love Him because He loved us first.

In truth, fear of God is not *respect*. It is truly a terror that will come upon those who practice evil in the Day of Judgment. For all others, there might be fear of God in the beginning but obedience to Him eventually brings indescribable blessings upon those who keep His commandments. If fear is the beginning, AGAPE LOVE is the **completion** for all God’s people!

May God’s grace and peace be upon you!

Steven Greene

<https://sabbathreflections.org>

SABBATH THOUGHT 2022-12-10—GOD’S LAW IS LOVE

May God bless you on His Sabbath day!

The Bible says, “The **fear** of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom.” (Prov. 1:7). In fact, this statement is repeated two more times in Psalm 111:10 and Proverbs 9:10. Why fear God? Jesus answers that question by saying, “... fear Him [God] Who has the power to destroy both life and body in Gehenna [fire].” (Matt. 10:28). But is that what God wants—for us to fear Him? Yes, at least in the BEGINNING. Still, that sounds terribly harsh.

Fear of death is common to everyone, so how does one avoid eternal death in the lake of fire? Jesus Christ also answered this by saying, “But if you desire to enter into life, keep the commandments.” (Matt. 19:17). This sounds simple enough; however, Paul made it very clear that it is impossible to perfectly keep God’s Law. He said, “For **if a law had been given that had the power to give life**, then righteousness would indeed have been by law.” (Gal. 3:21). He lamented about this more fully in chapter 7 of Romans:

What then shall we say? *Is the law sin? MAY IT NEVER BE!* But I had not known sin, except through the law. ... 8 But sin, having grasped an opportunity by the commandment, worked out within me every *kind of* lust because apart from law, sin was dead. ... 10 And the commandment, which *was meant to result in* life, was found *to be* unto death for me; 11 Because sin, having taken opportunity by the commandment, deceived me, and by it killed *me*. ... 14 For we know that the law is spiritual; but I am carnal, having been sold *as a slave* under sin; ... 18 Because I fully understand that there is not dwelling within me—that is, within my fleshly being—*any* good. For the desire to do good is present within me; but how to work out that which is good, I do not find. 19 For the good that I desire to do, I am not doing; but the evil that I do not desire to do, this I am doing. ... 23 But I see another law within my own members, warring against the law of my mind, and leading me captive to the law of sin that is within my own members. ... 25 I thank God *for His salvation* through our Lord Jesus Christ. (Rom. 7:7-8, 10-11, 14, 18-19, 23, 25).

James also points out that “*if* anyone keeps the whole law, but sins in one *aspect*, he becomes guilty of all.” (Jas. 2:10). The Bible is very clear that eternal life requires us to keep God’s Law. So, how is it possible to avoid death if we all sin? Obviously, sins are forgiven through the sacrifice of Jesus Christ. But now we are talking about a completely new perspective toward keeping the Law because the sacrifice of Jesus Christ was motivated by AGAPE LOVE. It was God the Father Himself who “... **so loved the world** that He gave His only begotten Son, so that everyone who believes in Him may not perish, but may have everlasting life.” (John 3:16).

It was out of agape love that God sacrificed His Son. That same agape love motivated Jesus Christ to endure death for us. As it says in Galatians 2:20, “the Son of God ...

loved [us] and gave Himself for [us].” So, how are we to keep God’s Law?¹ Is it out of fear or a strict discipline of obedience? If that were the case, then why did Jesus say, “If you **love** Me, keep the commandments—namely, My commandments.” (John 14:15). Even so, on the surface this sounds like keeping the Law is an unemotional discipline of the mind rather than something of the heart. So, is love toward God only a matter of obedience? Does God want us to focus on the all “thou shalt nots” of the Law? That sounds more like someone who is in prison. There, an inmate is so constrained that it is quite hard to break any rules. In a prison, the rules are nothing more than lists of prohibited and permissible behaviors wherein no one is allowed to do as they please. Is that what keeping God’s Law is all about? Is loving God the Father and Jesus Christ merely adhering to a set of rules? Not at all. In fact, the Law **is** agape love! Remember the two great commandments?

MATTHEW 22:36-40 “Master, which commandment *is the* great commandment in the Law?” 37 And Jesus said to him, “ ‘**You shall love the Lord your God** with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.’ 38 This is *the* first and greatest commandment; 39 And *the* second *one is* like it: ‘**You shall love your neighbor** as yourself.’ 40 **On these two commandments hang all the Law and the Prophets.**”

Verse 40 tells us that the Law and Prophets² are “hung” underneath agape love. In other words, God’s Law DEFINES agape love. If God’s Law is agape love, then why are there so many “thou shalt nots?” Perhaps the more important question is why is agape love even COMMANDED at all? How can love or any emotion be demanded of anyone? The apostle John spoke about agape love often and even he said, “... **this is His [God’s] commandment: ... that we love one another**, exactly as He gave commandment to us.” (1 John 3:23). However, when it comes to our emotions, no one can force someone to FEEL something, whether it is love or fear or anger.

Someone who first begins to seek God might be fearful of the consequence of death for disobedience. Fear can be a motivation to begin keeping God’s Law, even if it is strictly doing the “thou shalt” or avoiding the “thou shalt nots.” However, this is not the ultimate purpose for keeping God’s Law. While this was generally the situation with the ancient Israelites, a big change came about when God gave His Holy Spirit to people:

EZEKIEL 36:26 And **I [God] will give you a new heart, and I will put a new spirit within you.** ...

So, does this change the perspective of keeping the Law? If ALL the Law is based upon agape love toward God and toward people, then how should we view it? What is the fundamental purpose for keeping God’s Law? Read this carefully to answer that question:

¹ 1 John 4:9-11.

² A prophet did not only deliver prophecies. They also declared the testimonies and judgments of God, which are a part of the Law. Prophecies (predictions of future events) are not part of the Law.

1 TIMOTHY 1:5 **Now the purpose of the commandment is love out of a pure heart**, and a good conscience, and genuine faith;

There it is! We might strictly obey God's Law in the beginning, but the whole purpose is for us to grow and develop the agape love of God in our OWN hearts! The apostle John had much to say about keeping God's Law because he fully understood the purpose of it: "... if anyone is keeping His [*Jesus*'] Word [*to keep His commandments*], truly in this one **the love of God is being perfected**." (1 John 2:5). Keeping the Law PERFECTS agape love in US!

Jesus Christ lived a life of flesh on this earth to become the perfect sacrifice for sins; however, He also came to explain God's Law: "Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; **I did not come to abolish, but to fulfill [the Law of God]**." (Matt. 5:17). As Christians mature in their relationship with God, Jesus Christ, and people, their hearts and minds are changed from seeing the Law as a matter of strict obedience. They begin to have the same agape love that motivated God to sacrifice His Son and Jesus Christ to give His life for us. It is only with agape love that the Law is FULFILLED! It is so much more than strict obedience because it is a desire of the heart to give our lives in service to God and others.

David was a man after God's own heart BECAUSE he kept the Law, even though it was painful at times. David had God's agape love in him and understood that the "... law of the LORD is perfect, **converting the soul** ..." (KJV Psa. 19:7).

Now the question becomes—is there more to life than strictly keeping God's Law? Yes, in every way! The purpose of obeying God is to produce a heart filled with agape love. Keeping the commandments is a **way of life**—one of giving and serving God and others as God gives us the opportunities. The mature Christian sees someone in need and tries to help or encourage or teach or pray or comfort. This is because agape love is manifested as FRUITS of the Holy Spirit. Love, joy, peace, long-suffering, kindness, goodness, faith, meekness, self-control are not "thou shalt nots." They are the natural desires and expressions of agape love toward God, Jesus Christ, and this world. Have you ever thought about that? Have you ever considered that a perfect Christian is not only keeping the Law but doing good things for others that are not "commanded" in it? This is exactly what we find in the parable of the sheep and goats. In this parable we find **THE litmus test** for those children who enter into the eternal Kingdom. They are the ones who showed kindness and mercy and love to others:

MATTHEW 25:34-36 Then shall the King say to those at His right hand, 'Come, you who are blessed of My Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from *the* foundation of *the* world. 35 For I was hungry, and **you gave Me something to eat**; I was thirsty, and **you gave Me something to drink**; I was a stranger, and **you took Me in**; 36 I was naked, and **you clothed Me**; I was sick, and **you visited Me**; I was in prison, and **you came to Me**.'

The Law does not say “thou shalt” feed the hungry, give drink to the thirsty, comfort a stranger, cloth the naked, visit the sick, or spend time with those in prison. Those are voluntary good works to others who are in need or suffering. However, the sheep do those good things because they have a need to help others motivated by agape love in their hearts. The goats do not have agape love in their hearts and will not think about the needs of others. Rather, they might even find the thought of it repulsive, as was the case of some in the parable of the good Samaritan (Luke 10:30-37). Interestingly, this parable immediately follows Luke’s account of the two great love commandments (Luke 10:27).

In the end, the parable of the sheep and goats show us that only those who have agape love in their hearts will be in the kingdom:

MATTHEW 25:33-46 33 And He shall set the sheep at His right hand, but the goats at *His* left. 34 Then shall **the King say to those at His right hand [the sheep], ‘Come, you who are blessed of My Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world. ... 41 Then shall He also say to those on the left [the goats], ‘Depart from Me, you cursed ones, into the eternal fire, which has been prepared for the devil and his angels. ... 46 And they [the goats] shall go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous [the sheep] into eternal life.’**

The sheep represent the children of God whose hearts are filled with agape love. The goats are those who never grew past fear of their own death or never understood the Law as more than “thou shalt” and “thou shalt not.” So, God’s Law produces agape love and that is the ultimate **purpose** for keeping it.

1 JOHN 3:16-18, 22-23 By this *very act* we have known the love of God because He laid down His life for us: and we ourselves are to lay down *our* lives for the brethren. 17 But whoever has this world’s goods, and **sees his brother in need, and shuts up his feelings of compassion** from him, **how can the love of God be dwelling in him?** 18 My little children, we should not love in word, nor with *our* tongues; rather, **we should love in deed and in truth.** ... 22 And whatever we may ask we receive from Him because we keep His commandments and **practice those things that are pleasing in His sight.** 23 And this is His commandment: that we believe on the name of His Son Jesus Christ, and that we love one another, exactly as He gave commandment to us.

May God’s grace and peace be upon you!

Steven Greene

<https://sabbathreflections.org>

SABBATH THOUGHT 2022-12-17—BEATITUDES IN THE PSALMS

May God bless you on His Sabbath day!

The New Testament is what we call the part of the Bible that was written after the death of Jesus Christ. The amazing part is how much of the New Testament actually quotes the Old Testament. This should not be surprising since the way of salvation is also contained in the Old Testament.

Immediately following the spiritual battle with Satan, Jesus Christ began preaching to the people. He laid before them some of the most comforting and beautiful sayings in the entire Bible. Matthew 5:2 begins with, “He [*Jesus Christ*] opened His mouth *and* taught them, saying:”

“Blessed *are* the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.” (Mat 5:3).

“Blessed *are* those who mourn, for they shall be comforted.” (Mat 5:4).

“Blessed *are* the meek, for they shall inherit the earth.” (Mat 5:5).

“Blessed *are* those who hunger and thirst after righteousness, for they shall be filled.” (Mat 5:6).

“Blessed *are* the merciful, for they shall find mercy.” (Mat 5:7).

“Blessed *are* the pure in heart, for they shall see God.” (Mat 5:8).

“Blessed *are* the peacemakers, for they shall be called *the* sons of God.” (Mat 5:9).

“Blessed *are* those who have been persecuted for the sake of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.” (Mat 5:10).

“Blessed are you when they shall reproach you, and shall persecute you, and shall falsely say every wicked thing against you, for My sake.” (Mat 5:11).

Some have said that *beatitude* is a short word for *beautiful attitudes*. I wonder, however, how many can view someone who is actually crestfallen, mourning, meek, humbly seeking God, merciful, loving, peacemakers, or being persecuted as having a beautiful attitude. I am certain that God does, but it is still a puzzling name in that regard. The reason is that Jesus said that those who do these things are **blessed**, which is quite different from a beautiful attitude.

The Greek word for *blessed* is *makarios*. The root meaning of that word means to make something *beautiful*. It is this meaning that is behind *blessed*, not beautiful attitude. In other words, *blessed* **is** the meaning for the Old French word *beatitude*. So, Jesus is

saying to all those mentioned in verses 3-11 that they will be blessed or made beautiful. Obviously, this does not happen in this physical life.

I imagine Paul pondering these sayings of Christ when he wrote the agape love chapter especially when he said:

1 CORINTHIANS 13:4-8 Love is **patient** and is **kind**; **love envies not, does not brag** about itself, **is not puffed up**. 5 Love **does not behave disgracefully, does not seek its own things, is not easily provoked, thinks no evil**, 6 **Does not rejoice in iniquity**, but **rejoices in the truth**. 7 Love **bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things**. 8 Love never fails. But whether *there be* prophecies, they shall cease; whether *there be* languages, they shall cease; whether *there be* knowledge, it shall vanish away.

Are not all of these attitudes reflected by those situations mentioned in the Beatitudes? In other words, those mentioned in the Beatitudes are fulfilling the Great Commandments¹. As Saul, he was responsible for much suffering to others so it is no wonder that Paul was so transformed when he received the Holy Spirit of God's agape love. The growth of God's love working in him is striking as you read his epistles.

In the Old Testament, the word translated "blessed" is *'esher*, meaning *happiness*. It is a form of *'asher*, which is also the name of one of the twelve tribes. Did you know that the Psalms are full of "Blessed is/are..." scriptures? I present some of them here, but there are others throughout the Old Testament. Notice that the first verse in the first Psalm² is a "Beatitude":

"Blessed *is* the man that walketh not in the counsel of the ungodly, nor standeth in the way of sinners, nor sitteth in the seat of the scornful." (Psa. 1:1).

"... Blessed *are* all they that put their trust in him." (Psa. 2:12).

"... Blessed *is he* whose transgression *is* forgiven, whose sin *is* covered." (Psa. 32:1).

"Blessed *is* the man unto whom the LORD imputeth not iniquity, and in whose spirit *there is* no guile." (Psa. 32:2).

"Blessed *is* the nation whose God *is* the LORD; *and* the people *whom* he hath chosen for his own inheritance." (Psa.33:12).

"... blessed *is* the man *that* trusteth in Him." (Psa. 34:8).

"Blessed *is* that man that maketh the LORD his trust, ..." (Psa. 40:4).

¹ Matt. 22; Mark 12; John 13:34; 1 John 2; Matt. 5:43-44; Luke 6:27, 35.

² I used the KJV for the prose; however, it sometimes wrongly translates the word for *blessed* as *happy*.

“... Blessed *is* he that considereth the poor: the LORD will deliver him in time of trouble.” (Psa. 41:1).

“Blessed *is the man whom* thou choosest, and causest to approach *unto thee, that* he may dwell in thy courts: ...” (Psa. 65:4).

“Blessed *are* they that dwell in thy house: they will be still praising thee. Selah.” (Psa. 84:4).

“Blessed *is* the man whose strength *is* in thee; in whose heart *are* the ways of *them*.” (Psa. 84:5).

“... blessed *is* the man that trusteth in thee.” (Psa. 84:12).

“Blessed *is* the people that know the joyful sound: they shall walk, O LORD, in the light of thy countenance.” (Psa. 89:15).

“Blessed *is* the man whom thou chastenest, O LORD, and teachest him out of thy law;” (Psa. 94:12).

“Blessed *are* they that keep judgment, *and* he that doeth righteousness at all times.” (Psa. 106:3).

“... Blessed *is* the man *that* feareth the LORD, *that* delighteth greatly in his commandments.” (Psa. 112:1).

“Blessed be he that cometh in the name of the LORD: we have blessed You out of the house of the LORD.” (Psa. 118:26).

“... Blessed *are* the undefiled in the way, who walk in the law of the LORD.” (Psa. 119:1).

“Blessed *are* they that keep his testimonies, *and that* seek him with the whole heart.” (Psa. 119:2).

“Happy [Blessed] *is* the man that hath his quiver full of them (children): they shall not be ashamed, but they shall speak with the enemies in the gate.” (Psa. 127:5).

“... Blessed *is* every one that feareth the LORD; that walketh in his ways. 2 For thou shalt eat the labour of thine hands: happy *shalt* thou *be*, and *it shall be* well with thee.” (Psa. 128:1-2).

“Happy [Blessed] *is that* people, that is in such a case: *yea, happy [blessed] is that* people, whose God *is* the LORD.” (Psa. 144:15).

“Happy [Blessed] *is he* that *hath* the God of Jacob for his help, whose hope *is* in the LORD his God:” (Psa. 146:5).

This particular Sabbath Thought deviates somewhat from my usual writings. However, it seemed appropriate with this topic that I offer it as an opportunity to you to search for other “Blessed is...” scriptures on this Sabbath. I encourage you to seek out those “pearls” because they are truly uplifting and encouraging. There are many in Proverbs, but do not stop with the Old Testament because they are strewn throughout the NT as well, particularly in Luke but also Matthew, Romans, James, and Revelation.

If you want a challenge, see how many you can find in the NT that are direct quotes from the OT. You might also notice a big difference in the Old and New Testaments. The OT focuses on the happiness in this life, which is a result of obedience to the old covenant with God. Those in the NT are clearly pointed to a future, and more abundant and eternal blessing for enduring hardships and having the agape love of God directing our ways.

May God’s grace and peace be upon you!

Steven Greene

<https://sabbathreflections.org>

SABBATH THOUGHT 2022-12-24—WHAT ARE GOOD WORKS?

May God bless you on His Sabbath day!

God's agape love in us is the motivation for good works. Good works are mentioned quite often in the Bible. There is a very good reason for this—they are required for salvation. While Scripture is plain that faith is required for salvation¹, it also reveals that, without good works, faith is dead². A few other Scriptures that establish good works as salvational include Ecclesiastes 12:14, Matthew 19:16-21, 2 Corinthians 5:10; and, of course, the parable of the sheep and goats in Matthew 25:31-46. We are also rewarded in the Kingdom according to our works³:

COLOSSIANS 3:8, 24 Watch out for yourselves in order that we may not lose the things we have accomplished, but *that* we may receive a full reward. ... 24 Knowing that you shall receive from *the* Lord the recompense [*reward*] of the inheritance, for you are serving Christ the Lord.

The importance of good works is a mainstay in chapters 2-3 of Revelation where Jesus Christ evaluated every single church—Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamos, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia, and Laodicea—by their works! Obviously, many did not please Jesus; although, a few were/are acceptable. So, just what are good works? Perhaps our thoughts turn to these verses:

1 CORINTHIANS 12:27-30 Now you are *the* body of Christ, and *you are all* individual members. 28 And God Himself has placed certain *ones* in the church: first, apostles; secondly, prophets; thirdly, teachers; then miracles; then gifts of healings; helps; governments; various languages. 29 *Are all apostles? Are all prophets? Are all teachers? Do all perform miracles?* 30 Do all have **gifts** of healing? Do all speak in *different* languages? Do all interpret?

Notice that none of these are positions established by an ordination. Even the title Apostle is cannot be established by an ordination. The apostles were only those who had personally witnessed the resurrection of Jesus Christ and appointed by Him. In other words, all of these titles and positions are GIFTS given by God the Father and Jesus Christ, not by the laying on of hands.

How many of us have even one of these gifts? So, if these gifts are not common, then what does God expect of the rest of us in the way of good works? In fact, how can we know that we have the means to DO good works? Notice:

¹ 2 Tim. 3:15; Eph. 2:8.

² Jas 2:26.

³ Also 1 Cor. 3:8, 13-15.

GALATIANS 3:5 Therefore *consider this*: **He Who is supplying the Spirit to you, and Who is working deeds of power among you ...**

Do you have God's Holy Spirit dwelling within you? If you have the Holy Spirit, then you have the means to do good works. It is as simple as that. But again, what exactly are good works? In contrast, James defined dead works when talking about faith: "Now then, if there be a brother or sister who is naked and destitute of daily food, And one of you says to them, "Go in peace; be warmed and be filled," and **does not give to them the things necessary for the body**, what good is it? In the same way also, faith, if it does not have works, is dead, by itself." (Jas. 2:15-17). From this, maybe we can formulate a definition:

DEFINITION: A good work is providing for someone in their time of need.

The Bible has a number of examples such as the parable of the good Samaritan⁴ and the woman who anointed the feet of Jesus with ointment and wiped them with her hair:

LUKE 7:44-46 And after turning to the woman, He said to Simon, "Do you see this woman? I came into your house, and you did not provide *any water to wash My feet*; but she has washed My feet with *her tears* and wiped *them* with the hairs of her head. 45 You did not give Me a kiss; but she, from the *time* I came in, has not ceased to ardently kiss My feet. 46 You did not anoint My head with oil; but she has anointed My feet with ointment.

Paul gives us two more examples of good works that help us understand them. Notice the first one:

EPHESIANS 4:28 Let the one who stole, steal no more; rather, let him labor with *his hands*, working *at what is good*, **so that he may impart something to the one who has need**.

He describes someone performing physical work that provides for others in need. While it could be the result of earning an income, I think that Tabitha is an example of this in another way:

ACTS 9:36, 39 Now *there was* in Joppa a certain disciple named Tabitha; which, being interpreted, is called Dorcas. **She was full of good works and of alms** that she did. ... 39 Then Peter arose *and went with them*; *and when he arrived*, they brought him into the upper room; and all the widows stood around him, weeping and showing *him* **the tunics and garments that Dorcas had made** while she was with them.

Tabitha was laboring to make clothes and directly supply them to those in need. Whether is it working at a job to earn an income from which we have monetary means to help or

⁴ Luke 10:30-37.

using our talents directly, good works can come from our labors. Although the former is a category that is most often attributed to men, it also does not exclude women.

However, that is not something everyone is capable of doing, especially as we age and our strength wanes. Perhaps that is what Paul had in mind in Ephesians 4 because he his next example describes speaking good words to those who are in need of edification (being taught or lifted up):

EPHESIANS 4:29 Do not let any corrupt communication come out of your mouth, but **that which is good and needful for edification that it may give grace to those who hear.**

Grace is an undeserved gift that we receive. Speaking can bring grace to others through words that benefit others. They can be words of wisdom, understanding, encouragement, or vision.

But what about those who are alone and isolated? While telephones are ubiquitous, they are useless if we do not have someone to call. This is situation that has not been considered very often, but we do good works by connecting people with one another—those who can supply with those in need. Do you know of anyone in need of talking with someone, prayers, or fasting? Do you also know of someone who has the time and desire to talk, pray, and fast for others? This describes the widow Anna, the prophetess:

LUKE 2:37 And she was a widow of about eighty-four years, who did not depart from the temple, **serving day and night with fastings and supplications.**

She obviously was of an age where she did not have the strength to labor and provide for others in physical ways. Instead, she did good works that Jesus Christ made certain that mentioned in the Bible for all generations to read about. Was she fasting and praying for people she knew? I like to think so. Paul also emphasized how important these good works are to God:

1 TIMOTHY 5:5 Now **she who is a widow** indeed, and **who is alone in the world,** has *her* hope in God, and **continues in supplications and prayers** night and day.

Good works are the result of agape love, as I said in the beginning. Even though 2 Corinthians 9 is most often used to talk about offerings, notice in verse 8 that it also applies to good works:

2 CORINTHIANS 9:6-15 But this *I* say: the one who sows sparingly shall also reap sparingly; and **the one who sows bountifully [abundant in good works]** shall also reap bountifully. 7 Each one **as he purposes [to do good works] in his heart, so let him give,** but not grudgingly or by compulsion; for God loves a cheerful giver. 8 For God *is* able to make all grace abound toward you so that in every way you may always have sufficiency in all *things,* and **may abound unto**

every good work, 9 According as it is written: “He has scattered abroad, *and* he has given to the poor; his righteousness remains forever.” 10 **Now may He** Who supplies seed to the sower, and bread to eat, **supply your seed and multiply your sowing [good works]; and may He increase the fruits [good works]** of your righteousness, 11 *So that you may* in every way be enriched unto all bountifulness [*abundance for good works*], which causes thanksgiving to God through us. 12 For **the administration of this service is not only filling to overflowing the deficiencies of the saints**, but *is* also abounding by the giving of many thanks to God. 13 Through the performance of this service, *they* are glorifying God for your professed subjection to the gospel of Christ, and **for the liberality of the distribution toward them and toward all the saints**; 14 And in their supplications for you, *there is* a longing on your behalf, because of the surpassing grace of God upon you. 15 Now thanks *be* to God for His indescribable free gift.

Good works are not limited by physical strength, age, or learning. God gives gifts to each one of His chosen children and He will ensure that each has an abundance from which to supply the needs of others. This is required of all who are a part of the Body of Christ⁵ so He will not omit anyone who seeks opportunities to help others in need.

One final note. Good works require a giver and a receiver. In this life, sometimes we are a giver and other times we are the ones in need. Paul admitted he was both at times:

PHILIPPIANS 4:10-12 But I rejoiced greatly in *the* Lord, that at last *your* care for me has revived—although you were already thinking *of me*, but you lacked an opportunity *to provide*. 11 I am not saying *this* in respect to **being destitute**; for I have learned *that* in whatever *circumstances* I am, **to be content**. 12 **For I have experienced being brought low, and I have experienced abounding**. In everything and in all things I have been taught **both to be full and to hunger**, both **to abound and to be without**.

Notice in verse 10 that the Philippians were able to help Paul with his needs but they were initially prevented from doing so by circumstances. Eventually, God gave them the means. This, too, can happen to us. But in all cases, God supplies both the giver and the receiver—we just need to pray for opportunities to give and pray for our needs. Let God’s agape love in us be established by faith and be desirous of good works for each other!

May God’s grace and peace be upon you!

Steven Greene

<https://sabbathreflections.org>

⁵ Eph. 4:6-8, 11-12, 15-16.

SABBATH THOUGHT 2022-12-31—WHAT IS AGAPE LOVE?

May God bless you on His Sabbath day!

In the New Testament, the word translated *love* is most often is from Greek noun *agape* or verb *agapao*. But just what is agape love? How does it differ from other kinds of love? Is it even important for God's people to understand?

First of all, agape love comes *from* God: “Beloved, we should love one another because **love [Gk. *agape*] is from God**; and **everyone who loves [Gk. *agapao*] has been begotten by God**, and knows God.” (1 John 4:7). That makes sense because God **IS** love¹. This means that agape love is not something that we can have, feel, or understand unless it is given by God because He is the **ONLY** source of it. In fact, having agape love in us requires that we are begotten with God's Holy Spirit! In simple terms, it has to be planted in us. Agape love is not just the result of a single infusion, it is living and must be growing in us.

That means that agape love must differ from the love that humans experience naturally. Agape must be a special kind of love that is unique from all other forms of human love. To better understand agape love, look at the different types of human love. Since English really only has one word for “love”, a good approach is to look at the various forms based upon the Greek words:

DEFINITION: *Phileo* can be FONDNESS OR KINDNESS² toward people or it can refer to LOVE BETWEEN FRIENDS³. The latter is commonly called brotherly love. Love between close friends is called *philostorgos*⁴.

DEFINITION: *Storge* is FAMILIAL LOVE, which is love based upon the close bond that exists between parents and children as well as brothers and sisters. Note that *Storge* is not used in the Bible except in Romans 12:10.

DEFINITION: *Eros* is ROMANTIC LOVE between a man and woman. This involves deep feelings of respect, tenderness, and longing exclusive to a husband and wife. *Eros* was originally much more than sexual desire, but it became perverted even in ancient times. Sexual desire without love is called *lust*.

What is common to every one of these forms of human love? Each involve relationships where love is reciprocated; that is, all of them are based upon love that is jointly shared

¹ 1 John 4:8, 16.

² Acts 27:3; 28:2.

³ 1 Thess. 4:9; Heb. 13:1; 1 Pet. 1:22; 3:8; 2 Pet. 1:7.

⁴ Rom. 12:10.

between people. For example, friendships only exist if both people have *phileo* love for the other. If one person has *phileo* love for someone else but the recipient does not return that *phileo* love, then they are not friends. Someone who hates us, regardless of our feelings toward them, is an enemy not a friend. The same principle is true among family members or between a husband and wife.

This is what distinguishes *agape* love. Jesus Christ said that the two Great Commandments are to *agape* love God and our neighbors⁵. But Jesus also gave us a new commandment to love brethren as He loves us Himself⁶. All of this makes sense intellectually, especially since the Law of God is intended to bring us to that understanding⁷. How hard is it to love those that love us? That is the basis for romantic love, familial love, or love between friends and exactly the point that Jesus made:

MATTHEW 5:45-47 So that you yourselves may be *the* children of your Father Who *is* in heaven; for He causes His sun to rise on *the* evil and on *the* good, and sends rain on *the* just and on *the* unjust. 46 For **if you love those who love you, what reward do you have?** Do not the tax collectors practice the same *thing*? 47 And **if you salute your brethren only, what have you done that is extraordinary?** Do not the tax collectors practice the same *thing*?

What distinguishes *agape* love is that it not only exists between people who love us in return, but *agape* is the only form able to love those who do NOT reciprocate. Notice the fourth love commandment spoken by Jesus Christ:

MATTHEW 5:44a But I say to you, **love [Gk. *agapao*—the verb form of *agape*] your enemies** ...

We are to have *agape* love for our enemies! Do we have *phileo*, *storge*, or *eros* love for an enemy? No! Only *agape* love can be had for someone who hates us. This is *why* it defines God. He IS *agape* love because "... **God commends His own love to us because, when we were still sinners,** Christ died for us." (Rom. 5:8). Also notice:

1 JOHN 4:9-10 In this way the love of God was manifested toward us: that God sent His only begotten Son into the world, so that we might live through Him. 10 **In this act is the love—not that we loved God; rather, that He loved us and sent His Son to be the propitiation for our sins.**

JOHN 3:16 For **God so loved [Gk. *agapao*] the world [even though all were sinners]** that He gave His only begotten Son, so that everyone who believes in Him may not perish, but may have everlasting life.

⁵ Matt. 22:36-40; Mark 12:28-33; Luke 10:27.

⁶ John 13:34; 15:12; Eph. 5:2; 1 John 3:23; 4:21.

⁷ 1 Tim. 1:5.

Givem all of this, perhaps we can define agape love as:

DEFINITION: *Agape* is GODLY LOVE. It is unconditional whether it is reciprocated with love or hatred. Agape love is not natural to flesh and blood; therefore, it is received only through the begettal of the Holy Spirit by God. In an ideal sense, a person who has agape love does not hate others, including enemies. This is the highest and purest form of love.

When Jesus said that we are to show agape love toward our enemies, He meant it in every regard. We are to:

MATTHEW 5:44b ... bless those who curse you, do good to those who hate you, and pray for those who despitefully use you and persecute you,

Agape love is not manifested by doing good for our enemies grudgingly. Good works must be a motivation of our hearts, not from a discipline of strict obedience. How is this possible? Paul wrote, “And above all these things **put on love [Gk. agape]**, which is the bond of perfection.” (Col. 3:14). We are expected to have, and grow in, agape love. Agape love in us is truly the PERFECTION of our bond with God and others. With it, that bond truly runs deep. John wrote that “... **if we love one another, God dwells in us, and His own love is perfected in us.**” (1 John 4:12). This means that a relationship with God requires His agape love to LIVE IN us.

How do we know if we have agape love living in us? How does agape love grow in us? Look again at what Paul said, but this time notice the preceding verse:

COLOSSIANS 3:13-14 Forbearing one another, and forgiving one another if anyone has a complaint against another; even **as Christ forgave you, so also you should forgive.** 14 And above all these things *put on love*, which is *the* bond of perfection.

God’s children are confronted with many offenses in life. It is HOW we deal with them that matters. If agape love is living in us, we will sincerely try to reconcile with others when offenses occur. It means that we want to forgive those who offend us or repent to those we ourselves offend. Agape love is a desire for all—even our enemies—to become eternal children of God.

Agape love also grows as we deal with offenses and trials. If we, regardless of offenses or our personal afflictions, seek to always treat others as the potential children of God, then it will develop. Agape love is without any expectation of return and it is strongest when we “put on agape love” while we are afflicted or suffering. Read carefully one of the most beautiful passages by Paul:

1 CORINTHIANS 13:1-3 If I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, but do not have love, I have become a sounding brass or a clanging cymbal. 2 If I have *the gift of prophecy*, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, I am **nothing [Gk. oudeis]**. 3 And if I give away all my goods, and if I deliver up my body that I may be burned, but do not have love, I have gained nothing [Gk. oudeis].

Did you notice the mention of *angels* in verse 1? Are they not perfect before God? We can speak as angels, understand all prophecy and mysteries, have ALL knowledge (everything that God knows), and have faith to literally move mountains but we are NOTHING BEFORE GOD without agape love. The Greek word for *nothing* is *oudeis*, which means absolutely nothing or cannot exist. In simple words, without agape love there is no salvation. Growing in agape love is hard because it means we must put aside all anger and hatred no matter what the provocation. Notice what is not agape love:

1 CORINTHIANS 13:4-7 Love is patient *and* is kind; love **envies not**, does **not brag** about itself, is **not puffed up**. 5 Love does **not behave disgracefully**, does **not seek its own** things, is **not easily provoked**, **thinks no evil**. 6 Does **not rejoice in iniquity**, but rejoices in the truth. 7 Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

God begets His children with agape love. It is not natural to us and only comes from Him. It must be always be living and growing in us as we battle our carnal natures. It is out of agape love for God that we keep His commandments and Law. It is the motive for good works unto all, including our enemies. It is the foundation of God's eternal Kingdom. Agape love is all that matters when the end comes.

1 PETER 1:22 Having [cleansed] [Gk. hagnos] your lives by obedience to the Truth unto unfeigned brotherly love [*philadelphia*] through *the Spirit*, love [*agapao*] one another fervently with a pure [Gk. katharos] heart.

“Now **the purpose of the commandment is love out of a pure heart** ...” (1 Tim. 1:5). Agape love begins with keeping God's Law. It starts with *phileo* love for others. But God is transforming us to be vessels of the purest form of love—agape!

May God's grace and peace be upon you!

Steven Greene

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