

2023 SABBATH THOUGHT ARTICLES



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SABBATH THOUGHT 2023-01-07—MERCY & GRACE

May God bless you on His Sabbath day!

Did you ever notice that the last words in the Bible are “The **grace** of our Lord Jesus Christ *be* with you all. Amen.” (Rev. 22:21)? The Greek word for *grace* is *charis*. It is not to be confused with the English word *charity*, which comes the Latin word *caritas*. Both have a sense of benevolence or good will toward others. There is a subtle, but important, difference between *grace* and *charity*:

DEFINITION: **Grace** is benevolence toward others who are DEPENDENT upon such acts whereas **charity** is benevolence toward others who are NOT DEPENDENT upon such acts.

For example, the king in the parable of the servant who owed him 10,000 talents was an act of grace, not charity:

MATTHEW 18:23-27 Therefore, the kingdom of heaven is compared to a man, a *certain* king, who would take account with his servants. 24 And after he began to reckon, there was brought to him one debtor who owed *him* ten thousand talents. 25 But since he did not have *anything* to pay, his lord commanded him to be sold, and his wife and children, and all that he had, and payment to be made. 26 Because of this, the servant fell down *and* worshiped him, saying, ‘Lord, have patience with me, and I will pay you all.’ 27 And being moved with compassion, the lord of that servant released him, and forgave him the debt.

Forgiving the debt was certainly an act of grace because the debtor could never repay it. However, the unpaid debt was also grounds for selling the servant and his family into bondage according to the law. For that reason, there was also mercy because the king withheld from doing so. With that in mind, we can say:

DEFINITION: **Mercy** is *not* receiving a PUNISHMENT WE DESERVE and **grace** is receiving a GIFT WE DO NOT DESERVE.

Obviously, all that God does for us is a gift of grace including everything from making the sun to shine to eternal life. We are utterly dependent upon God in this life as well as for the next. But God is also merciful not to condemn us when we sin. In that regard, people are alive only because God is merciful.

When it comes to mercy and grace from God, it is difficult at times to distinguish between them. Both are a reflection of His agape love and we are entirely dependent upon both His mercy and grace. Perhaps, they are much the same in God’s eyes when it

comes to eternal life. We know that eternal life is a gift by the grace of God¹ but we also know that we are not dead because He is merciful². In some regards, they are two sides of the same coin. This seems to be the case in 1 Corinthians 3:12-15 concerning reward and works. There we find both grace and mercy from God when it comes to eternal life:

1 CORINTHIANS 3:12-15 Now if anyone builds upon this foundation gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay *or* stubble, 13 The work of each one shall be manifested; for the day *of trial* will declare *it*, because it shall be revealed by fire; and the fire shall prove what kind of work each one's is. **14 If the work that anyone has built endures, he shall receive a reward. 15 If the work of anyone is burned up, he shall suffer loss; but he himself shall be saved, yet as through fire.**

But mercy and grace are something we can, and should, give to others. Are they not a measure of agape love working in us? In other words, mercy and grace are motivated by agape love:

MATTHEW 12:35 The **good** man out of the **good** treasure of his heart brings out **good** things ...

There are many examples of mercy and grace in the Bible. Notice the grace of Tabitha:

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 provided items needed by others. Even though she may have spent some money purchasing the materials, what she made and gave to others was of far more value because she put her own time and effort into creating clothing that was worth more than the original cost of materials. Could she have just bought the clothes or given the money to those in need? Scripture does not say, but her grace was likely a reflection of her means. That is key to understanding the grace we offer to others. Compare Tabitha's works to Paul's charge to the rich:

1 TIMOTHY 6:17-18 Charge those who are rich in this present age not to be high minded, nor to put *their* hope in *the* uncertainty of riches; but *to put their hope* in the living God, Who abundantly gives us all things for *our* enjoyment; 18 To do good, **to be rich in good works, to be generous in giving**, to be ready to share;

¹ Rom. 5:17, 21; Titus 3:7; 1 Pet. 3:7.

² Ps. 9:13.

Those who have abundance are to be generous in good works because they are a measure of the mercy and grace we receive from God:

LUKE 6:36-38 Therefore, you also be compassionate, *even* as your Father is compassionate. 37 And do not judge *others*, so that you yourself will not be judged in any way. Do not condemn *others*, so that you will not be condemned in any way. Forgive, and you shall be forgiven. 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.**

Grace and mercy from God is commended by Paul and John in their epistles to Timothy³, Titus, and the “elect lady and her children.” It is obviously desirable and something worthy of thanksgiving to God:

1 TIMOTHY 1:2 To Timothy, *my* true son in *the* faith: **Grace, mercy and peace from God our Father and Christ Jesus our Lord.**

TITUS 1:4 To Titus, a true son according to *our* common faith: **Grace, mercy and peace from God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ** our Savior.

2 JOHN 1:3 **Grace, mercy, and peace shall be with us from God the Father, and from the Lord Jesus Christ,** the Son of the Father, in truth and love.

Did you realize, however, that most often mercy was omitted from all other epistles⁴ where only grace was mentioned? Does that mean that it is only about grace or that mercy was only extended to a few? No, mercy and grace from God are tightly woven together because we are dependent upon both from God. Notice this from Paul:

2 CORINTHIANS 12:7-10 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. 10 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 strong.

In his affliction, was it mercy or grace that motivated God to deny Paul’s request to remove the thorn? It obviously caused Paul much grief. It might seem that removing his suffering would be mercy, not grace. Perhaps that is an example of how God views our

³ Also 2 Tim. 1:2.

⁴ 1 Cor. 1:3; 2 Cor. 1:3; Gal. 1:3; Eph. 1:2; Phil. 1:2; Col. 1:2; 1 Thess. 1:1; 2 Thess. 1:1; Phlm. 1:3; 1 Pet. 1:2; 2 Pet. 1:2; Jude 1:2; Rev. 1:4.

afflictions and trials. God sees them more as grace because it is through sufferings that we receive the greatest gift of grace:

1 PETER 5:10 Now may **the God of all grace**, Who has called us unto **His eternal glory** in Christ Jesus, **after you have suffered a little while**, Himself **perfect you [through sufferings]**, establish, strengthen, and settle you.

There it is—God is gracious to help us achieve the gift of eternal life through afflictions. For God’s children, sufferings in a physical life are part of God’s grace because of the “unspeakable gift.”⁵ We enter into the eternal Kingdom only through afflictions so they are necessary to receiving the eternal gift. In the end, it is about the gift of grace⁶, not sufferings. God never loses sight of that even if we are preoccupied by sufferings:

MATTHEW 7:11 Therefore, if you, being evil, know *how* to give good gifts to your children, **how much more shall your Father Who is in heaven give good things** to those who ask Him?

The word for *good* here is the same in Matthew 12:35 mentioned previously. It is *agathos* and has the sense of benevolence. The same word is used of good works:

EPHESIANS 2:10 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.

Mercy and grace are a manifestation of agape love, whether from God or those called to be His children. God’s grace is upon us first because He loved us first⁷. When our hearts are seeded with agape love, we desire to give mercy and grace to others:

MATTHEW 5:7 Blessed *are* the merciful [*to others*], for they shall find mercy [*from God*].

The grace of God is fulfilled through our own afflictions and sufferings. We do not always recognize God’s mercy in our lives, but we should remember it is inseparable from His grace. And His grace is always greater⁸ because it is eternal.

May God’s grace and peace be upon you!

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⁵ 2 Cor. 9:15.

⁶ Rom. 5:15, 17; Eph. 2:8; 3:7; 4:7.

⁷ 1 John 4:19.

⁸ Jas. 4:6.

SABBATH THOUGHT 2023-01-14—DIVIDED WE FALL

May God bless you on His Sabbath day!

Here in the USA, the Republicans recently spent a week deciding who would become the Speaker of the House of Representatives. It was rife with not only disagreements and infighting, but an embarrassing public display of anger and conflict. It was a reflection and continuation of intraparty divisions that have unashamedly been going on for the last decade or so.

While opposing ideals have been around since the formation of this government, two things have changed: 1) they are no longer argued privately—outside of the media; and, 2) they are no longer philosophical and political differences that are hotly debated—they have devolved into character assassinations fueled by raw anger or hatred.

Such things normally occur between differing political parties, but there is just as much of this going on within supposedly politically ideologically similar groups. No one is willing to rationally debate the issues and they do not have even a modicum of respect for others. As soon as there is a disagreement, what do they do? They separate themselves and form another group, such as the Freedom Caucus, et al, that is at cross-purposes with their former associations.

At this point, if this sounds like a mirror of many of the organized Churches of God (CoG) today, you would be correct. Have you ever considered that many of the organized church groups in modern times, including Worldwide Church of God, was formed because of disputes? Admittedly, some were over salvational doctrinal differences, but the fact that many arose out of unresolved offenses is shameful, especially when they are *not* related to salvational beliefs.

While government political infighting was mostly hidden from the public until the last fifteen years or so, the CoGs have been doing this for decades. Worst of all, those who are responsible for the divisions (on both sides), typically recruit brethren to support and establish their cause. Unresolved offenses between those who have been called to be God's eternal children have seemingly become a way of life. Shame on us!

Solomon wrote that a “soft answer turns away wrath” (Prov. 15:1). However, does that really work these days? Even among the saints? Why do we allow anger to separate us from one another? Why do divisions continue to happen without reconciliation? I have heard many of the groups claim that there are God's people in the other organizations but I have never, not once, seen any of them reconcile and join together.

I have been thinking about eternity recently. It brought to mind some questions that have everything to do with offenses and, I hope, prompt us to seriously think about how critical it is to reconcile with others in this life. Considering that eternity is a very...very long time, what is required for everyone to perfectly and always peaceably coexist with billions of other beings? Do you imagine that there will NEVER be any differences—NONE

whatsoever? How is it possible for the children of God be “more” perfect than angels—some of whom rebelled? What makes us unique in the sense of being incapable of sinning? What is it about our character, heart, and mind that makes us better as spirit beings? Will we always be in agreement with *everyone* and *everything* in the Kingdom? What will prevent our hearts from being moved to anger by anyone or anything during that eternal existence?

How can anyone live a never-ending peaceable life if they are easily provoked in this life? People literally **end** relationships with family, friends, and brethren over small matters including divergent opinions, disparate (non-salvational) beliefs, who is or is not in control, who is or is not ordained, who is or is not allowed to speak, eating out on the Sabbath, etc. Again, I ask: can you imagine coexisting perfectly in love and humility with billions of other beings forever and ever if we cannot get along in this life?

Satan is a perfect example. At one time, he was one of the cherubim¹ who covered the throne of the Most High God. And he was *perfect in every way*. And that is according to GOD. However, Satan decided at one point he wanted to rule over all the angels:

ISAIAH 14:13-14 For you have said in your heart, ‘I will ascend *into* the heavens, **I will exalt my throne above the stars of God**; I will also sit upon the mount of the congregation, in the sides of the north. 14 I will ascend above the heights of the clouds; I will be like the Most High.’

He desired to have his throne next to God. He wanted to “sit upon the mount of the congregation, in the sides of the north”—the possible location of God’s throne upon Mount Zion². Satan wanted to be like the Most High by having dominion over the angelic heavenly host. When the answer he received was “no,” he became filled with hatred and turned the heavens upside down in rebellion.

Scripture tells us that such things will never happen in the future Kingdom³. But what is it that will ensure NO ONE will ever get angry and rebel? What Satan did is **no different** than what is happening over and over again among God’s children today. A disagreement is quickly followed by brethren choosing sides. The results are an exodus and splintering of the organization. If this continues in this life, how is it possible that it will never happen throughout eternity when we are made spirit beings? Will God use mind-control to prevent rebellion? Will God install an anger blocker into our hearts? ***Can anyone seriously believe that the solution to offenses between us now will only occur after we are given eternal life?***

If we, today, are truly begotten of God by His Holy Spirit and yet refuse to reconcile offenses, how can we believe that we will even be *in* the Kingdom? There are three very important questions to ask ourselves. What is it that will make us more perfect than the

¹ Ezek. 28:14-16.

² Ps. 48:2.

³ Isa. 9:7.

angels who were perfect and, yet, still rebelled; how do we obtain that greater perfection; and how do we can we know that we have it? The answer to the first question is:

COLOSSIANS 3:14 And above all these things **put on [agape] love, which is the bond of perfection.**

Agape love is the bond of **perfection**. The really interesting point is that perfection happens when there is a bond of agape love between us and God the Father and Jesus Christ. The Greek word for *bond* means to be jointly tied together in the way a ligament connects two bones so they work in concert with each other. A ligament is extremely hard to break; likewise, a perfect bond of agape love between us and God must be strong enough to never break. How strong is agape love in us? Will it last for eternity? Is it possible to stretch it to the breaking point as in the case of Satan?

I urge everyone to read 1 John 4:7-21 because it reminds us that the work of God is to fill us with His agape love. Also notice what Paul said immediately following his beautiful prose on what love is and is not: "... when that which is perfect has come." (1 Cor. 13:10). What is the perfection that comes? He tells us in verses 1-9 that it is agape love. So how do we obtain the perfection of agape love? It is from God alone:

1 JOHN 4:7-8, 12 Beloved, we should love one another because **love is from God**; and **everyone who loves has been begotten by God**, and knows God. 8 The one who does not love does not know God because God is love. ... 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.**

Agape love is from God, but it begins with a sincere desire to serve and obey God, not our own selfish interests. Keeping God's Law is the beginning of agape love and the way we are perfected in it.

1 JOHN 2:5 On the other hand, **if anyone is keeping His Word, truly in this one the love of God is being perfected.** By this *means* we know that we are in Him.

1 TIMOTHY 1:5 Now **the purpose of the commandment is love out of a pure heart**, and a good conscience, and genuine faith;

Finally, how do we know if we are growing in that bond of agape love? What is the test of it? How we handle offenses! Are we able to forgive—from the heart—those who offend us? Do we have the humility to sincerely repent to those we offend? Above all, do we strive with all our being to not be offended or become angry? Offenses certainly and frequently occur—they continue to be the single most common problem in the Body of Christ. What are people called who have an unresolved offense between them? Enemies. Whenever there is an unwillingness to reconcile with someone, they become an enemy. What is the truest test of agape love in us?

MATTHEW 5:44, 48 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, ... 48 Therefore, **you shall be perfect**, even as your Father Who *is* in heaven is perfect.”

Having sincere agape love for an enemy is the perfection of God the Father and Jesus Christ. They are perfect because they loved us all when we were enemies. And They proved it—Jesus Christ died for the enemies of God. He did not die for a friend—there were none. Life is hard and rife with offenses. We are to be vessels of God’s agape love, the only way to deal with an offense. How hard is it to repent to, or forgive, others? God does not ask us to DIE for our enemies, only love them. What prevents us from doing that? Fear? Pride? An angry heart? Jealousies over the disparities of life—gifts, intelligence, wealth, possessions, positions, or afflictions? If we, in this physical life, refuse to attempt to reconcile EVERY offense, can we really expect to live peaceably for all eternity with billions of people, many of whom are radically different from ourselves? Our personalities are as divergent as the two halves of our brains.

Please brethren, I am begging everyone to seriously ponder all these questions. Unresolved offenses are a grave matter. Jesus Christ demands that we try to resolve them even before we bring our offerings to **God**—it is that important:

MATTHEW 5:22-24 But I say to you, everyone who is angry with his brother without cause shall be subject to judgment. ... 23 For this reason, if you bring your gift to the altar, and there remember that your brother has something against you, 24 Leave your gift there before the altar, and go your way; first be reconciled with your brother, and then come and offer your gift.

At the resurrection, there will not be a lobotomy or heart transplant that makes us perfect. If we are devoid of agape love now, then our spiritual eternity is at risk. If we refuse to reconcile simple offenses with others who are begotten by God and have the mind of Jesus Christ, then what would eternity be other than unending divisions and strife? How is it that anyone can partake of the Passover each year if there are unresolved offenses? Is that not ignoring Matthew 5:24 as well as the sacrifice of Jesus Christ? Consider that God can withhold the sacrifice of Jesus Christ from any one of us if we do not try to resolve offenses between us:

LUKE 6:37 And do not judge *others*, so that you yourself will not be judged in any way. Do not condemn *others*, so that you will not be condemned in any way. Forgive, and you shall be forgiven.

Brethren, do not let unresolved offenses of today mar the joy of the resurrection with grief if any one of us is absent on that day.

May God’s grace and peace be upon you!

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SABBATH THOUGHT 2023-01-21— FAITHFUL UNTO DEATH

May God bless you on His Sabbath day!

The Marine Corp motto is *Semper Fidelis*, meaning “Always faithful.” The phrase is usually shortened to just “Semper Fi.” Marines are an elite corp of the US military whose training is among the most rigorous in the world. Many times they are the first to engage enemies face-to-face.

One important characteristic of military groups is that members must become more than individuals participating in a common goal. To be the best and most effective, teams of people must have a camaraderie built upon friendship, faithfulness, and loyalty. That dedication, or loyalty, can become so deep that members are willing to sacrifice their lives for others without hesitation.

Being a part of those close relationships is something that is never forgotten because it changes and moulds the character of the individuals to consider the needs of others above personal interests. We have all seen many examples of this—the fireman who dies trying to save someone in a burning building, the woman who risks her life on a frozen pond to rescue a child, the soldier who is killed protecting villagers, and the Secret Service agent who takes a bullet meant for his or her protectee. What each of these have in common is that the rescuers and victims had never even met each other.

What motivates someone to give their life for a complete stranger? How do these individuals overcome the natural fear of pain, suffering, and death to give up their own life for a stranger? Perhaps it simply comes down to a loving heart. However, I believe it is more than that. The personal stories behind those who gave their lives to save others more often than not include time in the military, sports, etc. Their lives were influenced so deeply they are willing to die for strangers. A soldier can hate and even kill an enemy but when the war is over, many throw down their weapons because they have a deep guilt about having been the instrument of death even though it was a worthy cause. A sports team will exhaust themselves to beat their opponent but afterwards, opposing players are seen comforting and encouraging each other. Inside military units and sports teams exists a bond between people who share a goal that cannot be achieved without the participation of every member. Their thinking is not upon the self. Someone willing to give their life for a stranger is unselfish and has learned to put the needs of others first.

Winning requires an individual to dedicate his or her efforts to the other members of the team. To become an effective military unit or sports team requires going through hard training. It is through those adversities and challenges that individuals learn about each others’ strengths and weaknesses. No one is without limitations so the true strength of the unit or team comes from the combination of the individual members working together in bonds of faithfulness and loyalty.

Jesus Christ said, “For narrow *is* the gate and **difficult is the way** that leads to life, and few are those who find it.” (Matt. 7:14). To say that the way unto eternal life is difficult is truly an understatement. We all know stories of saints who gave their lives for God. They are in the Bible and even history books such as Foxe’s Book of Martyrs. There are people we know personally who have endured great sufferings unto death. Paul listed examples of some because he knew the importance of faith and loyalty:

HEBREWS 11:32-39 Now what more can I say? For time would fail me to relate *the accounts* of Gideon, Barak also, and Samson and Jephthah, David also, and Samuel, and the prophets; 33 Who **by faith were victorious** over kingdoms, worked righteousness, obtained promises, shut *the* mouths of lions, 34 Quenched *the* fury of fire, escaped *the* edge of *the* sword, were strengthened from weakness, became mighty in war, *and* turned back the armies of foreigners. 35 Women received their dead restored to life; and **others were tortured, not accepting deliverance**, that they might obtain a superior resurrection; 36 And **others endured the trial of cruel mockings and scourgings**; yes, **and moreover, of chains and imprisonment**. 37 They were **stoned to death**, they were **sawed in two**, they were **brutally interrogated**, *and* **slaughtered by the sword**. They went about in sheepskins *and* in goatskins, being destitute, oppressed, *and* ill-treated; 38 Of whom the world was not worthy; they wandered in deserts and in mountains, *living* in caves and in holes in the earth. 39 But **these all**, *though* they had **received a good report through faith**, did not obtain the promise.

I think we read about the faithfulness of the great biblical personages without giving much thought to what it means. Do we view the faithfulness held by those mentioned in the Bible as simply obedience to God? Are we Semper Fidelis—*Always Faithful*. If so, faithful to what? Faithful to whom? It has to be to God and Jesus Christ and for Their purpose to save humanity. The faithfulness that Paul describes must be deeper than that of any marine unit or sports team. Everyone called by God in this age must endure severe hardships to establish them as part of that elite group called the Body of Christ. This training is so life-changing that we must become willing to give our lives for the cause. It is required that all who are part of The Body to put the purpose of God and Jesus Christ to save an entire world above their own lives. They did—and so must we. Jesus Christ set the path for us all to the kingdom through His own suffering. He said, “I am **the way**, and the truth, and **the life**; **no one comes to the Father except through Me**.” (John 14:6).

To be a part of God’s plan requires us to put Them and the Body first above all. As is the case with every military leader, recruits will only follow those who have gone through the same training and been proven on the battlefield. Jesus Christ has every right to require His people to suffer because He pioneered that path for us all:

1 PETER 4:12-19 Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery trial among you *which is* taking place to test you, as if some strange thing *were* happening to you. 13 But to the degree that **you have a share in the sufferings of Christ**, rejoice; so

that, at the revelation of His glory, you also may rejoice exceedingly. 14 If you are reviled for *the* name of Christ, *you are* blessed because the *Spirit* of glory and the Spirit of God is resting upon you; on their part He is blasphemed, but on your part He is glorified. ... 16 Yet if anyone *is suffering* as a Christian, he should not be ashamed; but let him glorify God because of this, ... 18 And if **the righteous are saved with much difficulty**, what will become of the ungodly and *the* sinner? 19 For this reason also, let those who suffer according to the will of God commit their souls *to Him* in well doing, as to a **faithful Creator**.

Semper Fidelis is deeply ingrained in every marine and it becomes the foundation of their character throughout their lives. Even when no longer a part of the corp, the standard remains. This fact is so deeply embedded in their thinking that a marine quipped, “Once a marine, always a marine.” What do God and Jesus Christ require of Their people? From the mouth of Jesus Christ:

REVELATION 2:8-11 And to the angel of the church of *the* Smyrneans write: These things says the First and the Last, Who was dead but is alive. 9 I know your works and **tribulation and poverty** (but you are rich), and the blasphemy of those who declare themselves to be Jews and are not, but *are* a synagogue of Satan. 10 **Do not fear any of the things that you are about to suffer**. Behold, the devil is about to cast *some* of you into prison, **that you may be tried**; and you shall have tribulation ten days. Be **faithful unto death**, and I will give you a crown of life. 11 The one who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. The one who overcomes shall not be hurt of the second death.

“Faithful Unto Death.” In Latin, it is *Fidelis Usque Ad Mortem*. What God’s people must endure changes them such that, hopefully, it can said that once a saint, always a saint. Being a member of the Body of Christ is a high calling. They are called *saints* and *witnesses*. In the Greek, *saint* means a *holy one*; that is, clean and blameless before God. *Witness* comes from *martus*, which is *martyr* in the English. Why are those who are the begotten children of God called holy ones and martyrs? Because they are washed in the blood of Christ who was the Faithful Witness (Martyr) and many also gave their lives:

REVELATION 1:4-5 John to the seven churches that *are* in Asia: Grace and peace *be* to you from Him Who is, and Who was, and Who *is* to come; and from the seven spirits that are before His throne; 5 And from **Jesus Christ, the faithful Witness [martus]**, the Firstborn from the dead, and the Ruler of the kings of the earth. To Him Who loved us and washed us from our sins in His own blood,

So, Jesus Christ set the standard for us of Faithful Unto Death, which is much more than being Always Faithful. Jesus endured sufferings unto death to save a world full of enemies, so *He* established *The Way* to eternal life. It requires us to suffer in like manner so that we prove we are Faithful Unto Death and are willing to die as a part of the greatest corp ever conceived—the Body of Christ. Jesus Christ our King BECAUSE He proved Himself worthy of the highest honor and position:

HEBREWS 5:7-9 Who, in the days of His flesh, offered up both prayers and supplications with strong crying and tears to Him Who was able to save Him from death, and was heard because *He feared God*. 8 Although He was a Son, yet **He learned obedience from the things that He suffered**; 9 And having **been perfected**, He became **the Author of eternal salvation** to all those who obey Him,

He is the Author of salvation so He also became The Way to eternal life. Those who are willing and able to endure the fiery trials of this life do so to prove they will be Faithful Unto Death. Those who succeed will be made “kings and priests” (Rev. 1:6), serving as members of a Body to fulfill the purpose of the Most High God—bringing many sons and daughters unto glory¹. Everyone who knows the bonds that are formed when people share in the crucible of life is forever changed. For God’s people, *Faithful Unto Death* is more than a motto: it is The Way of life to which we are called.

The Marine Corp is an elite military organization that is built upon bonds of faithfulness and loyalty. It is a tradition passed along to raw recruits by leaders who were also proven by those same high standards. Jesus Christ was the First of those who follow in His steps:

HEBREWS 2:9-14 But we see Jesus, Who was made a little lower than *the* angels, crowned with glory and honor on account of **suffering the death**, in order that by *the* grace of God **He [Jesus] Himself might taste death for everyone**; 10 Because it was fitting for Him, for Whom all things *were created*, and by Whom all things *exist*, in bringing many sons unto glory, to make the **[Prince] of their salvation perfect through sufferings**. 11 For both **He Who is sanctifying and those who are sanctified are all of one**; for which cause He is not ashamed to call them brethren, 12 Saying, “I will declare Your name to My brethren; in *the* midst of *the* church I will sing praise to You.” 13 And again, “**I will be trusting in Him.**” And again, “Behold, I and the children whom God has given Me.” 14 Therefore, since **the children are partakers of flesh and blood, in like manner He also took part in the same**, in order that through death He might annul him who has the power of death—that is, the devil;

Brethren, this life is meant to be a harsh training. Only through fiery trials is our character formed and established to serve in the Body of Christ. It is the standard by which every generation fulfills the highest calling of all. That is why honor and glory are given to those who are found *Fidelis Usque Ad Mortem*.

May God’s grace and peace be upon you!

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¹ Heb. 2:10.

SABBATH THOUGHT 2023-01-28—SPIRITUAL LAWS & PHYSICAL CUSTOMS

May God bless you on His Sabbath day!

Corinth is a town on the isthmus of mainland Greece. Paul spent a fair amount of time there; however, the Corinthians were a particular challenge because of their many gods, sexual immorality, and other evil practices. As a result, the Corinthians struggled with several issues. One particular problem Paul addressed was circumcision:

1 CORINTHIANS 7:18-20 Was anyone called being circumcised? Do not let him be uncircumcised. Was anyone called in uncircumcision? Do not let him be circumcised. 19 For **circumcision is nothing, and uncircumcision is nothing**; rather, the keeping of God's commandments *is essential*. 20 **Let each one abide in the calling** in which he was called.

The matter of circumcision was originally debated by the apostles at a meeting in Jerusalem. It began, as many disputes did, with a pharisaical approach to law. The Jewish brethren claimed that it "... **is obligatory to circumcise [the Gentiles]**, and to **command them to keep the law of Moses**." (Acts 15:5). At issue was the physical keeping of this statute under the Old Covenant.

The whole matter of physical circumcision brings up a question: by what authority did the apostles eliminate the statute of physical circumcision? None—they had NO authority to eliminate anything from the Law. So, did the apostles sin by telling the Gentiles that physical circumcision was no longer required? No. They recognized that God's salvation had come upon the Gentiles and that the Old Covenant was "a [*physical*] yoke upon the necks of the disciples [*Gentiles*], which neither our fathers nor we [*Jews*] were able to bear" (Acts 15:10). The Gentiles were legitimately part of the New Covenant just like the believing Jews. The fact is that the apostles did *not* change the Law because circumcision is still required in the New Covenant; however, it is now a spiritual fulfillment: "**he is a Jew who is one inwardly, and circumcision is of the heart**, ..." (Rom. 2:29).

Some points of the Law have *changed*, such as circumcision, but *nothing* has been eliminated. Other statutes that changed from the physical to the spiritual include wearing tassels¹ (tzitzits), putting phylacteries² (tefillin) on their foreheads or hands, and writing the commandments on their doorposts. What was the purpose of these? Notice:

DEUTERONOMY 6:5-6 And thou shalt **love the LORD thy God** with all thine heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy might. 6 And **these words**, which I command thee this day, **shall be in thine heart**. ... 8 And **thou shalt bind them for a sign** upon thine hand, and they shall be as frontlets between thine eyes. 9 And thou shalt write them upon the posts of thy house, and on thy gates.

¹ Num. 15:38-40; Deut. 22:12.

² Deut. 6:4-9.

Tassels and phylacteries were meant to remind the people to keep God’s Law in the same way that physical circumcision was supposed to remind them of their covenant promise to obey God. However, the Bible is clear that physical reminders could not change the hearts and minds of the people. No one can have a spiritual relationship with God on a physical level.

That all changed when God gave His Holy Spirit. Only by moving beyond the physical to the spiritual can anyone love and obey God. Ezekiel wrote about this very problem: “**A new heart also will I give you, and a new spirit will I put within you:** and I will take away the stony heart out of your flesh, and I will give you an heart of flesh. And **I will put my spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes, and ye shall keep my judgments, and do them.**” (Ezek. 36:26). Physical circumcision, wearing tassels and phylacteries, and doorposts cannot bring people to a relationship with God because “God is Spirit, and those who worship Him must worship in spirit and in truth” (John 4:24). That is why those things are no longer physically required.

It is vitally important to realize that none of the changes to the Law were done by the apostles themselves—all changes were from God. How do we know that? God showed the apostles that the uncircumcised Gentiles also received the Holy Spirit. Peter himself witnessed this³. Both Peter and Paul recognized that it was the Holy Spirit that determined who was in a covenant relationship with God, not physical acts⁴.

But does that mean that all things are now spiritual? What about unclean foods? Do those statutes still apply? Yes, because physical food has no spiritual proxy—we cannot eliminate physical food. Only things that pertain to our *spiritual relationship* with God under the New Covenant have changed. Those who desire to be in covenant with God according to the physical Old Covenant must do all those things commanded in it—circumcision, wearing tassels and phylacteries, etc. However, those under the New Covenant are not obligated to perform certain physical acts that were meant *TO ESTABLISH GOD’S LAW IN OUR HEARTS AND MINDS*. That is now the result of having the Holy Spirit. But what about matters that pertain to physical appearance? The Bible does not eliminate them even under the New Covenant:

1 TIMOTHY 2:9-10 In like manner also, *let* the women adorn themselves with clothing that shows **modesty and discretion**, not with *elaborate* braidings of the *hair*, or *with* gold, or pearls, or expensive apparel; 10 But *with that* which is fitting for women who profess *to have* reverence for God—with good works.

There has been much discussion over the years about clothes, hair, head coverings, makeup, tattoos, jewelry, etc. How should we approach matters of physical appearance? Generally speaking, these pertain to discretion and modesty; things that are influenced by the *customs* of society. For God’s people, they are also based upon God’s Law, which

³ Acts 10; 15:7-11.

⁴ Rom. 2:29.

includes statutes against certain hair styles, beard trimmings, cutting the flesh, wearing clothes specifically meant for a man or woman, etc.⁵, that were pagan practices or sexual immorality. God gave a severe warning against such things:

DEUTERONOMY 18:9 When thou art come into the land which the LORD thy God giveth thee, **thou shalt not learn to do after the abominations of those nations.**

While this verse addressed specific topics listed in the next few verses (vv. 10-14), it pertained to all manner of evil pagan practices. God said numerous times, “I *am* the LORD your God Who brought you out of the land of **Egypt**.” (Lev. 19:36). God brought them out of Egypt because of the influence of pagan idolatry and sexual immorality.

To understand the ordinances pertaining to physical appearance requires a careful reading of Scripture. For example, Paul addressed the matter of marriage to an unconverted spouse and virgins in 1 Corinthians 7. In doing so, he was cautious in his wording to distinguish those things that were his own opinion as opposed to a commandment from God. He said it was *his* judgment four times in 1 Cor. 7:6, 10, 12, and 25-26, not God’s. In verse 9 he makes it clear it was God’s judgment. The lesson here is that we must be careful not to infer a commandment when none was given (even though Paul’s judgment was wise and prudent).

From this we know that Paul was concerned for both obedience to God’s Law as well as maintaining discretion and modesty. (Discretion is being mindful of the sensibilities of others whereas modesty is doing things that do not stand out or are an expression of rebellion.) Paul said he sought to “please everyone in all things, **not seeking my own profit, but the profit of many, in order that they may be saved.**” (1 Cor. 10:33)⁶. Did he do this to the extent that he violated the commandments of God? Certainly not! But he did take into account the local customs. For example, when he talked about women’s hair in 1 Corinthians chapter 11, he gave his judgment based upon what was by *nature*:

1 CORINTHIANS 11:14-15 Or does not even **nature itself** teach you that if a man has long hair, it is a shame to him? 15 But if a woman has long hair, it is a glory to her; because the long hair has been given to her instead of a *veil to cover her head*.

What is *nature*? It is the natural order of things; in simple terms, that which is usual, customary, and decent. It was the custom for men ancient times to wear robes but, today, most men wear pants. It is also acceptable for men in Scotland to wear kilts. Someone in the USA wearing a robe or sporting a kilt today would be outside societal norms—it would not be usual, customary, or maybe even decent. In Paul’s day, it appears that men typically did not have long hair and women did not shave their heads. Does that apply

⁵ Lev. 19:19-37; 21:5; Deut. 14:1; 22:5.

⁶ Also 1 Cor. 9:20-22.

today? It depends. Read carefully what Paul said in 1 Cor. 11:6: “But **if** *it be* shameful for a woman to be shorn or shaved, let her be covered.” Notice the word *if*. Paul said IF it is shameful, then women should not cut their hair to the length of stubble (the result of shearing) or shave their heads bald. What would make those a *shame*? When such conduct or appearance violates the acceptable customs of society. It is important to understand that shame is not sin! It is the result of disregard for the standards of what is usual, customary, and decent in the eyes of society and God. It is **not** something determined by the opinion of one (or even a few) people—it is determined by standards of appropriate behavior. God’s people should have discretion and modesty in all things from the perspective of both the societal norms *and* God. Let me be clear, however, that any physical appearance that is a reflection of pagan idolatry or sexual immorality could certainly be a sin.

Over time, acceptable physical appearance has changed. Among the Body of Christ, it seems to be a recurring controversy. For those reasons, I think it is helpful to point out a couple verses. First of all, Paul told the Corinthians to judge these matters themselves: “**You judge for yourselves.** Is it becoming for a woman to pray to God uncovered?” (1 Cor. 11:13). Then there was his final conclusion: “But **if anyone is contentious over this issue, we have no such custom, neither do the churches of God.**” (1 Cor. 11:16). Above all things, we are not to elevate these matters to contentious strife.

There are diverse opinions within the Body of Christ about hair styles, clothes, makeup, jewelry, and many other such things, but are they worth causing hurt, divisions, and offenses? On the other hand, everyone should evaluate themselves to ensure we do things with discretion and modesty from the perspective of others and God. After all, we are to judge ourselves and not others. Finally, ask yourself: Which is more important—hairstyles or the Kingdom of God?

God’s children are those with His Holy Spirit within their hearts and minds. The reason we have it is so that God’s Law is written inside us. That also means that each of us is personally responsible for keeping it—*all* of it. Some physical statutes have been replaced by a spiritual keeping. Others are left to us to figure out according to the thoughts and intents of our hearts⁷ that should be aligned with desiring to fully keep God’s Law and edify one another in agape love⁸. There is no other way to eternal life!

May God’s grace and peace be upon you!

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⁷ Heb. 4:12.

⁸ Eph. 4:16.

SABBATH THOUGHT 2023-02-04—WAIT UPON THE LORD

May God bless you on His Sabbath day!

Perhaps the most infamous king of Israel was Jeroboam, the son of Nebat. He was the first to rule over the ten tribes after they were separated at the end of Solomon's reign. What is so striking about his story is the utter evil that he did. But it is not his actual sins that he committed that are my focus—it is the fact that he made the ENTIRE nation of Israel to sin. There are over twenty scriptures¹ in the Bible where it says, "... the sins of Jeroboam, who did sin, and **who made Israel to sin.**"²

To cause a whole nation of people to sin is an appalling accomplishment, to say the least. How can anyone, even the leader of the country, make an entire nation sin against God? What Jeroboam did was so vile that God eventually rejected the whole nation:

2 KINGS 17:21-23 For he rent Israel from the house of David; and they made Jeroboam the son of Nebat king: and **Jeroboam drave Israel from following the LORD, and made them sin a great sin.** 22 For the children of Israel walked in all the sins of Jeroboam which he did; they departed not from them; 23 Until **the LORD removed Israel out of his sight,** as he had said by all his servants the prophets. So was **Israel carried away out of their own land to Assyria** unto this day.

The Bible records Jeroboam's sin with some detail, but suffice it to say that he instituted idolatrous worship throughout the country. The truly astounding part is that God waited over 200 years and watched as eighteen successive kings failed to correct the evil ways of Jeroboam before He gave Israel up to the Assyrians. God is certainly longsuffering.

So, how is it that he caused an entire nation to sin against God? This happened because the hearts of the people **wanted** to do evil. The book of Jeremiah exposes the problem with the Israelites. Notice a phrase that he repeated so many times it became more of a slogan: "the stubbornness of their evil hearts."³ But even that phrase does not reveal the depths of their depraved wickedness. The word for *stubbornness* has a sense of *twisted lust*. God certainly put the blame on Jeroboam, but God also knew the hearts of the people yearned for the idolatry that he instituted.

What God expected from every successor to Jeroboam was to PUT AND END to the idolatry. God's reckoning of the kings who reigned after Jeroboam was: "**you** have walked in the way of Jeroboam and his sin, which he did to make Israel to sin." God held each king responsible for eliminating Jeroboam's idolatry and reinstating God's Law, at least to the extent that they maintained an appearance of it

¹ *Israel* refers specifically to the 10 northern tribes throughout.

² 1 Kgs. 14:16; 15:30, 34; 16:2, 19, 26; 22:52; 2 Kgs. 3:3; 10:29, 31; 13:2, 6, 11; 14:24; 15:9, 18, 24, 28; 17:21-22; 23:15.

³ Jer. 3:17; 7:24; et al.

Fast forward to today. I remember the election of President Trump. One aspect of his campaign that received a fair amount of attention was his religious connection. It appeared that he sincerely respected God to some extent. Whether or not that was personally heartfelt is not for me to say. Regardless, God expected him, like every other leader, to establish His Law and do away with the evil works⁴ of their predecessors. Did President Trump do that? He seemingly tried to do good instead of bad, which is more than can be said of other presidents of recent times. In the end, did he change the hearts of the people? No, more people reject God than ever before because of the public hatred against him. It may come as a surprise, however, but that was not even his responsibility. A leader is required by God to:

DEUTERONOMY 17:16 But he [*the king*] shall not multiply horses to himself, **nor cause the people to return to Egypt**, to the end that he should multiply horses: forasmuch as the LORD hath said unto you, Ye shall henceforth **return no more that way**.

This is a critical point. A leader is not to be like Jeroboam who caused “the people to return to Egypt” by reestablishing pagan worship of golden calf idols⁵. However, when it happens, successors are responsible for eliminating national idolatry, although I doubt it is even possible these days. Read chapter five of Jeremiah for the full text, but it essentially says the people:

- v1: Do not execute righteous judgment or seek the truth.
- v3: Have refused to receive correction and return to God.
- v4: Are ignorant of the ways and judgment of God.
- v5: Have rejected God.
- v7: Have forsaken God and turned to idolatry.
- v8: Have turned to fornication and adultery.
- v11: Have betrayed their covenant with God.
- v12: Have disregarded God’s warnings.
- v28: Have grown wealthy and cover up their wicked works.
- v28: Have oppressed the fatherless and poor.

The reason a modern human leader is incapable of removing idolatrous pagan worship is because it is impossible to change the lust in the hearts of the people who:

JEREMIAH 5:23-24, 31 But this people **hath a revolting and a rebellious heart**
... 24 **Neither say they in their heart, Let us now fear the LORD our God** ...
31 ... and **my people love to have it so** ...

Only God can change the hearts of the people—through severe afflictions. But there is another reason that a modern leader is unable to change things. God looks for a leader who is “a man after My own heart, who will perform all My will.” (Acts 13:22). A leader is

⁴ Rom. 13:1.

⁵ 2 Kings 10:29.

personally responsible for seeking after God's own heart and obeying His Law. Other responsibilities include:

DEUTERONOMY 17:17-20 **Neither shall he multiply wives to himself**, that his heart turn not away: **neither shall he greatly multiply to himself silver and gold**. 18 And it shall be, when he sitteth upon the throne of his kingdom, that **he shall write him a copy of this law in a book** out of *that which is* before the priests the Levites: 19 And it shall be with him, and **he shall read therein all the days of his life: that he may learn to fear the LORD his God, to keep all the words of this law and these statutes, to do them**: 20 **That his heart be not lifted up above his brethren**, and that he turn not aside from the commandment, *to the right hand, or to the left*: to the end that he may prolong *his* days in his kingdom, he, and his children, in the midst of Israel.

What modern leader has not had adulterous affairs or become incredibly wealthy? Which of them has ever read, much less written down and studied, the Law of God? I seriously doubt that even President Trump has done so. He has “multiplied wives” and had an extramarital relationship. He is certainly “lifted up above” in his pride. But he is no different than the other leaders today. If a leader is not seeking after God and not doing those things for which he is *personally* responsible, is God going to bless anything he does, especially when it comes to the hearts of the people being filled with lust?

So, anyone who hoped that President Trump would turn the USA back to God does not understand that a leader cannot change the hearts of the people—only God can do that. If a leader is not even willing to obey God on a personal level, then certainly nothing will ever change. But there is another problem. In this country, leaders are chosen through a popular vote. What is often overlooked is that the people are responsible for choosing their leaders according to the following stipulation:

DEUTERONOMY 17:14-15 When thou art come unto the land which the LORD thy God giveth thee, and shalt possess it, and shalt dwell therein, and shalt say, I will set a king over me, like as all the nations that *are* about me; 15 **Thou shalt in any wise set him king over thee, whom the LORD thy God shall choose**: *one* from among thy brethren shalt thou set king over thee: thou mayest not set a stranger over thee, which *is* not thy brother.

God prophesied to the ancient Israelites that whomsoever THEY setup as king shall be someone **God** chooses. Again, it comes down to the heart of the people. A rebellious nation will reject those leaders whom God might choose and elect those who hate Him. This was painfully obvious during the Trump presidency with all of the false accusations against him as well as the election fraud. Not that Trump was chosen by God but neither did he entirely reject Him.

So, what about evil leaders? It is certainly a frustration for people who sincerely seek after God. What are they to do when they are ruled over by a wicked leader? I think one answer comes from the story of Elijah. It has always been God who corrects evil rulers by warning them through a prophet. Elijah spent himself as a prophet of God warning Ahab and Jezebel. It wore him out completely. This story is captured in 1 Kings 19. God

even warned Jeroboam through Ahijah and Iddo⁶. God has never required the people of a nation itself to correct a leader—that solely His responsibility. God is also responsible for removing evil leaders⁷. This was why David refused to kill Saul⁸.

Again, what are people who seek after God to do when their rulers are evil? Exactly that—continue to seek after God with all our heart, mind, soul, and strength. Elijah felt all alone and exhausted after battling against Ahab and Jezebel, so he fled for his life. After leaving his servant in Beersheba, he begged God to take his life. In response, God set him on a journey of forty days and nights without food to a cave in Mount Horeb (Sinai), which is the “mount of **God**.” It was there that God asked a simple question, “What *are* you *doing* here, Elijah?” Elijah replied, “... I have been very jealous for the LORD God of hosts: for the children of Israel have forsaken thy covenant, thrown down thine altars, and slain thy prophets with the sword; and I, **even I only, am left; and they seek my life, to take it away.**” (1 Kings 19:10).

God knew Elijah had given everything he had and he did not have the strength to continue as the prophet of God. But he was not alone. There were 7,000 other people who had dedicated themselves to God while they were under the evil rule of Ahab and Jezebel⁹. Elisha was among them and the torch of prophet was passed to him.

What are God’s people to do when living under wicked rulers in a terribly pagan and idolatrous nation? Seek after God all the more. The world does not know us anymore than we know the 7,000 names of those who refused to worship Baal. All we can do is remain faithful to God. Perhaps some of us will be called into a special service to God in the end as was Elisha. Most of us, however, are part of the reserves—we are to wait:

PSALMS 37:9-10 For **evildoers shall be cut off**: but **those that wait upon the LORD, they shall inherit the earth.** 10 For yet a little while, and the wicked *shall not be* ...

Many times our desire is to do something about evil. But these are times where the hearts of the people are filled with twisted lust. Only God can change that—now is our time to “stand still and [*wait to*] see the salvation of the LORD which He will work for you.”¹⁰

May God’s grace and peace be upon you!

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⁶ 2 Chr. 9:29.

⁷ Dan. 2:21.

⁸ 1 Sam. 24:6.

⁹ 1 Kgs. 19:18; Rom. 11:4.

¹⁰ Exo. 14:13.

SABBATH THOUGHT 2023-02-11—LOST FRIENDSHIPS

May God bless you on His Sabbath day!

Death is a part of this physical existence. Several friends in high school died way too young. One of my best friends, Scott, was someone who always knew what he wanted to do in life. Shortly after high school, I drove with our circle of friends down to College Station, TX where we participated in his wedding to a beautiful young woman who was the love of his life. After college, he followed his dream and joined the Air Force. A couple of years later, I found out that the aircraft he was flying in disappeared off the coast of Seattle. Nothing was found—not even wreckage. I could relate other stories of car accidents, diving accidents, breast cancer, suicides, etc. While all of these deaths were grievous, most had one thing in common—they were friends who knew love in this life and gave love in return.

The same is true for brethren I have known over the years who have died of various illnesses, sicknesses, and disease. Again, those friends were part of a circle of love that was given and received.

Sadly, I have witnessed and experienced something over the decades that is worse than losing friends to death—I am talking about the loss of friendships with brethren who separated from church organizations. To this day, it baffles me how close friendships within the Body of Christ are suddenly ended when someone leaves an organization. What is that all about? I have both witnessed and experienced it several times and find it one of the great sorrows of this life.

Some made the personal decision to leave an organization while others were forced out. When brethren leave an organization, it is many times caused by—or results in—unreconciled offenses. But I am not talking about an offense that originated between friends. I am referring to offenses that are with the minister or organization! I am speaking about those left an organization and were subsequently rejected by friends who had nothing to do with the **reasons** why they left. Who can claim to be friends with someone but so easily discards that friendship because the person no longer “belongs” to the same organization or because the leader of an organization disfellowships them? I have seen this occur between people who were friends for decades. This is a serious issue within the Body of Christ.

I am guessing that some may think that there must be serious sins that caused those separations from a group. Perhaps, but does that matter? Even if there are sins involved, are we not to still be there for a FRIEND??

1 JOHN 4:20 If anyone says, “I love God,” and **hates his brother, he is a liar.** For if he does not love his brother whom he has seen, how is he able to love God Whom he has not seen?

GALATIANS 6:2 **Bear one another’s burdens,** and so fulfill the law of Christ.

JAMES 5:20 Let him know that he who **brings back a sinner from the error of his way shall save a soul from death**, and shall cover a multitude of sins.

This reminds me of the mother of John and James who asked Jesus to give them high positions in the Kingdom. The story is in Matthew 20:20-24. It caused great “indignation” with the other disciples who were jealous and wanted the positions for themselves. Was that not a serious matter that arose between them? And, yet, they forgave one another. There was also a disagreement between Paul and Mark as well as Paul and Peter. Scripture also reveals that they later reconciled. Why is that so hard today?

We must stand firmly on those things that God has revealed to us as truth because “everything that *is* not of faith is sin” (Rom. 14:23). On the other hand, who is willing to claim they know all truth unto salvation? Who is willing to claim they keep the commandments of God without sin? Who keeps the Sabbath perfectly? Judgment belongs to Jesus Christ, not us. Thank God for that because some have publicly condemned to the lake of fire some who left their organization. Such words should never come out of the lips of those who are flesh and blood, much less those of the Body of Christ. There is a warning from God against that:

MATTHEW 7:1-5 “**Do not condemn others, so that you yourself will not be condemned; 2 For with what judgment you judge, you shall be judged; and with what measure you mete out, it shall be measured again to you.** 3 Now why do you look at the sliver that *is* in your brother’s eye, but you do not perceive the beam in your *own* eye? 4 Or how will you say to your brother, ‘Allow *me* to remove the sliver from your eye’; and behold, the beam *is* in your *own* eye? 5 *You* hypocrite, first cast out the beam from your *own* eye, and then you shall see clearly to remove the sliver from your brother’s eye.

To reject a friend who is begotten of God, even if there are differences, is not something I can rationalize. The apostles had issues and forgave one another. Whatever happened to reconciliation? Most of the time it seems to be regarded as more of a suggestion than a biblical commandment of Jesus Christ.

Friendships that are lost when someone turns in their membership card are something I have only seen happen within organized church groups. No one “unfriends” someone who moves to a different city, changes schools, or takes a different job even if they left because of disagreements with an employer. On occasion, a relationship might dwindle over time because of lack of contact but who rejects a friendship BECAUSE they change jobs due to problems with a boss? Friendships should never be sacrificed on the altar of loyalty to a group and certainly are not defined by membership to a specific organization.

Can agape love be growing in those who cast away a friendship so easily? If there is not enough agape love to maintain a friendship, can there be agape love for our enemies¹?

¹ Matt. 5:44.

Loving our enemies is the sincerest test of God's agape love working in us. Does God declare that we are to have agape love for everyone except for those who are not members of our fellowship group? I cannot think of ANY reason to abandon a friendship especially with someone in the Body of Christ. As John said, "... The one who **does not love his brother is dwelling in death.**" (1 John 3:14). That should frighten some sense into us.

I cannot count how many times someone confided in me that they disagree on this or that point with a minister. I would be not surprised if you have heard such things or, maybe, even said them. But a friendship is not harmed when a friend privately tells us that he or she disagrees with the minister or organization. Apparently, it is only when someone actually **leaves** the group that it is grounds for removing them from our book of friends. Discarding friendships because someone leaves an organization is a reflection of a heart condition.

Something else happens when friends are rejected—people begin to gossip and tell stories behind the backs of the person that was their friend. The most appalling things are spoken to others that would never be said in front of the person. Instead, why not call and talk with the person—privately. There is no agape love in gossip.

This is worse than how some treat Catholics or Protestants or Muslims. Are they not blinded by God? **We were all like them** in that sense at one time. Did you know there are some Protestants Christians who have literally shed blood for their beliefs? The stories abound in Pakistan, Kenya, Saudi Arabia, Bangladesh, and many other places of those who were tortured, imprisoned, murdered, and enslaved and, yet, they still have love in their hearts to forgive their abusers and faith to continue proclaiming the gospel. Is there anyone you know that has endured such things and continued to love and forgive their tormentors? How can they be condemned by anyone in the churches of God, especially since we ourselves have never bled for Christ? So, how is it that we treat friends worse than those who are blinded? Friends that leave an organization are rejected, cast away, ridiculed, and condemned.

These days I see too many children of God with hard hearts. I have never lost a friendship with people at work or neighbors even if we seriously disagreed about something on occasion. It seems that there is more respect and love with people not of the faith than in the Body of Christ. When will that change? Soon, I hope, for all our sakes. What did God warn us about?

MALACHI 4:5-6 Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the coming of the great and dreadful day of the LORD: 6 And he shall **turn the heart of the fathers to the children, and the heart of the children to their fathers, lest I come and smite the earth with a curse.**

Do we think this applies only to a blinded world? If so, then why is God going to bring terrible destruction upon the world in the day of His vengeance? In that case, then why bother cursing the world if they do not get their act together. Instead, this seems to be a

warning more for the children of God. Jesus told the disciples and, by extension, all of God's children, "because iniquity shall abound, **the love of many brethren shall wax cold.**" (Matt. 24:12). I have often wondered exactly what kind of iniquity is referred to here, but I would guess it is unreconciled offenses. Those who reject friendships in the name of an organization are "having an outward appearance of godliness, but denying the power of *true* godliness. ..." (2 Tim. 3:5).

I can guarantee you one thing: those who understand and keep the Law of God, even with great perfection, but do not have agape love for brethren are not focused on what is vital for salvation. Those who reject friendships when someone leaves an organization are not showing agape love. Have we allowed ourselves to be so controlled or are so loyal to a man or organization that we put aside agape love?

The purpose of keeping the commandments is "**love** out of a pure heart" (1 Tim. 1:5) and, to that end, we are to be "making the increase of the body unto *the* **edifying of itself in love**" (Eph. 4:16). When it comes to knowledge, "**we know in part, and we prophesy in part**" (Matt. 23:23) but it is love that matters:

1 CORINTHIANS 13:2 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**.

"All knowledge" in the Greek means knowledge of EVERYTHING; that is, to have the knowledge of God Himself. The word translated *nothing* means "does not exist." So, even if we have the knowledge of God, without sincere, humble, genuine, honest, and earnest agape love there is likely an unhappy end awaiting. If the test of God's agape love working in us is love toward our enemies, what does it say about us who are willing to sacrifice friendships with those who left our group? It seems we have forgotten what agape love is all about:

1 CORINTHIANS 13:7-9 **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**. 9 For we know in part, and we prophesy in part;

Friendships SHOULD never fail among brethren—even when someone leaves an organization, regardless of the reasons, if agape love is truly above all things².

May God's grace and peace be upon you!

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² 1 Cor. 13:13.

SABBATH THOUGHT 2023-02-18—FOOTWASHING & OFFENSES

May God bless you on His Sabbath day!

Passover is unique among all the appointed times of God. Without the fulfillment of Passover, even though it is not a holy convocation, the rest of the holydays would have no purpose or meaning. It is a time that entirely focuses on our Lord and Savior—it is not about events of God’s plan of salvation, but about reconciliation and salvation through Him. Passover, by far, has a spiritual deepness such that each year brings blessings of understanding more than before. And that is the way it should be.

One aspect of the Passover that is rarely mentioned in casual conversations is the footwashing; however, it is not only a vital beginning of the observance but it also reflects our relationship with God the Father, Jesus Christ, and **each other**. I highlighted “each other” because, among the Body of Christ, footwashing is primarily understood as showing humility toward the Father and Son and, of course, our brethren. However, that neglects the deep meaning behind this simple, yet essential act. Notice what Paul said about Passover:

1 CORINTHIANS 11:26-27 For as often as you eat this bread and drink this cup [of the Passover], you solemnly proclaim the death of the Lord until He comes.
27 For this reason, *if* anyone shall eat this bread or shall drink the cup of the Lord **unworthily, he shall be guilty [G1777] of the body and the blood of the Lord.**

Pause here for a moment. There have been many discussions about what it means to be unworthy to eat and drink the Passover. Generally, they are directed toward having a wrong mindset toward God. That certainly is one aspect, but Paul is leading us to something far more important. Notice what Paul said next:

1 CORINTHIANS 11:28-32 But **let a man examine himself**, and let him eat of the bread and drink of the cup accordingly 29 Because **the one who eats and drinks unworthily is eating and drinking judgment to himself, not discerning the body of the Lord.** 30 For this *very* reason, many *are* weak and sickly among you, and many have fallen asleep. 31 Now **if we would examine ourselves, we would not be judged.** 32 But when we are judged, we are chastened by *the* Lord, **so that we will not be condemned** with the world.

The phrase “**body of the Lord**” in verse 29 is not referring to the body of Jesus Christ symbolized by the unleavened bread. Two verses prior to that, Paul referred to both “the body **and blood** of the Lord,” which is clearly the *sacrifice* of Jesus Christ. Verse 29 omits *blood* because this refers to those in covenant with God, the *ekklesia* (Gk) or “the called out ones,” which is the Body of Christ. It is not referring to Christ’s sacrifice.

Paul said we are **guilty** of the sacrifice of Jesus Christ if we partake of it unworthily. The Greek for *guilty* (G1777) means *held liable* or *subject to*. A better translation would be, “if anyone shall eat this bread or shall drink the cup of the Lord unworthily, he shall be **held liable for** the body and the blood of the Lord.”

This same word is only used in Scripture for three specific judgments. One is in Mark 3:29 where Jesus warns against blaspheming the Holy Spirit. Such a person would be “**in danger of [subject to] eternal judgment.**” The same word is also used in James 2:10, which says that sinning in one point of the law makes us “guilty of all.” The previous verse clarifies that this is a matter of being convicted under the Law as transgressors. Therefore, this is better rendered, “subject to all [*judgment under the Law*].” However, Jesus Christ also used this word when He warned against not reconciling offenses:

MATTHEW 5:22-24 But I say to you, **everyone who is angry with his brother without cause shall be subject to [G1777] 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 [G1777] to the fire of Gehenna.** 23 For this reason, if you bring your gift to the altar, and there remember that your brother has something against you, 24 Leave your gift there before the altar, and go *your way*; **first be reconciled** with your brother, and then come and offer your gift.

NOT reconciling offenses is so serious that the judgment is the same as for someone who blasphemes the Holy Spirit! Jesus Christ said that anyone guilty of blaspheming the Holy Spirit “is subject to [G1777] **eternal judgment**” in Mark 3:29. Compare this to “shall be subject to [G1777] **the fire of Gehenna**” in Matthew 5:22 about unreconciled offenses. There is no worse punishment in the Bible. The judgment for failing to reconcile with brethren is to be cast into the Lake of Fire. Does this not spotlight the seriousness of our responsibility for reconciling?

So, what does all of this have to do with footwashing? Everything. Begin reading here:

JOHN 13:3-11 Jesus, knowing that the Father had given all things into *His* hands, and that He had come from God and was going to God, 4 Rose from supper and laid aside *His* garments; and after taking a towel, He secured it around Himself. 5 Next, He poured water into a washing basin and began to **wash the disciples’ feet**, and to wipe *them* with the towel which He had secured. 6 Then He came to Simon Peter; and he said to Him, “Lord, are You going to wash my feet?” 7 Jesus answered and said to him, “What I am doing you do not understand now, but you shall know after these things.” 8 Peter said to Him, “You shall not wash my feet, not ever.” **Jesus answered him, “If I do not wash you, you have no part with Me.”** 9 Simon Peter said to Him, “Lord, not my feet only, but also *my hands and my head.*” 10 Jesus said to him, “**The one who has been washed** does not need to wash *anything other* than the feet, but **is completely clean**; and **you are clean, but not all.**” 11 For He knew the

one who was betraying Him; this was the reason He said, “Not all of you are clean.”

Footwashing certainly has a component of humility because it was a servant’s job. But that is not the *foundation* for understanding it. Footwashing is about **spiritual cleansing**. (This is not the place to go into detail about the topic, so suffice it to say that clean and holy are spiritual states¹ that are the result of being washed by Christ’s sacrifice.) Did you notice how vital it is to be clean? Jesus said if you are not clean, “you have **no part with me**,” that is, His sacrifice does not apply to you.

The disciples were the only ones physically washed by Jesus Christ. However, notice that Judas Iscariot was NOT clean even though Jesus Christ Himself washed his feet. Physical washing does not make someone clean—spiritual cleansing is only through the sacrifice of Jesus Christ. Being spiritually clean is crucial to partaking of the Passover in a worthy manner but there is still much more to it:

JOHN 13:12-15 Therefore, when He had washed their feet, and had taken His garments, *and* had sat down again, He said to them, “Do you know what I have done to you? 13 You call Me the Teacher and the Lord, and you speak rightly, because I am. 14 Therefore, if I, the Lord and the Teacher, have washed your feet, **you also are duty-bound to wash one another’s feet; 15 For I have given you an example, to show that you also should do exactly as I have done to you.**

Jesus said we are **duty-bound** to wash each other’s feet. Footwashing is an act whereby **we** recognize that we are washing the feet of brethren WHO HAVE BEEN WASHED AND CLEANSED BY JESUS CHRIST’S SACRIFICE²! The footwashing is done *before* partaking of the symbols of the body and blood of our Lord because the sacrifice of Jesus Christ applies to both our own self as well as our **brethren**. Recognizing that His sacrifice applies to others besides ourselves is part of the Passover ceremony. This is why the Passover cannot be properly observed if unreconciled offenses exist and why it can become a matter of judgment. Without reconciliation, we do not acknowledge others as brethren; instead they are enemies. Are we able to wash the feet of someone who is an enemy and then partake of the symbols of the body and blood of Christ in a worthy manner? We EXAMINE ourselves to ensure we are sincerely reconciling all offenses before we partake of the symbols of a sacrifice that atoned for OUR offenses against God. This is key to keeping the Passover in a worthy manor. Remember, Paul said we are unworthy if we are “**not discerning the body of the Lord**,” which is all God’s children.

¹ For more information, go to <https://sabbathreflections.org/bible-studies/audio> where you will find *Spiritual Warfare—Cleansing*, parts 1 & 2.

² Note: This is why only those who are baptized in the name of Jesus Christ can be a part of the footwashing as well as partaking of the Passover unleavened bread and wine.

If there is an unreconciled offense with a brother or sister in Christ, we are not showing agape love to those who have likewise been washed in the sacrifice of Jesus Christ. Humility is required to acknowledge that the sacrifice of Jesus Christ applies to us **and** others. Offenses are a stumblingblock to discerning the Body of Christ—our brethren.

The footwashing demonstrates that we understand that not only are we washed by the sacrifice of Jesus Christ but so are all those in the *ekklesia* because Jesus Christ died for everyone³. That is why the footwashing comes *first*,⁴ before we partake of the symbols of the Passover. Those symbols are a remembrance⁴ of the sacrifice of Jesus by which we have a covenant of reconciliation for *our* offenses with God. Observing the Passover in a worthy manner is in keeping with the expectation that we edify one another in agape love:

EPHESIANS 4:13, 15-16 Until **we all come into the unity of the faith** and of the knowledge of the Son of God, unto a perfect man, **unto the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ**; ... 15 But **holding the truth in love**, may in all things grow up into Him Who is the Head, *even* Christ 16 **From [Jesus Christ] 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.**

Self-examination is vital to recognizing and acknowledging our part in offenses. It is crucial to know if there are outstanding offenses and to put forth a sincere effort to begin reconciling them *before* partaking of the body and blood of our Lord and Savior.

NOTE: For those who keep the Passover alone, footwashing cannot be physically performed. However, personal examination before the Passover is still required. In place of the footwashing, I suggest offering a heartfelt prayer of thanksgiving for being washed in the sacrifice of Jesus Christ and humbly ask blessings upon *all* who have been cleansed by the Lamb of our Passover sacrifice.

May God's grace and peace be upon you!

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³ 1 Cor. 5:14-15.

⁴ 1 Cor. 11:24-25.

SABBATH THOUGHT 2023-02-25—EKKLESIA OF GOD

May God bless you on His Sabbath day!

A friend reminded me recently about a word in the NT that has been mistranslated almost as long as English Bibles have existed. It is the Greek word *ekklesia*, which has been universally translated as *church*. While many understand this, the problem is that word *church* redefines and obscures our relationship with God the Father and Jesus Christ. First, look at the meaning of the word *church*:

DEFINITION OF CHURCH:

- A **building** used for Christian worship.
- A particular Christian **organization**, typically one with its own clergy [*or ministry—author’s comment*], buildings, and distinctive doctrines.
- An institutionalized religion as a political or **social** force.

To appreciate why *church* is a completely inappropriate translation for *ekklesia* requires understanding both the meaning of the Greek as well as an historical perspective. Here is the definition of *ekklesia*:

DEFINITION OF EKKLESIA:

- Literally—“a calling out.”
- Concretely—“a called out assembly.”
- In actual biblical usage—designates a group of people who were summoned to a gathering.

Ekklesia means a called out assembly. If a church was the intended meaning in Scripture, then something similar to the Greek word *kyriakon* (“house of the Lord”) would have been used. However, the Greek word *ekklesia* **never** refers to a building, organization, or denomination. When William Tyndale first translated the NT in 1526, he used the word *congregation*, which properly infers a sense of assembling according to a summons because *congregate* means “the action of gathering together.” This use of *congregation* was maintained with the publishing of Matthew’s Bible in 1537 as well as the Great Bible in 1539.

However, a Swiss follower of John Calvin started emphasizing the word *church* in 1556 to promote a Protestant hierarchical and authoritative church organization. This influenced the 1557 Geneva NT to translate *ekklesia* as *church* and it has remained a corruption of English Bibles ever since, including the venerable King James Version.

The proper meaning of *ekklesia* as “a calling out” (a summons or invitation) also implies that there is someone who does the calling. Obviously, it is God who calls His people¹:

ACTS 2:39 For the promise is to you and to your children, and to all those who are afar off, **as many as the Lord our God may call.**”

Because our calling is from the one true God, there are no DIVISIONS among His children. This is **embodied** in the meaning of *ekklesia* and upheld by Scripture²:

ROMANS 12:4-5 For even as we have **many members [parts of the body] in one body**, but all members [parts of the body] do not have the same function; 5 Likewise, **we, being many [parts of the body], are one body in Christ**, and each one members of one another.

The word translated *members* does not refer to someone associated with a group, it means a limb or body part. There should be a oneness of the people who are called by God (the whole point of 1 Corinthians 12:12-25). In every respect *ekklesia* refers to all who are called by God to come assemble before Him. The word *church* **never** describes the true body of believers. It might seem bad enough that all Bibles translate *ekklesia* as *church*, but the real evil is that it divides the true believers according to a building, organization, or denomination that sets up **men** between them and God!

Ekklesia originally had roots in the “assembly of the congregation³,” which was what the ancient Israelites were called by God during the Exodus. *Ekklesia* is formed by two Greek words: *ek* (*out*) and *kaleo* (*called*). In most cases, *ekklesia* is a reference to those who are called or invited by God, chosen out of this evil world, and who then assemble before Him. In contrast with the OT, God BROUGHT the ancient Israelites out of Egypt—many against their will. But those of the NT covenant are INVITED by God as is the case in the wedding supper⁴. Those who respond are then chosen by Him to leave the ways of this world and be faithful unto God⁵ alone.

In contrast, *church* always refers to a building, organization, or denomination in English. **By definition, the word church divides people (i.e., as congregants in a particular building), through an alliance with a particular association (i.e., members of an organization), or by doctrinal differences. The word church always separates people into exclusive divisions that are established and organized by men.**

In all regards, those of the *ekklesia* are not bound or grouped by any person, building, organization, or denomination. A proper translation of *ekklesia* is “called out ones” or

¹ See also Rom. 8:28; 9:11; 11:29; 1 Cor. 1:9; 7:17; Phil. 3:14; 1 Thess. 2:12; 4:7; 2 Thess. 1:11; Heb. 5:4; 1 Pet. 5:10; 2 Pet. 1:3.

² See also 1 Cor. 1:2; 10:17; 12:12-25; Eph. 2:16; 4:4; Col. 3:15.

³ The Hebrew influence for *ekklesia* is found in the words *miqra'* (H4744) = convocation, lit. “a called out assembly” and *qara'* (H7121) = proclaim, lit. “to call out.”

⁴ Matt. 22:1-8.

⁵ Rev. 17:14.

“called out assembly” with the implication that they are called by God. They are not **members** of the Body of Christ, but **belong** to it. A membership requires applying for permission to join a group. Belonging means “to be **rightly placed**.” The reason that the *ekklesia* are not **members** of an organization is that they BELONG to God—we were purchased by Him through the blood sacrifice of His Son, Jesus Christ.

I know that all of this has been rather technical and is likely becoming an antidote for insomnia. However, the point about all of this is that it is a serious problem if we have a separatist mentality when it comes to God’s people. The **true *ekklesia* belong to God**. No person, building, organization, or denomination of men should stand between us and God. We are purchased by God with the sacrifice of Jesus Christ. Paul said it best when it comes to how we THINK of those who are **members** of a church vs. **belonging** to God:

1 CORINTHIANS 7:23 *For you were bought with a price. **Do not become slaves of man.***

There is little anyone can do about all of the wrong translations of *ekklesia* in Bibles, but changing how we speak can make a difference in how we THINK about each other—we are all one Body and we are all purchased and washed by the blood of Christ!

1 CORINTHIANS 10:16-17 The cup of blessing that we bless, is it not **the fellowship of the blood** of Christ? The bread that we break, is it not **the fellowship of the body** of Christ? 17 For we, being many, **are one body and one bread**, because we are all partakers of the bread.

God’s people should NEVER be referred to, or considered to be, a *church*. Whenever someone says they are a member of XYZ Church of God, they are saying that they do not entirely belong to God AND, as a result, are separated and divided from all other churches of God. This is NOT how God views His people. Those who are Christ’s should not place their loyalty, allegiance, or commitment upon any person, building, organization, or denomination because we are no longer a part OF THIS WORLD⁶. There will be no disunity among God’s true children:

JOHN 17:21-23 **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.

Perhaps you think I am just being fussy, but words really do matter because language defines our thinking. Consider this: People claiming to be a member of a particular COG rarely associate with other COGs. They declare, many times with feigned sadness, that there are “some” of God’s children in other groups but (there is usually a “but”) they are

⁶ John 17:14, 16.

not doing as great a work of preaching the gospel, do not have as deep an understanding doctrines, are not giving as much of their income, are being fed milk instead of meat, are not as loving, do not provide as well for the brethren, etc.

This attitude is far more destructive toward those who do not (or cannot) associate with a COG. Be honest about this. So-called independents are looked down upon by those in the COGs. Those in the COGs generally view “independent” brethren as spiritually lost souls while those in a COG organization—who are under the authority of **men**—are all but guaranteed to be in the Kingdom. In many regards, the opposite might be closer to the truth because we all must “work out **own** salvation with fear and trembling.” (Phil 2:12).

This attitude has been around at least since WCG—I know because I have attended with a number of different COGs. I have also seen (and committed) the hypocrisy when someone leaves one COG for another. The new group is promoted as having “better” everything—from messages to doctrines to brethren. The real betrayal arises when the brethren in the previous COG are now shunned. This is the result of thinking we are “members” of an organization rather than belonging to the called out Assembly of God:

HEBREWS 12:23 To **the general assembly and [ekklesia = congregation] of the firstborn**, which are written in heaven, and to God the Judge of all, and to the spirits of just men made perfect,

While there are certainly distinct problems within the different *ekklesia* of Revelation 2-3, they were all acknowledged as the *ekklesia*. If we truly believe we belong to the *ekklesia* rather than a church, then boundaries would not exist between ANY of God’s people. It is time to put away “church” thinking and appreciate that the children of God are: the “called out (*ekklesia*) ones,” “chosen of God⁷,” “called to be saints⁸,” belong to the “Body of Christ⁹,” will be the “Bride of Christ¹⁰,” are of the “Household of God¹¹,” et al. Read the scriptures in the footnotes and meditate on the fact that we have all been purchased by the same body and blood as the Passover draws near! The *ekklesia* are those who are called by GOD, chosen by GOD, purchased by GOD, faithful to GOD, belong to GOD, and assemble before GOD. No one enters into the Kingdom of God because they have a membership with a man-made building, organization, or denomination.

May God’s grace and peace be upon you!

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⁷ Luke 23:35; John 15:19; 1 Cor. 1:27-28; Eph. 1:4; 2 Thess. 2:13; Jas. 2:5; 1 Pet. 2:4, 9; Rev. 17:14.

⁸ Rom. 1:7; 1 Cor. 1:2.

⁹ Rom. 12:5; 1 Cor. 12:12, 27; Eph. 4:12; 5:23; Col 2:17.

¹⁰ Rev. 19:7-9; 21:9; 22:17.

¹¹ Eph. 2:19.

SABBATH THOUGHT 2023-03-04—INSPIRED EVIDENCE

May God bless you on His Sabbath day!

We call the era in which we live in a “modern” world. But is it? Yes, if we only consider mathematics, science, engineering, and technology. This age fits perfectly as “... the time of the end: [*when*] many shall run to and fro, and knowledge shall be increased.” (Dan. 12:4). Knowledge has most definitely increased in these areas.

But there is an area where knowledge is but a shadow of times past—the Bible. Today, we like to believe that we understand much more than the ancient peoples; but that is, in most regards, utter nonsense. Compared with men such as Abraham, Moses, and David we certainly can say the Bible contains more about prophecy; however, many ancient cultures and practices; perspectives underpinning God’s Law, times and seasons, etc. are not detailed in the Bible and very little can be found in the scant historical references if it exists at all.

For example, apostles knew from childhood the details and meanings behind Temple sacrifices, how to determine the holydays, the observance of “no work” on the Sabbath and Atonement and how that differs from the other holydays in which “no servile work” shall be done. They understood the law, statutes, ordinances, precepts, judgments, and testimonies and had been taught from Torah, writings, and prophets in languages that were not only native to them (they knew both Hebrew and Greek) but they were the same ones used in the original biblical scrolls. This is particularly true of Paul who had a deep understanding of things because he was “... brought up in this city at the feet of Gamaliel, having been **instructed according to the exactness of the law** of our fathers.” (Acts 22:3).

Knowledge of the Bible today cannot compare to what the apostles understood. This is true even though they did not have all the NT writings and not surprising since they were the ones who **wrote** them. No author writes about everything he knows. The apostles were like tenured professors while we are still in pre-kindergarten. Only an enormous amount of pride would allow someone today to claim that he or she is a biblical “scholar.” It is only by the grace of God if we are past nursing on “milk”.

Only in the areas of mathematics, science, engineering, and technology has the modern world exceeded that of the ancients. In that regard, there is a fun and easy to read book titled, *Inspired Evidence—Only One Reality* (listed on the Sabbath Reflections website [here](#)), which contains evidences from different areas of science, proving God exists. It is painfully obvious that it has taken mankind thousands of years to scientifically prove what God knew all along, especially in this faithless era. The following are only a few of them and I present them here for your inspiration and enjoyment.

Macro evolution as a theory for the development of life is utterly laughable because there is an unending supply of examples that demonstrate the impossibility on scales from the microscopic to the largest of creatures. One such case is the *apheloria millipede* that

protects itself from predators by emitting hydrogen cyanide, a chemical that can kill other life forms. It would be interesting to know just how and when this insect “evolved” the ability to kill everything but not itself. It seems to me that evolutionary trial and error would have wiped out this millipede before it started.

Evolution requires millions of years to develop anything, but everything had to exist **simultaneously** in order for anything to survive. A case in point is birds and insects. If birds evolved before insects, many bird species would not have survived because they feed on vast numbers of insects. A warbler eats about 3,000 aphids per minute while the nighthawk can eat 500 mosquitoes in a single feeding. On the other hand, if insects evolved before birds, many plant species would not exist. A single pair of potato beetles will produce over 60 million offspring in a single season and a female fly will produce 140,000 bushels of offspring. Aphids can produce thirteen generations in a single season. Assuming 100 females per generation, there would be 10 sextillion (10 followed by 21 zeros) aphids. If that many aphids were in the continental USA, they would cover it to a depth of 6-1/2 feet. That many aphids would certainly devour most of the plant life. If everything on this earth was not created at about the same time, nothing would have survived because of the interdependency of plants, animals, reptiles, birds, fish, insects, bacteria, etc.

The story of a worldwide flood is recorded in over 200 stories in ancient writings found in countries around the world including Africa, North America, Mesoamerica (countries between the USA and South America), Mesopotamia, Iran, China, India, Indonesia, Japan, Korea, Malaysia, Philippines, Thailand, Vietnam, and Siberia. One interesting anecdote is that the Chinese character for a ship (船) is a composite of the symbol for a vessel (舟), the number 8 (八), and *mouth* (口). Mouth represents a person, so the character for a ship is a vessel with eight people. When Chinese language was first developed, Noah’s ark must have been the dominant example—it was a huge ship. Is there any doubt that the eight survivors who witnessed that worldwide flood passed it down to their children? Their children and grandchildren also had plenty of evidence of the flood with all of the physical evidence it left behind. They knew it happened.

Aside from the flood, there was something that they might not have understood. The events listed of the creation week in Genesis include a curiosity. On the fourth day, it was recorded that “God made two great lights; the greater light to rule the day, and the lesser light to rule the night.” (Gen. 1:16). Today, everyone knows that the sun is about 400 times larger than the moon; however, the moon actually *appears* larger than the sun to the unaided eye. In fact, several ancient peoples believed the moon was larger than the sun. The fact that the sun is larger had to come directly from God.

There is so much we do not know. Of the approximately 128 questions that God asked Job in chapters 38-42, how many could Job answer? None, including this one: the Lord asked Job, “Can you bind the bands of the Pleiades, or loosen the cords of Orion?” (Job 38:31). This portrays Pleiades as bound together and Orion as loosened or spreading. It turns out that astronomers have actually proven that the seven stars of Pleiades (the Seven

Sisters) are indeed gravitationally bound together while the stars that make up Orion are moving apart. Only God could have known this thousands of years ago.

How many of the questions the Lord asked Job could we answer in this “modern” age? Perhaps a few, but no one can answer them all—even today. Ancient peoples believed there is a god simply because the creation is a monument to the power and intelligence of a creator. It is so vast and complex that all of the knowledge of today still cannot answer how most things function, what is life, what is time, what is gravity, and on and on. The universe is a small token of the great and unimaginable power of God—it should humble us and produce a healthy amount of fear. But that is why God made it:

ROMANS 1:19-22 Because that which may be known of God is manifest among them, for **God has manifested *it* to them; 20 For the invisible things of Him are perceived from *the* creation of *the* world,** being understood by the things that were made—both His eternal power and Godhead—so that they are without excuse; 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.**

God created everything to be a witness of His greatness but it is also the temporary womb for one of the smallest of creations—people. That, too, should impress us because as insignificant as we are, He desires us above all else in His creation. When David realized this, he asked, “What is man that You are mindful of him?” (Ps. 8:4). His concern for people and His purpose for us is the reason the Bible exists. Remember the story of the blind man who Jesus healed? He took the time to care for people, one person at a time:

MARK 8:22-25 And He came to Bethsaida, and they brought to Him a blind man and besought Him that He might touch him. 23 Then He took hold of the blind man’s hand *and* led him out of the village, and He spit on his eyes *and* laid His hands on him, *and* then He asked him if he saw anything. 24 And when he looked up, he said, “I see men as trees walking.” 25 Then He again laid *His* hands on his eyes and made him look up. And he was restored, and he saw everything clearly.

Ever wonder why the man’s vision was not completely healed the first time? One possible explanation is that the man’s *eyes* were capable of perfect vision after Jesus first laid hands upon him, but his *brain* could not process what he saw. This is called agnosia, a condition where the mind develops without any visual input from the eyes. Even though his vision was restored, his brain was not capable of properly interpreting the signals from the optic nerve. It normally takes time to train the mind to work with the eyes. So, the first time Jesus laid hands upon the man, his eyes were physically restored. The second time Jesus healed the neurological processing in his brain. The fact that the account in Mark recorded both of these healing steps adds legitimacy to the story because he could not have known about agnosia although it is now a fact of modern times.

However, instead of being awed by the Most High, people spend decades trying to explain the Bible away. Perhaps this is because they have not figured out how to explain

the universe. One particular story that many in this “modern” age have wasted time trying to refute occurred at Passover. While Jesus Christ was on the cross, there was this miraculous event:

LUKE 23:44-45 Now it was about *the* sixth hour, and **darkness came over the whole land [earth]** until *the* ninth hour. 45 And **the sun was darkened**, and the veil of the temple was split down *the* middle.

Some try to explain this as a solar eclipse instead a of the miracle it was. The problem they face is that the death of Jesus Christ occurred at Passover, which occurs when the moon is full. It is not possible to have a solar eclipse during a full moon because it is on the opposite side of the earth from the sun. A solar eclipse requires the moon to come between the earth and sun. When the moon is full (or approximately so), the only possibility is a **lunar** eclipse, when the earth comes between the sun and moon. More evidence that a solar eclipse was not responsible is the fact that no eclipse (solar or lunar) lasts three hours. The longest theoretically possible eclipse is less than 7.5 minutes and the longest recorded one was 7.46 minutes. Scripture also mentions that darkness was upon the **whole** earth but that would not be possible during either a solar or lunar eclipse. Any eclipse only covers about 0.01% of the earth (a circle about 160 miles in diameter). It was here that the authors of the book make an astute point: “People had seen many solar eclipses. Although eclipses were common and may have caused some to be fearful, ... it would hardly cause a Roman soldier to [be filled with **fear** and say ‘Truly this was the Son of God!’¹”

But the greatest miracle is yet to come—changing flesh and blood into spirit:

2 CORINTHIANS 5:17-18 Therefore, **if anyone be in Christ, he is a new creation**; the old things have passed away; behold, all things have become new. 18 And all things *are* from God, Who has reconciled us to Himself through Jesus Christ, and has given to us the ministry of reconciliation;

And that is what Passover is all about—“bringing many sons unto glory” (Heb. 2:10).

ROMANS 8:22-23 For we know that all the creation is groaning together and travailing together until now. 23 And not only *that*, but even we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, also groan within ourselves, **awaiting the sonship—the redemption of our bodies**.

May God’s grace and peace be upon you!

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¹ Matt. 27:54.

SABBATH THOUGHT 2023-03-11—WHO KILLED CHRIST?

May God bless you on His Sabbath day!

When we think of the sacrifice of Jesus Christ, it is generally the idea that He died for the sins of all humanity. Paul said, “**all have sinned**” (Rom. 3:23) and “that **Christ died for our sins**” (1 Cor. 15:3). Why did He die for our sins? The obvious answer is so that “**we have redemption through [Jesus Christ’s] own blood, even the remission of sins**” (Col. 1:14). It is only through the shed blood of Jesus Christ that our sins are covered so that they can be forgiven by God and we can have eternal life as His children.

However, have you ever thought that because our sins were laid upon Jesus Christ that WE had something to do with killing Him? Could that be true? Only in the sense that God had to have a way to forgive our sins. In other words, if it was not for sin, then Jesus Christ would not have had to die. However, NO man or woman killed Him.

Start with the question: WHO put the sins of the world upon Jesus Christ? Notice the prophecy of the sacrifice of Jesus Christ for our sins:

ISAIAH 53:4-6 Surely He [*Jesus Christ*] hath borne our griefs, and carried our sorrows: yet **we did esteem Him stricken, smitten of God**, and afflicted. 5 But **He was wounded for our transgressions, He was bruised for our iniquities**: the chastisement of our peace was upon Him; and with His stripes we are healed. 6 All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned every one to his own way; and **the LORD [God the Father] hath laid on Him [Jesus Christ] the iniquity of us all**.

It was GOD THE FATHER who laid the sins of humanity upon His own Son. But God the Father would not have done that had not Jesus Christ willingly taken them upon Himself and willingly became the vessel of flesh and blood that God the Father used to take our sins to the grave. This is plain in the Scripture:

JOHN 10:17-18 On account of this, the Father loves Me: because I lay down My life, that I may receive it back again. 18 No one takes it from Me, but **I [Jesus Christ] lay it down of Myself**. I have authority to lay it down and authority to receive it back again. This commandment I received from My Father.”

1 PETER 2:24 **Who [Jesus Christ] Himself bore our sins within His own body** on the tree, so that we, being dead to sins, may live unto righteousness; by Whose stripes you were healed.

This is a vital/essential/fundamental/central understanding of the Passover: NO sinner lays their sins upon Jesus Christ and NO sinner has the authority or power to cause Jesus Christ to bear their sins. This is why salvation is a FREE GIFT—we had nothing to do with putting our sins upon our Savior. God the Father did that solely of His own volition.

IMPORTANT: God the Father FREELY put the sins of the world upon His Son and Jesus Christ WILLINGLY bore them to the grave! This is why salvation is a FREE gift.

All have sinned but none of us had the means to cause, direct, beg, pray, or plead that our sins be placed upon Jesus Christ. Only God the Father could do that and only Jesus Christ could bear them because only THEY are sinless. This was a completely SELFLESS act of agape love by God the Father and Jesus Christ. Because the sins of the world were laid upon Jesus Christ, God the Father literally made His Son into SIN—Jesus Christ BECAME sin. Notice:

1 CORINTHIANS 5:21 For **He [God the Father] made Him [Jesus Christ] Who knew no sin to be sin** for us, so that we might become *the* righteousness of God in Him.

Once the sins of the world were placed upon Jesus Christ, He had to die because “the wages of sin is death.” (Rom. 6:23). The death penalty applies to all who are flesh and blood, including the very Son of God! This is what is meant by “stricken” (Isa. 53:4, 8)—He had to die BECAUSE the sins of the world were upon Him:

ISAIAH 53:7-9 He [*Jesus Christ*] was oppressed, and He was afflicted, yet He opened not his mouth: He is brought as a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before her shearers is dumb, so He openeth not his mouth. 8 He was taken from prison and from judgment: and who shall declare His generation? for **He was cut off out of the land of the living: for the transgression of My [God the Father's] people was He [Jesus Christ] stricken. 9 And He [Jesus Christ] made His grave with the wicked,** and with the rich in His death; because He had done no violence, neither *was any* deceit in His mouth.

At the moment that Jesus Christ became sin for us, God the Father was obligated to kill His own Son by Law! Do not be surprised because this is similar to the statutes that require men (fathers) to stone a rebellious son¹. It is also portrayed in the sacrifices—**the one who sinned**, not the priest, had to kill the animal used for the blood sacrifice.

This is also why no human being had the right, even according to the Law, to kill Jesus Christ—it was God the Father who laid the sins of the world upon Jesus Christ and God the Father who had to Judge Him. This might explain why Jesus Christ told the scribes and Pharisees when they brought the woman caught in adultery to Him, “**he that is without sin** among you, let him first cast a stone at her.” (John 8:7). Now notice WHO killed Jesus Christ:

ISAIAH 53:10-11 Yet **it pleased the LORD [God the Father] to bruise Him [Jesus Christ]; He [God the Father] hath put Him [Jesus Christ] to grief:**

¹ Deut. 21:21.

when **Thou [God the Father] shalt make His [Jesus Christ's] soul an offering for sin**, He [God the Father] shall see His [Jesus Christ's] seed, He [God the Father] shall prolong His [Jesus Christ's] days, and the pleasure of the LORD [God the Father] shall prosper in His [Jesus Christ's] hand. 11 **He [God the Father] shall see of the travail of His [Jesus Christ's] soul, and shall be satisfied**: by His [God the Father's] knowledge shall my righteous Servant [Jesus Christ] justify many; for He [Jesus Christ] shall bear their iniquities.

God the Father **made** Jesus Christ into an offering for sin. The root of the word for *sin-offering* means *to perish*. Is that not what the Law of God requires for sin? Yes! (It is interesting that the root word for sin-offering is *'ashem* and it is pronounced just as the English word *ashame[d]*.) Being made into sin meant that Jesus Christ was appointed to die just like all who transgress the Law of God:

ISAIAH 53:12 Therefore will I [God the Father] divide Him [Jesus Christ] a portion with the great, and He [God the Father] shall divide the spoil with the strong; because **He [God the Father] hath poured out His [Jesus Christ's] soul unto death**: and **He [Jesus Christ] was numbered [appointed; counted] with the transgressors**; and He [Jesus Christ] bare the sin of many, and made intercession for the transgressors.

Many people assume that “He” and “His” in the phrase “**He** hath poured out **His** soul unto death” both refer to Jesus Christ. However; both cannot refer to Him because verse 11 says, “when thou [God the Father] **shalt make** his [Jesus Christ] soul an offering for sin.” Therefore, the phrase should read: “He [God the Father] **hath poured** out His [Jesus Christ's] soul unto death” Because Jesus Christ had become sin, God the Father Himself was required to put Him to death. But all of this was portrayed and prophesied in the story of Abraham and his son Isaac:

GENESIS 22:1-2, 10-12 And it came to pass after these things, that God did [test] Abraham, and said unto him, Abraham: and he said, Behold, *here I am*. 2 And he said, **Take now thy son, thine only son Isaac, whom thou lovest**, and get thee into the land of Moriah; **and offer him there for a burnt offering** upon one of the mountains which I will tell thee of. ... 10 And **Abraham stretched forth his hand, and took the knife to slay his son**. 11 And the angel of the LORD called unto him out of heaven, and said, Abraham, Abraham: and he said, Here *am I*. 12 And he said, Lay not thine hand upon the lad, neither do thou any thing unto him: for now I know that thou fearest God, **seeing thou hast not withheld thy son, thine only son** from me.

It was Abraham, the father of Isaac, who was asked to kill him. This very act of obedience to God portrayed EXACTLY what God the Father would be required to do to His Son. After God intervened and stopped the killing of Isaac, notice what Abraham called the place where God had taken him:

GENESIS 22:13-14 And Abraham lifted up his eyes, and looked, and behold behind *him* a ram caught in a thicket by his horns: and Abraham went and took

the ram, and offered him up for a burnt offering in the stead of his son. And Abraham called the name of that place **Jehovahjireh**: as it is said *to this day*, **In the mount of the LORD it shall be seen.**

Abraham named the place he was to sacrifice Isaac “Jehovah jireh,” meaning “the LORD will see to it” or “the LORD will provide.” Provide what? The BURNT OFFERING for sin! Abraham must have been inspired when Isaac asked where the animal was for the burnt offering. He said, “My son, **God will provide himself a lamb for a burnt offering.**” (Gen. 22:8). This is a profound prophecy of God the Father giving Jesus Christ as a sacrifice for sin! Because the test of Abraham portrayed the sacrifice of God the Father’s role, GOD had to **provide** the ram for that sacrifice to Abraham. Is that not exactly what God the Father did? God the Father PROVIDED the world THE Lamb for our sins. This was witnessed, testified to, and recorded by the apostles. (In fact, witnessing the sacrifice of Jesus Christ is the primary qualification of an apostle. So, the next time you use the title apostle, recall that you are referring to “a witness—from the Greek word for *martyr*—of the sacrifice of Jesus Christ.”)

Have you ever noticed that only John the Baptist and John the apostle call Jesus Christ “The Lamb of God?” John the Baptist used it because he “prepared the way of the Lord;” that is, for God the Father to sacrifice His Son Jesus Christ. John also uses this name in Revelation many times. Given that much of Revelation is devoted to events of the Tribulation and Day of the Lord, it is not surprising. Those events are the result of mankind’s **sins**. The title Lamb of God is fitting because the book of Revelation describes the final victory over **sin**. It is very appropriate that John the Baptist calls Him “The Lamb of God, Who takes away the sin of the world” (John 1:29). As The Lamb, He was The Sacrifice for our sins and as The Lamb *of God*, He was God the Father’s sacrifice for sin. They did this because They “so loved the world that *God the Father* gave His only begotten Son *Jesus Christ*, so that everyone who believes in Him may not perish, but may have everlasting life.” (John 3:16).

Brethren, this Passover is a **remembrance**² of the sacrifice of Jesus Christ who had to die at the hands of His Father in order to take away our sins so that we are the Children of God! I pray that you contemplate the depths of the love, mercy, and compassion that God the Father and Jesus Christ have for you, me, and the world during this Passover.

May God’s grace and peace be upon you!

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² 1 Cor. 11:24-25.

SABBATH THOUGHT 2023-03-18—MEANING OF LEAVEN

May God bless you on His Sabbath day!

When it comes to leaven, it has been taught for decades that it pictures all sin; however, that does not square with Scripture. Can you think of any verse in the Bible that directly connects leaven with sin? You might think about 1 Corinthians 5, but read it carefully:

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.

Verse 8 is the go-to place for claiming that leaven represents all sin, but it does not say that. It says, **leaven represents “malice and wickedness.”** While malice and wickedness are sins themselves, it never says that leaven represents *all* sin. To understand more, look at the definitions for these words:

DEFINITIONS:

Malice = desire to do evil unto others.

Wickedness = conduct that is evil.

Malice and wickedness are a type of *leaven*. Saying it another way, *leaven* is the result of malice and wickedness so it is a **type** of sin. Why? Because people whose conduct is evil or who have a desire to do evil can cause others to also commit serious sins. Remember what Paul said, “a little leaven leavens the whole lump” (v6). Malice and wickedness is a quality or state of the heart and mind that can **spread to others**. But this is not the only type of leaven. Notice something Jesus Christ said:

MATTHEW 16:6 And Jesus said to them, “Watch out, and be on guard against the **leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees**.”

This statement puzzled the disciples who imagined that He was referring to bread. Jesus then reminded them of feeding 5,000 people from only a few baskets of fish and bread. He then flat out said that He was NOT speaking about bread:

MATTHEW 16:11-12 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 [teachings] of the Pharisees and Sadducees**.

Instead of referring to bread, Jesus said leaven is the result of the teachings of the Pharisees and Sadducees. How can teachings be leaven? Because the scribes, Pharisees, and Sadducees were hypocrites! In Matthew 23 we find a harsh condemnation of them where Jesus tells them over and over, “Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, **hypocrites!**” A hypocrite is one who says one thing but does things that contradict what they say. The Greek word for hypocrite is *hupokrites* and it is a compound of “under” (*hupo*) and “condemnation” or “judgment” (*krisis*), so it literally means someone who is “under condemnation”. Interestingly, it is what they called *actors*. So, **leaven also represents hypocritical teachings**. Again, that is something that can *spread to others*.

Do you see a pattern here? **Leaven represents serious sins that are spread to others**. It is not **all** sin. Sin is the transgression of the law, but when it spreads to others, it becomes leaven. Now “leaven” makes a lot more sense, right? This exactly portrays what happened in Corinth with the man who was fornicating with his stepmother.

Also, *leaven* is an AGENT! It is not bread by itself. It is put into dough when making bread but the dough itself is not bad. It can become leavened OR unleavened bread. We are like dough. We have all sinned so we are leavened to some extent but we need to continue in a state of being unleavened by NOT putting any more leaven into our “dough.” Leaven portrays serious sins that are intentionally spread to others just like deliberately adding leaven to dough. The Corinthians were puffed up because they allowed fornication to continue in their midst:

1 CORINTHIANS 5:1-2 *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.*

The Corinthians all knew about their brother in Christ who was committing fornication (*porneia* = sexual immorality) and his actions affected the entire group. He continued in his sin even though everyone knew it. Such sin can spread—and THAT is why it is called leaven. It is much worse than a sin that does not involve the brethren.

Now, what about the opposite of leaven; that is, what is “unleavened bread”? Look again what Paul said:

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**.*

We ARE unleavened because we are no longer putting more leaven into our lives. Through the sacrifice of Jesus Christ and we are to be *unleavened* by sincerity and truth. (It is *unleavened*, not unleavened bread—*bread* was wrongly added.) To be *unleavened* is

not adding any more leavening. So, *unleavened* is living without leaven and having a heart and mind of sincerity and truth! What do those words mean?

DEFINITIONS:

Sincerity = conduct that is free from deceit or hypocrisy.

Truth = a quality or state of being pure or unconcealed.

To be *unleavened* is to have a heart and mind that is free of deceit and hypocrisy. If we are unleavened, our hearts and minds are pure before God and Jesus Christ is LIVING in us¹! Of all who ever lived as flesh and blood, only Jesus Christ is unleavened. In contrast, we ALL are leavened because once leaven is added to dough it can never be removed. Since we all sinned and were enemies of God², we all have leaven in us. It is not something we can change at this point. However, we are to stop adding leaven and allow Jesus Christ to live in us so we move forward in an unleavened state. Now we have all the pieces to understand what leaven and unleavened means:

DEFINITIONS:

Leaven = represents the spreading of serious sins to others. It is the result of a heart and mind filled with deceit, malice, wickedness, or hypocrisy.

Unleavened = represents a heart and mind that is pure. Unleavened does not mean that a person is without sin, it is staying sincere and true to God even when we do sin. Such a heart and mind does not intend to spread sin to others.

Now, this topic would not be complete without addressing “old leaven:”

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.

When Paul mentioned “old leaven,” it was in the context of the sexual immorality of the man and his stepmother. The Corinthians were gentiles and their entire culture was one of idolatry and sexual immorality and they were struggling to come out of it. The “old leaven” was referring to the practicing and spreading of idolatry and sexual immorality that the Corinthians lived with before their conversion.

This is similar to the ancient Israelites in Egypt. They lived in a culture that taught and spread the sin of idolatry. Why do we keep the Feast of Unleavened Bread?

¹ Gal. 2:20.

² Rom. 5:10.

EXODUS 12:15, 17 Seven days shall ye eat unleavened bread; even the first day ye shall **put away leaven** out of your houses: for whosoever eateth leavened bread from the first day until the seventh day, that soul shall be cut off from Israel. ... 17 And **ye shall observe the feast of unleavened bread; for in this selfsame day have I brought your armies out of the land of Egypt:** therefore shall ye observe this day in your generations by an ordinance for ever.

God brought the ancient Israelites out from a nation that worshipped false gods. In fact, a reason for the 10 plagues was to judge their gods³. The plagues destroyed their idolatry (even if it was only temporary)! God then brought the Israelites out of Egypt desiring that they would no longer follow after idolatry. They saw God destroy the Egyptian gods and that way of life. That should have humbled them because God certainly showed there is “none other gods before Me⁴”. The “old leaven” was the idolatry of Egypt that had spread into the lives of the Israelites. Just like their bread that did not have time to become leavened, God wanted them to come out from the source of the “leaven” and stop adding more of that “leaven” into their lives.

Paul told the Corinthians to “flee idolatry”⁵. This seemingly does not fit the context because he begins talking about the Passover symbols (read all of 1 Corinthians 10). But fleeing idolatry fits perfectly in Paul’s discussion because the “old leaven” of Corinth was affecting the God’s people the same way Egypt affected the ancient Israelites. They “lusted after evil things”⁶ and it was intentionally taught (spread) as a part of their culture. The same thing was happening with the Corinthian brethren so Paul’s warning was very appropriate to the discussion of keeping the Feast of Unleavened Bread.

All are leavened except Christ. After conversion, we are to put away our “old leaven” and stop adding more leaven of serious sins through the deceit, malice, wickedness, or hypocrisy of others. The Feast of Unleavened Bread is about remaining steadfast in an unleavened state through Jesus Christ living in us!

May God’s grace and peace be upon you!

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³ Exod. 12:12.

⁴ Deut 5:7.

⁵ 1 Cor. 10:14.

⁶ 1 Cor. 10:6.

SABBATH THOUGHT 2023-03-25—FEAST OF UNLEAVENED BREAD

May God bless you on His Sabbath day!

The previous Sabbath Thought discussed the meaning of leaven and sin. Leaven is not **all** sin, but rather it represents serious sin that is spread to others. Scripture clearly defines it as idolatry and witchcraft¹, divisions and offenses², malice and wickedness³, hypocrisy⁴, sexual immorality⁵, etc. They can be personal sins that affect or influence others, taught as part of a national culture such as idolatry, or evil works that are publicly flaunted as is the case with homosexuality and abortion. Leaven sin, at the very least, exposes others to it. At the worst, leaven sin entices others to commit sin. Solomon mentions the very worst of (and most common) leaven sins:

PROVERBS 6:16-19 These six *things* **doth the LORD hate**: yea, **seven are an abomination** unto him: 17 A **proud look**, a **lying tongue**, and **hands that shed innocent blood**, 18 An heart that deviseth **wicked imaginations**, feet that be swift in running to **mischief**, 19 A **false witness** that speaketh lies, and he that soweth **discord** among brethren.

Whether or not we partake of those sins, they are ever-present everywhere. Many of us participated in leaven sins in the past such as by keeping and promoting the pagan holidays. Paul calls those sins the “old leaven”⁶ because we participated in them prior to our conversion when we followed the ways of the world. After baptism, we are to live in the unleaven of sincerity and truth⁷. This means that when we do sin, we feel shame and remorse and go before God and Jesus Christ in the fullness of repentance. **PERSONAL SINS ARE NOT REPRESENTED BY LEAVEN BECAUSE WE DO NOT WANT TO DO THEM AND ARE NOT TRYING TO SPREAD THEM.** Sincerity and truth **is** unleaven because they are foundational for true repentance and required when we come before God and ask His forgiveness for our sins through the sacrifice of Jesus Christ. So, what is the meaning behind the Feast of Unleavened Bread? Read what Moses told the ancient Israelites when they left Egypt:

EXODUS 13:3-8 And Moses said unto the people, Remember this day, **in which ye came out from Egypt, out of the house of bondage; for by strength of hand the LORD brought you out from this place**: there shall no leavened bread be eaten. 4 This day came ye out in the month Abib [*or Nisan 15*]. 5 And

¹ Especially 1 Sam. 15:23. Also 2 Kings 21:11; Isa 31:7; Ezek. 23:49; 37:23; Hos. 13:2; et al.

² Rom. 16:17.

³ 1 Cor. 5:8.

⁴ Mat. 16:6, 12; 23.

⁵ 1 Cor. 5:1-2.

⁶ 1 Cor. 5:7.

⁷ 1 Cor. 5:8.

it shall be **when the LORD shall bring thee into the land** of the Canaanites, and the Hittites, and the Amorites, and the Hivites, and the Jebusites, which he swore unto thy fathers to give thee, a land flowing with milk and honey, that thou shalt keep this service in this month. 6 Seven days thou shalt eat unleavened bread, and in the seventh day *shall be* a feast to the LORD. 7 Unleavened bread shall be eaten seven days; and there shall no leavened bread be seen with thee, neither shall there be leaven seen with thee in all thy quarters. 8 And thou shalt shew thy son in that day, saying, *This is done* because of that *which* the LORD did unto me when I came forth out of Egypt.

There are several key aspects mentioned in these verses. First, God brought the ancient Israelites OUT of bondage. While that was specifically physical slavery, it also, and more importantly, included the idolatry of the Egyptians. However, just as central to the Feast of Unleavened Bread is the fact that God brought them INTO a land AWAY from the leaven of the Egyptian idolatry.

The Feast of Unleavened Bread was to be a remembrance of when the ancient Israelites came OUT of idolatry (leaven) and INTO a land purged of idolatry (the absence of leaven) because God intended “cut off” the indigent nations along with their leaven sin:

EXODUS 23:23-24 For mine Angel shall go before thee [*to the promised land of Canaan*], and bring thee in unto the Amorites, and the Hittites, and the Perizzites, and the Canaanites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites: and **I will cut them off.** 24 Thou shalt not bow down to their gods, nor serve them, nor do after their works: but **thou shalt utterly overthrow them, and quite break down their images.**

If dough represented the ancient Israelites, they were leavened in Egypt by idolatry; however, God wanted them to stop adding leaven to their lives. If they had “baked in” the Law of God into their hearts and minds, they would stop adding leaven and each succeeding generation would become more and more unleavened. Instead, they kept **returning** to the idolatry of the other pagan nations⁸. This is absolutely clear in Ezekiel 20:7-10.

We are to keep the Feast of Unleavened Bread in the same manner God intended for the ancient Israelites. It begins with a holy convocation on the first day, which is “a night to be much observed unto the LORD for bringing them out from the land of Egypt: this is **That Night of the LORD** to be observed of all the children of Israel in their generations.” (Exod. 12:42). The evening of the first day is called “That Night of the LORD” because it is GOD who liberated them (and us). It a night to be *much observed*. The English translation “much observed” does not give a full sense of the Hebrew meaning, the root of which means to hedge about, guard, protect, attend to, and preserve. That Night of the Lord is much more than recalling our personal salvation by God—we

⁸ Exod. 34:12-18; 2 Sam. 7:23; 2 Kings 17:7-11.

are to guard, protect, attend to, and preserve it. How do we do that? By purging out the “old leaven,” avoiding the “leaven of malice and wickedness,” and living in the “unleaven of sincerity and truth:”

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.**

While Paul talked about the unleaven of sincerity and truth, he understood this from the teachings of Joshua. In his last days, Joshua reminded the ancient Israelites of all that God did in bringing them out of Egypt and into the promised land (Josh. 24:1-13). He finished by saying:

JOSHUA 24:14 Now therefore fear the LORD, and **serve him in sincerity and in truth: and put away the gods which your fathers served on the other side of the flood, and in Egypt; and serve ye the LORD.**

The Feast of Unleavened Bread is a time to PROTECT the memory that God liberated us from leaven sin; a time to renew our efforts to GUARD against the leaven sins of this world; and a time to ATTEND TO and PRESERVE our hearts and minds in the unleaven of sincerity and truth through humility and repentance under the sacrifice of Jesus Christ.

This is why Paul concluded his discourse to the Corinthians on the Feast of Unleavened Bread by saying:

1 CORINTHIANS 5:9-11 I wrote to you in an epistle **not to associate with the sexually immoral**; 10 And yet, **you can not altogether avoid contact with the sexually immoral** of this world, or **with the covetous, or extortioners, or idolaters**, since you would then have to go out of the world. 11 But now, I have written to you **not to associate** with anyone who is called a brother, **if he be either sexually immoral, or covetous, or an idolater, or a reviler, or a drunkard, or an extortioner**; with such a person *you are* not even to eat.

What is his message? DO NOT ASSOCIATE with others who are committing and spreading serious sins. They are spreading leaven! How do you recognize leaven sins? Because they are spread publicly without remorse or shame—they are “in your face,” so to speak. They affect others the same way leaven affects dough. We must come away from them; avoid them; and STAY unleavened. We must stay humble and keep sincerity and truth in our hearts and minds through avoidance and repentance. Leaven sin was a serious problem for the Corinthians. Paul dealt with it in his first epistle to them as well as his second:

2 CORINTHIANS 6:14-17 Do not be unequally yoked with unbelievers. For what do righteousness and lawlessness *have* in common? And what fellowship *does* light *have* with darkness? 15 And what union *does* Christ *have* with Belial? Or what part *does* a believer *have* with an unbeliever? 16 And **what agreement is there between a temple of God and idols? For you are a temple of the living God**, exactly as God said: “I will dwell in them and walk in *them*; and I will be their God, and they shall be My people. 17 Therefore, **come out from the midst of them and be separate,**” says *the Lord*, “**and touch not the unclean**, and I will receive you;

As the name implies, the Feast of Unleavened Bread is about being in a state of unleaven—avoiding ALL leaven as much as possible. It is hedging about, guarding, protecting, attending to, and preserving our hearts and minds in the unleaven we have through Christ’s sacrifice. But is it even possible to entirely avoid leaven sin considering the wickedness of the world and its evil works? No, but we should not intentionally let it into our lives and do our best to steer clear of it. So, how do we stay unleavened in the midst of a world swimming in leaven?

EPHESIANS 6:11-18 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**. 14 **Stand** therefore, having your loins girded about with **truth**, and wearing the breastplate of **righteousness [of God]**, 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 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;**

We have the truth and righteousness of God, the peace and faith of Jesus Christ, and the salvation and sword of the Holy Spirit and the Word of God. This is the POWER of God; this is the SALVATION of God, and this is the PROMISE of God!

May God’s grace and peace be upon you!

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SABBATH THOUGHT 2023-04-01—WATCHFUL UNTO SALVATION

May God bless you on His Sabbath day!

There are many Scriptures that command us to watch. What are we to watch? Notice what Jesus said about His return:

MATTHEW 24:37-41 Now as *it was in* the days of Noah, so shall *it* also be *at* the coming of the Son of man. 38 For as in the days that *were* before the Flood, they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the day that Noah entered the ark; 39 And **they were not aware** until the Flood came and took *them* all away; **so shall it also be at the coming of the Son of man.** 40 Then two shall be in the field; one shall be taken, and one shall be left; 41 Two *women shall be* grinding at the mill; one shall be taken, and one shall be left.

Obviously, there are those who think “My lord delays *His* coming” (Matt. 24:48). Jesus continued:

MATTHEW 24:42-46 **Watch**, therefore, because you do not know in what hour your Lord is coming. 43 But know this, that if the master of the house had known in what watch the thief would come, he would have been **watching**, and would not have allowed his house to be broken into. 44 Therefore, you also **be ready**. For **the Son of man is coming at a time that you do not think.** 45 Who then is **the faithful and wise servant whom his lord has set over his household, to give them food in due season?** 46 Blessed *is* that servant, whom his lord when he comes shall find so doing.

Jesus did not say to watch because He was concerned about end-time events—He warned against being caught unaware when He RETURNS. He hinted at this when He said, “**you do not know the day nor the hour in which the Son of man is coming.**” (Matthew 25:13). But did it jump out at you when He said He will return when the SAINTS **least expect** (“a time that you do not think”)¹? In fact, Jesus said in Luke 12:40 that He will return when we **think it is not possible**. That should give everyone pause regarding any predictions of His return.

Instead of giving specifics about His return, He repeatedly emphasized to “**Watch** therefore, *and* **pray** 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.**” (Luke 21:36). God’s children are to come *out* of the world “so that you **do not take part in her sins,** and that you **do not receive of her plagues.**” (Rev. 18:4).

The real message of Jesus is to be spiritually, not physically, preparing for His return because there is a grave danger of being deceived² or drawn into the cares (or sins) of the

¹ Also Luke 12:40.

² Warnings against being deceived are mentioned four times in Matthew 24 alone (vv 4, 5, 11, 24).

world³. BEING PREPARED PHYSICALLY DOES NOT MAKE ANYONE **WORTHY** OF ANYTHING. We are only “worthy ... to stand before the Son of man” if we are *spiritually* prepared.

This is the message of the parable of the master of the house. The lord expected the master of the household to provide spiritual “food in due season.” (Matt. 24:42-46). What is the season? The TIME PRIOR TO HIS RETURN! We must watch to avoid being deceived or distracted and overcome by the cares of the world. WATCHING IS ABOUT SALVATION—it is not about the fulfillment of the events in biblical prophecies. This same message is repeated over and over (1 Cor. 16:13; Eph. 6:18; Col. 4:2; 1 Thess. 5:2, 4-6, 8-9, 11; 2 Tim. 4:5; 1 Pet. 4:7; Rev. 3:2-3; 16:15). The purpose of the end-time prophecies is to point us to the RETURN of Jesus Christ and spiritual preparation. Has not every generation of saints believed the return of Jesus Christ was imminent? Even though we are still waiting today, the message has not changed:

2 PETER 3:10-14, 18 However, the day of *the* Lord shall come as a thief in *the* night in which the heaven itself shall disappear with a mighty roar, and *the* elements shall pass away, burning with intense heat, and *the* earth and the works in it shall be burned up. 11 **Since all these things are going to be destroyed, what kind of persons ought you to be in holy conduct and godliness,** 12 **Looking forward** to and striving for the coming of the day of God, during which *the* heavens, being on fire, shall be destroyed, and *the* elements, burning with intense heat, shall melt? 13 But according to His promise, **we look forward** to a new heaven and a new earth, in which righteousness dwells. 14 For this reason, beloved, since you are anticipating these things, **be diligent, so that you may be found by Him in peace, spotless and blameless.** ... 18 Rather, **be growing in the grace and the knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.** To Him *be* glory both now and into *the* day of eternity. Amen.

The *ekklesia* (“called out ones”) are the temple, or household, of God⁴. We need to conduct ourselves in holiness and godliness and be without spot and blameless. No one knows when Jesus Christ will return but He promised it will happen when we **think it is not possible**. Even if we knew the exact timing of His return, would it make a difference in what we are doing? Spiritual preparation does not come by watching world events and trying to line them up with prophecy. Have you ever known of any speculations about end-time prophecies that have come true? I have never heard of a single one.

Whether or not it is intended, the *result* of such preaching is almost always **fear**. Is that how Jesus wants us to be? In a constant state of fear? No! “God has not given us a spirit of fear, but of power, and of love, and of sound-mindedness.” (2 Tim. 1:7). Some preach that God’s children should prepare for the end-times by having caches of gold, cash, food stores, water, etc. Who has the means to obtain all those things? Who has the resources to store them? Who can have enough to last until the return of Christ? I have never heard

³ These are the seeds that fell among thorns in the parable of the sower (Matt. 13:3-20).

⁴ 2 Cor. 6:16.

one of these messages where the preacher says, “Do not worry, I will provide you with these things if you cannot afford them.” Shame on those who preach such things to brethren who cannot afford it. Shame on those who preach fear to the saints. Shame on those who preach physical instead of spiritual preparation. That is the antithesis of Scripture. Jesus Christ said we cannot change one hair on our head⁵. What purpose does it serve to preach speculations of world events fulfilling end-time prophecies when they cannot be PROVEN? Such messages are only fear-mongering and distract from tending to our spiritual household.

The biblical message is not one of endless prophetic speculations. Trying to predict the fulfillment of prophecy is, at best, a fruitless effort because no one can know if their speculations are correct until the events actually happen. At the worst, it is a message that salvation is dependent upon physical preparations and one that spreads fear. God will fulfill His prophecies in His own time and in His own way. Our Savior commands us to be watchful of our spiritual condition so that we can “stand before the Son of man” and receive SALVATION! God’s children must:

MATTHEW 6:33-34 ... **seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness**, and all these things shall be added to you. 34 Therefore, **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*.”

It is a serious responsibility to speak in the name of the Lord. This is especially true during God’s holy time on Sabbaths and holydays. Speculating about how end-time events might fulfill prophecy is not “[teaching and preaching]⁶ the **truth** in love.” (Eph. 4:15). Speculation has no part with God’s Word of Truth because it is nothing more than conjecture and fear-mongering. Notice what God says about speaking in His name⁷:

DEUTERONOMY 18:20-22 But the prophet, which shall presume to speak a word in my name, which I have not commanded him to speak, or that shall speak in the name of other gods, even that prophet shall die. 21 And if thou say in thine heart, How shall we know the word which the LORD hath not spoken? 22 **When a prophet speaketh in the name of the LORD, if the thing follow not, nor come to pass, that is the thing which the LORD hath not spoken, but the prophet hath spoken it presumptuously**: thou shalt not be afraid of him.

Even if opinions and speculations come with a disclaimer that they are merely personal thoughts and ideas, is it appropriate to conjecture about prophetic fulfillments? God gave us His Word (“All Scripture *is* God-breathed”—2 Tim. 3:16) and the Holy Spirit to understand it. No one should ever preach a message of fear and speculation is simply adding unproven personal opinions. Notice what Scripture says about adding to or taking away from the “words of the **PROPHECY**” in the Bible:

⁵ Matt. 5:36.

⁶ Gk. *alētheuo* = to be true in doctrine (teaching) or profession (preaching). See Gal. 4:16.

⁷ Also, Deut. 13:5; Jer. 14:15.

REVELATION 22:18-19 For I jointly testify to everyone who hears **the words of the prophecy** of this book, **that if anyone adds to these things**, God shall add to him the plagues that are written in this book. 19 And **if anyone takes away from the words of the book of this prophecy**, God shall take away his part from *the* book of life, and from the holy city, and from the things that are written in this book.

All prophecy points to the return of Jesus Christ who brings salvation to God's children. Peter said we should pay attention to "the confirmed prophetic Word" which is like "a light shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and *the* morning star arises." (1 Peter 1:19). The morning star is obviously Jesus Christ⁸. Prophecy shines a light for us to see our Savior in this dark world. While prophecy clearly describes a time of serious trouble, the saints are not to fear any of it.

Preaching physical preparation for the coming end-time events of prophecy is not a message of God because it produces **fear**. Even if (or when) God reveals all the details of the world events that will fulfill prophecy, it will not tell us what happens to us *individually*. Some will live through the Tribulation and Day of the Lord because Jesus promised the gates of the grave will not prevail against the *ekklesia*⁹. Others will be killed for their testimony against the world as witnesses (Gk. *martus* = martyrs) of God the Father and Jesus Christ. Understanding prophetic end-time fulfillments, even if it was possible, does not reveal the path each of us must follow individually. Few of us walk the same path even though the destination is the same. The one thing common to us all in the day of salvation is that we "... overcame him [*Satan*] **through the blood of the Lamb**, and through the word of [our] testimony; and [we] **loved not their lives unto death.**" (Revelation 12:11).

Do not be concerned about end-time events suddenly occurring around us. God will provide for His people so we need not fear. Real fear is being caught "unawares" when Jesus Christ returns. Seek first the Kingdom. God will provide the means to get there no matter how rough the path might be.

May God's grace and peace be upon you!

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⁸ Rev. 22:16.

⁹ Matt. 16:18.

SABBATH THOUGHT 2023-04-08—PRE-PASSOVER EVENTS

May God bless you on His Sabbath day!

The 2023 Passover falls on the fourth day of the week (Wednesday), which is the same day of the week that Jesus died. While our focus usually begins with the Passover ceremony—the remembrance of the sacrifice of Jesus Christ and His sacrifice—our Lord spent several days beforehand preparing for His death and fulfilling several prophecies.

In preparation for His death, He was anointed the first time six days prior to Passover day by Mary, the sister of Lazarus and Martha:

JOHN 12:1-3, 7 Now **six days before the Passover**, Jesus came to Bethany, where Lazarus was who had died, *and* whom He had raised from *the* dead. 2 There they made a supper *for* Him, and Martha served; and Lazarus was one of those who sat with Him. 3 **Mary then took a pound of pure spikenard ointment worth a great price and anointed Jesus' feet**, wiping His feet with her hair. And the house was filled with the aroma of the ointment. ... 7 Then Jesus said, "Let her alone; she has been keeping it toward the **day of My burial**."

This first anointing was of His feet. Four days later, on Abib/Nissan 12, Jesus was again anointed—this time on His head at Simon the leper's house¹:

MATTHEW 26:2, 6-7, 12-13 "You know that **after two days the Passover takes place**, and the Son of man is delivered up to be crucified." ... 6 Now when Jesus was in Bethany, **in Simon the leper's house**, 7 **A woman came to Him with an alabaster flask of ointment, very precious, and poured it on His head** as He sat down *to eat*. ... 12 What this *woman did* in pouring this ointment on My body, **she did for My burial**. 13 Truly I say to you, wherever this gospel shall be preached in the whole world, what this *woman* has done shall also be spoken of for a memorial of her."

These anointings were for the BURIAL of Jesus Christ. You may remember another anointing mentioned in Luke 7:36-38, 44-50. That one occurred early in Jesus' ministry and it appears to be a fulfillment of Isaiah 61:1-3:

ISAIAH 61:1-3 The Spirit of the Lord GOD *is* upon me; because the LORD [*God the Father*] hath **anointed me [Jesus Christ] to preach good tidings** unto the meek; he hath sent me to **bind up the brokenhearted**, to **proclaim liberty** to the captives, and the **opening of the prison** to *them that are* bound; 2 To **proclaim the acceptable year of the LORD**, and the **day of vengeance** of our God; to **comfort** all that mourn; 3 To appoint unto them that mourn in Zion, to give unto them **beauty** for ashes, the **oil of joy** for mourning, the garment of **praise** for the spirit of heaviness; that they might be called trees of

¹ Also Mark 14:1, 3, 8.

righteousness, the planting of the LORD, that He [*God the Father*] might be glorified.

Jesus Christ was anointed by God the Father to be the Messenger of God—to bring a message of the Gospel, healing, and liberty to the world. In contrast, the two anointings prior to His sacrifice were for His burial. There is much meaning behind anointings because they symbolize cleansing or separation unto holiness. You can find messages on cleansing on the website, but I think it is possible that these anointings symbolized that God “examined” Jesus Christ and found Him to be the perfect (“without blemish”²) sacrificial Passover Lamb with whom God the Father was well pleased:

ISAIAH 53:10 Yet it **pleased the LORD** [*God the Father*] to bruise Him [*Jesus Christ*]; He [*God the Father*] hath put Him [*Jesus Christ*] to grief: when **Thou** [***God the Father***] shalt make His [***Jesus Christ***] soul an offering for sin, He [*God the Father*] shall see His [*Jesus Christ*] seed, He [*God the Father*] shall prolong His [*Jesus Christ*] days, and the pleasure of the LORD [*God the Father*] shall prosper in His [*Jesus Christ*] hand.

Just a few days prior, the priests decided that Jesus must die on Passover (John 11:53). Essentially, they unwittingly “accepted” God’s true Lamb. They planned His death, so the anointings were for His burial. Following the anointings is the wondrous event when Jesus is proclaimed King:

JOHN 12:12-17 **On the next day**, a great crowd of people who had come for the feast, when they heard that Jesus was coming into Jerusalem, **13 Took branches from palm trees** and went out to meet Him, and **were shouting, “Hosanna! Blessed is He Who comes in the name of the Lord, the King of Israel.”** 14 Now **after finding a young donkey, Jesus sat upon it**, exactly as it is written: 15 **“Fear not, daughter of Sion. Behold, your King comes, sitting on a colt of a donkey.”** 16 And His disciples did not understand these things at the beginning; but when **Jesus was glorified**, then they remembered that these things were written about Him, and that they had done these things to Him.

Depending upon the meaning of “on the next day,” Jesus might have ridden into Jerusalem on Abib/Nissan 10 when the Passover lambs were chosen³—it was certainly no earlier than the 9th. This fulfilled the prophecies in Isaiah 62:11 and Zechariah 9:9. However, it also fulfilled a prophecy in Psalms:

PSALMS 118:25-26 **Save now [*yasha`*]**, I beseech You, O LORD; O LORD, I beseech You, cause us to prosper now. 26 Blessed is **He who comes** in the name of the LORD [*God the Father*]; we have blessed You **out of the house of the LORD [*God the Father*]**.

² Exod. 12:5.

³ Exod. 12:3.

The word *hosanna* in John 12:13 is not Greek, but Hebrew. It is the transliteration of two Hebrew words *yasha`na'*. It means *O save* and is the same word used in Ps. 118:25. That is exactly what Isaiah 61:1-3 described—that salvation of God through Jesus Christ. But now notice the next verse:

PSALMS 118:27 The LORD is God and He has made His light to shine upon us.
Bind the festival sacrifice with cords even unto the horns of the altar.

Jesus had already been chosen as God's sacrificial Lamb when He finally came to Jerusalem. As the Passover sacrifice, He was bound with cords on the night of his arrest. John records this fulfillment:

JOHN 18:12 Then the band and the chief captain and the officers of the Jews took hold of Jesus, and **bound** Him;

Now we come to one of the most important fulfillments written in the Bible: Jesus glorified God the Father:

JOHN 12:23, 28-30 But Jesus answered them, saying, "The time has come for **the Son of man to be glorified.** ... 28 **Father, glorify Your name.**" Then a **voice came from heaven, saying, "I have both glorified it and will glorify it again."** 29 Then the people standing *there*, who heard *it*, said, "It thundered." Others said, "An angel spoke to Him." 30 Jesus answered and said, "This voice did not come because of Me, but because of you.

That God the Father was glorified was mentioned at the end of Isaiah 61:3, "... the planting [*Jesus Christ*] of **the LORD, that He [God the Father] might be glorified.**" It also fulfills the prophecy in Ps. 118:27: "**God [the Father] made His light [of glory] to shine upon us.**" All that Jesus Christ did GLORIFIED God the Father and, because of His obedience and sacrifice, God the Father also glorified Jesus.

While John omits it, Luke mentions that the glorification of God the Father and Jesus Christ was such a majestic part of the events prior to the crucifixion that if people did not proclaim Their praise, then the stones themselves would cry out:

LUKE 19:38-40 38 Saying, "Blessed be the King [*Jesus Christ*], Who comes in the name of the Lord [*God the Father*]. Peace in heaven and **glory in the highest!**" 39 And some of the Pharisees in the multitude said to Him, "Master, rebuke Your disciples." 40 But He answered *and* said to them, "I tell you that **if these were silent, the stones would cry out.**"

The next verses not only continue to describe the "light" of God's glory, but also bring out another prophetic fulfillment:

JOHN 12:31-36a Now is *the* judgment of this world. Now shall the prince of this world be cast out. 32 And if **I be lifted up** from the earth, **I will draw all to Myself.**" 33 But He said this to signify by what death He was about to die. 34 The people answered Him, "**We have heard out of the law that the Christ lives**

forever, and why do You say that the Son of man must be lifted up? Who is this Son of man?" 35 Then Jesus said to them, "**Yet a little while the light is with you.** Walk while you have the light, so that *the* darkness will not overtake you. For the one who walks in darkness does not know where he is going. 36 **While you have the light, believe in the light, so that you may become the children of light.**" ...

The Jews knew from the Law, Prophets, and Writings that the prophesied Savior was an eternal being. The fact that Jesus came in the flesh and died was a major stumbling block for them. This was another fulfillment of prophecy⁴:

JOHN 12:37-46 Although **He had done so many miracles in their presence, they did not believe in Him,** 38 So that **the word of Isaiah the prophet might be fulfilled** who said, "**Lord, who has believed our report?** And to whom has the arm of *the* Lord been revealed?" 39 For this *very* reason **they could not believe** because again Isaiah said, 40 "He has blinded their eyes and hardened their hearts so that they would not see with *their* eyes and understand with *their* hearts, and be converted, and I would heal them." 41 Isaiah said these things when he saw His glory and spoke concerning Him⁵. 42 But even so, many among the rulers believed in Him; but because of the Pharisees they did not confess *Him*, so that they would not be put out of the synagogue; 43 For they loved the glory of men more than **the glory of God.** 44 Then Jesus called out and said, "The one who believes in Me does not believe in Me, but in Him Who sent Me. 45 And the one who sees Me sees Him Who sent Me. 46 **I have come as a light into the world** so that everyone who believes in Me may not remain in darkness.

The Passover is a solemn remembrance of Jesus Christ and His sacrifice. It is a time to remember that He was betrayed, falsely accused and tried, shamed, tormented, scourged, beaten, tortured, nailed to a cross, killed with a spear, and buried in the earth—all so that **our** sins may be forgiven and **we** might receive the gift of eternal life. It was the day that God our Christ **died** for us. The remembrance of Passover is a time of humble and solemn remembrance, worship, praise, respect, honor, and glory to the Most High Father and His beloved Son who is the Passover Lamb. But then Jesus was resurrected and the time is at hand when the fullness of heavenly joy will be upon all those who believe and trust in God the Father and Jesus Christ!

May God's grace and peace be upon you!

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⁴ Isa. 53:1

⁵ Isa. 6:1-4.

SABBATH THOUGHT 2023-04-15—HESED = COVENANT LOYALTY & DEVOTION

May God bless you on His Sabbath day!

There are a few biblical words that present a challenge when translating to English. The Hebrew word *checed* or *hesed* (H2617) is one of them. Notice a few verses in Psalm 136:

PSALM 136:1 O give thanks unto the LORD; for *he is good*: **for his mercy [hesed] endureth for ever.**

PSALM 136:10 To him that smote Egypt in their firstborn: **for his mercy [hesed] endureth for ever:**

PSALM 136:15 But overthrew Pharaoh and his host in the Red sea: **for his mercy [hesed] endureth for ever.**

PSALM 136:17 To him which smote great kings: **for his mercy [hesed] endureth for ever:**

PSALM 136:18 And slew famous kings: **for his mercy [hesed] endureth for ever:**

Does the refrain “for his mercy *endureth* for ever” fit with God destroying the firstborn of Egypt or drowning the Egyptian army or killing kings? Psalm 136 is a good example of a translation problem that has gone on for centuries. Look at another example:

GENESIS 21:22-23 And it came to pass at that time, that Abimelech and Phichol the chief captain of his host spake unto Abraham, saying, God *is* with thee in all that thou doest: 23 Now therefore swear unto me here by God that thou wilt not deal falsely with me, nor with my son, nor with my son’s son: **but according to the kindness [hesed] that I have done unto thee, thou shalt do unto me,** and to the land wherein thou hast sojourned.

This occasion was the result of quarrels among the servants of Abimilech and Abraham over water rights to a well. To resolve it, Abimelech wanted to make a treaty with Abraham. Up until that point, however, the Bible gives no indication that Abimilech had done Abraham any real past “kindnesses.” Or what about this next example?

HOSEA 6:4 O Ephraim, what shall I do unto thee? O Judah, what shall I do unto thee? for **your goodness [hesed] is as a morning cloud, and as the early dew it goeth away.**

This infers some sort of a “goodness” that God expected from Ephraim and Judah. When we read of Hezekiah’s death we find a similar curious reference to his “goodness”¹:

2 CHRONICLES 32:32 Now the rest of the acts of Hezekiah, and his **goodness [hesed]**, behold, they *are* written in the vision of Isaiah the prophet, the son of Amoz, and in the book of the kings of Judah and Israel.

¹ Also 2 Chr. 35:26.

Or, what is behind Jonathan *demanding* “the kindness of the LORD” *from* David:

1 SAMUEL 20:14-16 And **thou [David] shalt not only while yet I [Jonathan] live shew me the kindness [hesed] of the LORD**, that I die not: 15 But *also* **thou shalt not cut off thy kindness [hesed] from my house for ever**: no, not when the LORD hath cut off the enemies of David every one from the face of the earth. 16 So **Jonathan made a covenant with the house of David**, saying, Let the LORD even require *it* at the hand of David's enemies.

... or God “**keeping** mercy” for thousands:

EXODUS 34:6-7 And the LORD passed by before him, and proclaimed, The LORD, The LORD God, merciful and gracious, longsuffering, and **abundant in goodness [hesed]** and truth, 7 **Keeping mercy [hesed] for thousands**, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, and that will by no means clear *the guilty*, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children, and upon the children's children, unto the third and to the fourth *generation*.

The English translations of *hesed* in the above verses just do not fit the context. Moreover, *hesed* has been variously translated as mercy, kindness, lovingkindness, goodness, and favor among several different words. So why all the different meanings? The Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible, the Septuagint or LXX (“seventy”), originated in Alexandria, Egypt about 250 BC and has influenced the way the Hebrew text has been translated for centuries. When the council of seventy came upon the word *hesed*, they chose to use the Greek word *eleos* (G1656), which means mercy or compassion. However, this was a poor choice because it is not only misleading but very inadequate. Notice this definition from Vine's Dictionary for *hesed* (*emphasis mine*):

... In general, one may identify three basic meanings of the word [*hesed*], which always **interact**: “strength,” “steadfastness,” and “love.” **Any understanding of the word that fails to suggest all three inevitably loses some of its richness**. “Love” by itself easily becomes sentimentalized or universalized apart from the covenant. Yet, “Strength” or “Steadfastness” suggests only the fulfillment of a legal or other obligation.

The word refers primarily to mutual and reciprocal rights and obligations between the parties of a relationship (especially Yahweh and Israel). **But hesed is not only a matter of obligation; it is also of generosity. It is not only a matter of loyalty, but also of mercy**. The weaker party seeks the protection and blessing of the patron and protector, but he may not lay absolute claim to it. The stronger party remains committed to his promise, but retains his freedom, especially with regard to the matter in which he will implement those promises. *Hesed* implies personal involvement and commitment in a relationship beyond the rule of law.

Marital love is often related to *hesed*. Marriage certainly is a legal matter, and there are legal sanctions for infractions. Yet the relationship, if sound, far transcends mere legalities. ... **Hence, “devotion” is sometimes the single English word best capable of capturing the nuance of the original**. The RSV attempts to bring this out by its translation, “steadfast love.” Hebrew writers often underscored the element of steadfastness (or strength) by pairing *hesed* with ‘emet (“truth, reliability”) and ‘emunah (“faithfulness”). ...

The association of *hesed* with “covenant” keeps it from being misunderstood as mere providence or love for all creatures; **it applies primarily to God’s particular love for His chosen and covenanted people.** “Covenant” also stresses the reciprocity of the relationship; but since God’s *hesed* is ultimately beyond the covenant, it will not ultimately be abandoned, even when the human partner is unfaithful and must be disciplined (Isa. 54:8, 10).

The key to unlocking the full meaning of *hesed* is identifying the parties involved in the reciprocal relationship:

Hesed of man – kindness of men towards men, in doing favors and benefits; kindness extended to the lowly, needy and miserable; mercy; affection or love of God, piety.

Hesed of God – redemption from enemies and troubles; in preservation of life from death; in offering of eternal life; in redemption from sin; in keeping the covenants with Abraham; Moses, and Israel.

From this we can see that *hesed* reflects a combination of faithfulness + steadfastness + love, which is expressed as loyalty + devotion to a person or cause. However, loyalty and devotion are also part of a **covenant** relationship that grants the parties certain rights that they can expect of each other. Inserting this new meaning into Psalms 136:10 brings better clarity:

PSALM 136:10 To him that smote Egypt in their firstborn: **for his [loyal devotion to His covenant people] endureth for ever:**

This also helps understand the bond between David and Jonathan:

1 SAMUEL 20:8 Therefore thou [*Jonathan*] shalt deal kindly **[be loyal or devoted to]** thy servant [*David*]; for **thou hast brought thy servant into a covenant of the LORD with thee:** ...

The idea that loyalty and devotion is tied to a covenant relationship is obvious and important. Look also at the NT meaning of *hesed* from the perspective of Jesus Christ:

MATTHEW 9:11-13 And after seeing *this*, the Pharisees said to His disciples, “Why does your Master eat with tax collectors and sinners?” 12 But when Jesus heard *it*, He said to them, “Those who are strong do not have need of a physician, but those who are sick. 13 Now go and learn what this means: **‘I desire mercy [*eleos*] and not sacrifice.’** For **I did not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance.**”

In these verses, the *mercy* is the Greek word *eleos*. The problem is that the meaning is lost entirely—how does man show “mercy” to God? But the original Hebrew was *hesed* because Jesus was quoting Hosea 6:6:

HOSEA 6:6 ... For **I desired mercy [*hesed* = loyal devotion to My covenant], and not sacrifice;** and the knowledge of God more than burnt offerings.

Matthew 9:11-13 goes to the heart of Jesus Christ’s purpose on earth—to bring redemption to a sinful world. It is a message of a covenant with God. Jesus Christ came to call sinners to repentance. Does God desire mercy **from us**? No. He seeks loyalty and devotion—*hesed*. To

what? To our COVENANT with God the Father and Jesus Christ! This partly comes in the form of sinners repenting.

In fact, is not repentance loyalty and devotion to God's Law? What is baptism but a demonstration of loyalty and devotion to God by symbolically laying down our lives to Him? What is Holy Spirit in us but God's loyal devotion for His promise to us in our covenant?

Hesed is difficult to translate because there is no single English word that captures the depth and meaning of it. The Greek translation of the OT lost the meaning of *hesed* by using *eleos* (mercy) because covenant loyalty and devotion is such a foundational underpinning of the Bible and God's relationship with mankind.

It is so important that the Passover, Feast of Unleavened Bread, and Pentecost directly mirror this relationship. These days are the formulation of *hesed*—covenant loyalty and devotion. It starts with Passover when God spared our lives with the blood ransom of the New Covenant. He then liberates us from a sinful world and leads us on a journey to the Promised Land as portrayed in the Feast of Unleavened Bread. Contained within the Feast days is the Wavesheaf offering—God's acceptance of the sacrificial Lamb and King following His resurrection. From that day only is counted fifty days to the seed of our new heavenly citizenship as members of the Elohim family through the Holy Spirit as portrayed on Pentecost. These unique connections form the basis for our covenant with God whereas the autumn holydays are Kingdom Days—they tell of the pathway to the realization of God's Kingdom. But it all starts with the Covenant Days:

LUKE 1:68-75 "Blessed be *the* Lord, the God of Israel, because He has visited and has worked redemption for His people, 69 And has raised up a horn of salvation for us in the house of His servant David; 70 Exactly as He spoke by *the* mouth of His holy prophets since the world began; 71 **Salvation from our enemies and from *the* hand of all those who hate us;** 72 To **fulfill *the* promise of mercy [covenant loyalty and devotion]** made to our fathers, and **to remember His holy covenant,** 73 *The* oath that He swore to Abraham our father; to grant us *that*, 74 Being saved from *the* hand of our enemies, **we might serve Him** without fear, 75 **Walking in holiness and righteousness before Him** all the days of our lives.

Hesed is loyalty and devotion to God the Father and Jesus Christ in a covenant in which the relationship is bound by God's faithfulness + steadfastness + love in return for our love, obedience, and faithfulness. *Hesed* is the reason we will have salvation from death and the greatest gift—to be God's children in the eternal fullness of agape love, joy, and peace!

May God's grace and peace be upon you!

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SABBATH THOUGHT 2023-04-22—SABBATH TIME

May God bless you on His Sabbath day!

The Sabbath is one of the Ten Commandments, so it is fundamental to God and His Law. Nine of the commandments are **ordinances of behavior** that are based upon the character of God—who He IS—and they define what mankind is to BECOME. However, the Sabbath is a period of TIME. It transcends the other commandments because the Sabbath is a time of perfecting the other commandments as we draw closer to God. In other words, the Sabbath is time during which we should reflect the perfect nature of God.

The Sabbath day is unique from all other commandments because it is time. It also involves both mankind AND God. What does time have to do with God? Is He not eternal? Yes, but all that He has done, is doing, and will do is a sequence of events that He directs over time. Even eternal life is simply time without death. The whole of God’s Work—creating an eternal Kingdom of children—is a progression of time-events. But the Sabbath is much more than that. Grasping all that the Sabbath means begins with understanding dominion and that can be found in the Genesis creation account:

GENESIS 1:26, 28, 31 And God said, Let us make man in our image, after our likeness: and let **them have dominion** over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over the cattle, and **over all the earth**, and over every creeping thing that creepeth upon the earth. ... 28 And God blessed them, and God said unto them, Be fruitful, and multiply, and **replenish the earth, and subdue it**: and **have dominion** over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and **over every living thing** that moveth upon the earth. ... 31 And God saw every thing that he had made, and, behold, *it was* very good. And the evening and the morning were the sixth day.

Genesis establishes the duration of every day of the week as 24 hours (“evening and morning”). Regardless of how anyone tries to “interpret” other scriptures, the duration of a day was irrefutably instituted at creation as a complete 360° rotation of the earth. Therefore, all days of the week are 24 hours long, including the seventh day Sabbath.

Heaven and earth were created *prior* to man. God owns everything but He gave mankind dominion over—to conquer, subjugate—the *whole* earth after He finished creating the physical universe. But He did not put everything under mankind—He did **not** give mankind jurisdiction over the heavens, which is why they will be forever out of reach of physical people. Only later will He give mankind dominion over the heavens¹. But the conclusion of the physical creation was the Sabbath:

¹ Rev. 21:7.

GENESIS 2:2-3 And **on the seventh day God ended his work** which he had made; and **he rested** on the seventh day from all his work which he had made. 3 And **God blessed the seventh day, and sanctified it:** because that in it **he had rested** from all his work which God created and made.

God made the earth and all that is in it for mankind in the first six days but His final act of not working made the seventh day different from the other days. God made the Sabbath time by replacing work with refreshing rest for *both* God and man². The basic time-unit of a week consists of six days for work and the seventh as **no** work. The Sabbath was the conclusion of the creation but it also bookends our lives each week that we draw breath as a “new creation.”³ During the creation, God made both physical things and time. He gave mankind jurisdiction over the physical things of this earth and six days of time in which to carry out works over those physical things; however, God retained dominion over the heavens and the Sabbath, which He separated (sanctified) for a special purpose:

MARK 2:27 And He [*Jesus*] said to them, “The **Sabbath was made for man**, and not man for the Sabbath;

While God retained dominion over the Sabbath, it was time made BY God FOR mankind. The Sabbath day is when EVERY LIVING SOUL is to do no work—**including God!** God gave mankind dominion over the earth and all that is in it as well as the time of the first six days of a week—but not the Sabbath:

MARK 2:28 Therefore, **the Son of man is Lord even of the Sabbath.**”

God retained dominion over the seventh day Sabbath of rest and this was well understood from the beginning:

LUKE 13:14 And the ruler of the synagogue answered ... and said unto the people, **There are six days in which men ought to work**⁴ ...

DEFINITION: *Work* is not just an occupation to earn a living. It encompasses much of what we do that is beyond simple labor. In Greek, *work* (various forms of *ergon*—G2041) can mean task, occupation, engagement, labor, deed, action, achievement, etc.⁵ In Hebrew, *work* (various forms of Hb. *`abad*—H5647 and *ma`aseh*—H4639), means labor, work, action, activity, etc.⁶

The emphasis in this verse on the first six days is MEN working. Because mankind has dominion over the time of the first six days of the week, we can use them for our own

² Exod. 31:17.

³ 2 Cor. 5:17; Gal 6:15.

⁴ While this was spoken by a priest, Jesus Christ did not refute it.

⁵ Matt. 26:10; Acts 10:35; Rom. 13:10; 1 Cor. 9:13; Gal 6:10; Col 3:23; Heb 11:33; Jas 2:9; et al.

⁶ Gen. 20:9; Gen 46:33; Exod. 23:12; et al.

purposes. However, as Lord of the Sabbath, Jesus Christ has dominion over the Sabbath time. He has the authority to demand that all “**keep my Sabbaths**, and reverence my sanctuary” (Lev. 19:30). How does He command us to keep the Sabbath?

EXODUS 20:8-11 **Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy.** 9 Six days shalt thou labour, and do all thy work: 10 But **the seventh day is the Sabbath of the LORD thy God: in it thou shalt not do any work**, thou, nor thy son, nor thy daughter, thy manservant, nor thy maidservant, nor thy cattle, nor thy stranger that *is* within thy gates: 11 For *in* six days the LORD made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that in them *is*, and **rested** the seventh day: wherefore the LORD blessed the Sabbath day, and hallowed it.

EXODUS 23:12 Six days thou shalt do thy work, and on **the seventh day thou shalt rest**: that thine ox and thine ass may rest, and the son of thy handmaid, and the stranger, may **be refreshed [Hb. naphash]**.

DEUTERONOMY 5:12-14 **Keep the Sabbath day to sanctify it**, as the LORD thy God hath commanded thee. 13 Six days thou shalt labour, and do all thy work: 14 But the seventh day *is* the Sabbath of the LORD thy God: *in it* **thou shalt not do any work**, thou, nor thy son, nor thy daughter, nor thy manservant, nor thy maidservant, nor thine ox, nor thine ass, nor any of thy cattle, nor thy stranger that *is* within thy gates; that thy manservant and thy maidservant **may rest as well as thou**.

The word *keep* is similar to the word *observe* used in regard to That Night of the Lord, which is “a night to be much **observed**.”⁷ It means to protect, hedge about, attend to, take heed of, and be circumspect about the Sabbath time. **Keeping** Sabbath time means to earnestly protect it, hedge it about, and attend to it. It is a time of **no work**—to cease from those things that are not in keeping with “no work.” Why? Because GOD ceases from all His work to spend that time with His people so that both are refreshed. Instead of working, it is meant to be a **rest** and a **refreshing**—literally, *naphash* means “to be breathed upon.” We keep it **holy** (pure) by striving to be like God is—holy, just as God is holy⁸. God’s holiness is the perfection of love, righteousness, justice, truth, mercy, and faithfulness. The Sabbath is **sanctified** by respecting and revering the time we spend in the presence of God. The Sabbath is a time to keep (guard, protect), make holy, sanctify, not work, rest, be refreshed—“breathed upon” by God—and remember. But what exactly are we to **remember**?

DEUTERONOMY 5:15 And **remember that thou wast a servant [bondslave] in the land of Egypt, and that the LORD thy God brought thee out thence through a mighty hand and by a stretched out arm: therefore the LORD thy God commanded thee to keep the sabbath day.**

⁷ Exod. 12:42.

⁸ 1 Pet. 1:15.

What does slavery have to do with the Sabbath? When a person is saved from death, that person owes their future existence to the rescuer simply because life would have ceased without the intervention. God rescues us from death so the remainder of our lives belongs to Him. The Sabbath is a remembrance that we owe Him our lives. The Sabbath also is something special to those whom God is saving:

EXODUS 31:13, 16-17 Speak thou also unto the children of Israel, saying, Verily **my Sabbaths ye shall keep: for it is a sign [signal, evidence] between me and you** throughout your generations; that ye may know that I *am* the LORD that doth sanctify you. ... 16 Wherefore the children of Israel shall keep the Sabbath, to observe the Sabbath throughout their generations, **for a perpetual covenant.** 17 **It is a sign between me and the children of Israel for ever:** for *in* six days the LORD made heaven and earth, and on the seventh day he rested, and was refreshed.

The Sabbath is a commandment but it is more than a period of time. The Sabbath is a sign or evidence of those in covenant with God. A covenant consists of promises made between parties. We promise to obey God's Law, including the Sabbath, and He promises to save us from death. The Sabbath time is evidence to God that we understand our lives will end in death without His intervention. We owe our existence to Him. Refusing to keep the Sabbath rejects a covenant with God. The Sabbath time is a sign or evidence of a **covenant relationship** with God wherein we promise to become as He is—as reflected in the other nine commandments. The Passover and other holydays portray the plan of God to redeem mankind from death but that plan has an ending. The Sabbath is about our relationship with God, which will be eternal.

The seventh day Sabbath is one day—24 hours—that God created by replacing work with rest. God gave mankind dominion over the first six days of time but He retained jurisdiction over the seventh. He intended it to be a time for us to keep (guard, protect), make holy, sanctify, not work, rest, be refreshed as God “breathes upon” us, and remember our salvation. The Sabbath is a sign of a covenant relationship with God for a life that will continue throughout all TIME. The seventh day of the week was the conclusion of the physical creation but it also reflects the greatest creation—God's eternal children. The Sabbath is a covenant reminder and the rest and refreshing is a type of the covenant fulfillment that is coming. The seventh day is a taste of a never-ending life of love with God the Father, Jesus Christ, the heavenly angels, and each other.

May God's grace and peace be upon you!

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SABBATH THOUGHT 2023-04-29—KINSMAN & REDEEMER

May God bless you on His Sabbath day!

The Bible is replete with ancient customs, many of which are unfamiliar to us today. Even though they can generally be understood from context, customs also affect the language. One particular example is the meaning behind *kinsman*. In English, it strictly means a blood relation. However, in ancient times it was much more than just a blood relative. Lineage was important to every family so they knew their genealogies back to the flood and beyond. Some are even recorded in the Bible. This is quite a contrast to today where few of us know our genealogy beyond a few generations.

One of the reasons blood lines were so important was because there was a legal heritage associated within a family. This was especially important when it came to property. Land was important; it was the means to raise crops and herds, a place to build homes, and a source of water and minerals. Land was required to survive. One's inheritance also defined nationality, profession or occupation, and many times determined positions of authority within a community or nation.

One of the most important roles of a kinsman within a family was the role as family protector or avenger. The Hebrew word *ga'al* is translated *kinsman* but it literally means *kinsman redeemer*. A kinsman redeemer was expected to help a relative who was unable to repay his debts (Lev. 25:25), to restore a relative who had been sold into servitude (Lev. 25:47-52), or to avenge the murder of a family member (Num. 35:19, 21, 25, 27; Deut. 19:5-6, 12).

Another responsibility of a kinsman redeemer was to ensure the continuation of the family lineage and inheritance. When a man died without children, ancient Israelite custom (and law) required a close relative to buy back any property that was sold and have children with the widow so that the dead man's lineage and heritage would continue. The book of Ruth tells the story of one such kinsman redeemer. The following from Adam Clarke's Commentary summarizes the story (*emphasis mine*):

CHAPTER 1: Elimelech, his wife Naomi, and their two sons, Mahlon and Chilion, flee from a famine in the land of Israel, and go to sojourn in Moab. Here his two sons marry; and, in the space of ten years, both they and their father die. Naomi returns to her own country [*Israel*], accompanied by her daughters-in-law Orpah and Ruth. She endeavors to persuade them to return to their own people and, although Orpah returns, Ruth follows her mother-in-law. They arrive at Bethlehem in the time of the barley harvest.

CHAPTER 2: There, Ruth goes to glean in the field of Boaz according to the law. Boaz sees her, and inquires who she is. He speaks kindly to her and gives her permission to follow his reapers, who have orders to treat her well. She returns in the evening to Naomi and tells her all that Boaz did for her.

CHAPTER 3: Naomi's advice to Ruth invokes **the kinsman's duty to marry his dead brother's wife to continue his inheritance**. Ruth acts according to her mother-in-law's direction, and is kindly received by Boaz who promises to marry her should her nearer kinsman refuse. He gives her six measures of barley, and sends her away privately to her mother-in-law.

CHAPTER 4: The next day Boaz gathers a council of the elders at the city gates, states the case, and proposes to the nearest kinsman *[that]* he redeem the inheritance of Elimelech and take Ruth to wife. The kinsman refuses, and relinquishes his right to Boaz. Boaz redeems the inheritance in the presence of the elders and the people who witness the contract and pray for God's blessing upon the marriage.

The story of Ruth is one of an Israelite family that was forced to abandoned their land and people. They suffered poverty and death for their choices but in the end, a few survivors returned to Israel. Those that returned included Ruth, a Moabitess who sought the God of Israel through her relationship to her mother-in-law Naomi. For her faithfulness, Ruth received her dead husband's land and was redeemed through marriage to Boaz. The biblical record of the binding agreement that Boaz entered into is recorded in Ruth 4:3-10. Notice the intense focus on redemption and inheritance:

RUTH 4:3-10 And he *[Boaz]* said unto the **kinsman**, Naomi, that is come again out of the country of Moab, selleth a parcel of land, which *was* our brother Elimelech's: 4 And I thought to advertise thee, saying, Buy *it* before the inhabitants, and before the elders of my people. If thou wilt **redeem it**, **redeem it**: but if thou wilt not **redeem it**, *then* tell me, that I may know: for *there is none* to **redeem it** beside thee; and I *am* after thee. And he said, I will **redeem it**. 5 Then said Boaz, What day thou buyest the field of the hand of Naomi, thou must buy *it* also of Ruth the Moabitess, the wife of the dead, **to raise up the name of the dead upon his inheritance**. 6 And the **kinsman** said, I cannot **redeem it** for myself, lest I mar mine own **inheritance**: **redeem** thou my right to thyself; for I cannot **redeem it**. 7 Now this *was the manner* in former time in Israel concerning **redeeming** and concerning changing, for to confirm all things; a man plucked off his shoe, and gave *it* to his neighbour: and this *was* a testimony in Israel. 8 Therefore the kinsman said unto Boaz, Buy *it* for thee. So he drew off his shoe. 9 And Boaz said unto the elders, and *unto* all the people, Ye *are* witnesses this day, that **I have bought all** that *was* Elimelech's, and all that *was* Chilion's and Mahlon's, of the hand of Naomi. 10 Moreover Ruth the Moabitess, the wife of Mahlon, have **I purchased to be my wife, to raise up the name of the dead upon his inheritance**, that the name of the dead be not cut off from among his brethren, and from the gate of his place: ye *are* witnesses this day.

But the culture of kinsman redeemer is not limited to the OT. After the birth of John the Baptist, his father Zacharias prophesied this of Jesus Christ:

LUKE 1:68-69, 71 "Blessed be *the* Lord, the God of Israel, because **He has visited and has worked redemption for His people**, 69 And has raised up a horn of **salvation [redemption]** for us **in the house [literally, family (heritage)]**

of His servant David; ... 71 **Salvation [redemption] from our enemies** and from *the hand of all those who hate us*"

Even though she was a Moabitess, Ruth's heritage by her marriage to Naomi's son Mahlon and her subsequent marriage to Boaz gave her full status as an Israelite. Her story is a reflection of the redemption of mankind and our heritage. Through His sacrifice, Jesus Christ became our Kinsman Redeemer.

The concept of a kinsman redeemer is a foundation of eternal salvation throughout the Bible because of sin. How does sin play into it? Paul said, "I am carnal, having been sold *as a bondservant* under sin." (Rom. 7:14). Why does he talk about being sold as a bondservant because of sin? Notice the law of trespasses:

NUMBERS 5:6-7 Speak unto the children of Israel, When a man or woman shall **commit any sin** that men commit, to do **a trespass against the LORD**, and that person be guilty; 7 Then they shall confess their sin which they have done: and **he shall recompense his trespass with the principal thereof, and add unto it the fifth part thereof, and give it unto him against whom he hath trespassed.**

There is a price for sin that has to be paid. All sin is against God¹ and, when we sin, we owe God the "principal" value against the sin **plus twenty percent**. The principal value for every sin is the death of the sinner² by the shedding of blood³. But that is only the 100% principle amount. Every sinner still owes an additional twenty percent on top of that! No one has enough to pay for their sins because we cannot give more than 100% of our lives. There will always be the additional 20% "interest" owed; therefore, every sinner becomes a debtor without the means to repay. Whenever someone owed a debt that could not be repaid, they could be sold as a bondservant⁴:

MATTHEW 18:23-25 Therefore, the kingdom of heaven is compared to a man, a *certain* king, who would take account with his servants. 24 And after he began to reckon, there was brought to him one debtor who owed *him* ten thousand talents. 25 But **since he did not have anything to pay, his lord commanded him to be sold**, and his wife and children, and all that he had, and payment to be made.

So, when we sin we are "sold *as a bondservant* under sin" because we can never repay the 20% interest. After the sin of Adam, God had to take on the role of kinsman redeemer because only He could pay the full penalty for sin—the 120% owed by sinners! By His sacrifice, Jesus Christ claimed the right of Kinsman Redeemer by paying our debt:

COLOSSIANS 2:14 **He [Jesus Christ] has blotted out the note of debt against us** *with the decrees of our sins*, which was contrary to us; and He has taken it away, having nailed it to the cross.

¹ Ps. 51:4.

² Rom. 6:23.

³ Heb. 9:22.

⁴ Also Lev. 25:39.

After paying our debts, Jesus Christ also “purchased⁵” the right of marriage because He is our Kinsman Redeemer, just like Boaz who married Ruth:

ISAIAH 54:1, 4-5, 8 Sing, O barren, thou *that* didst not bear; break forth into singing, and cry aloud, thou *that* didst not travail with child: for more *are* the children of the desolate than the children of the married wife, saith the LORD. ... 4 Fear not; for thou shalt not be ashamed: neither be thou confounded; for thou shalt not be put to shame: for thou shalt forget the shame of thy youth, and shalt **not remember the reproach of thy widowhood** any more. 5 For thy Maker *is* **thine husband; the LORD of hosts *is* his name; and thy Redeemer** the Holy One of Israel; The God of the whole earth shall he be called. ... 8 ... with everlasting kindness will I have mercy on thee, saith **the LORD thy Redeemer**.

REVELATION 14:3-4; 19:7-9 ... And no one was able to learn the song except the hundred *and* forty-four thousand, **who were redeemed** from the earth. 4 These are the ones who were not defiled with women, for they are virgins; they are the ones who follow the Lamb wherever He goes. **They were purchased** from among men **as first fruits to God and to the Lamb**; ... 19:7 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.”

And it will be by marriage to Jesus Christ that our inheritance is restored that was lost through Adam:

REVELATION 21:7 The one who overcomes **shall inherit all things**; and I will be his God, and he shall be My son.

God the Father and Jesus Christ together are our Kinsman Redeemer who have redeemed us from a debt that cannot be repaid and for that, God the Father purchased His Son a Bride and restores our inheritance!⁶

REVELATION 5:9 And they [*the saints*] sang a new song, saying, “... **You were slain, and did redeem us to God by Your own blood**, out of every tribe and language and people and nation.

May God’s grace and peace be upon you!

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⁵ Ruth 4:10.

⁶ Also Job 19:25-26; Ps. 19:14; 69:18; 72:14; 74:2; 77:15; 78:35 (“**the Most High God** their Redeemer”); 103:4; 106:10; 107:2; 119:154; Gal. 3:13; Titus 2:14; 1 Pet. 1:18; et al.

SABBATH THOUGHT 2023-05-06—CALLED OUT ONES

May God bless you on His Sabbath day!

I recently wrote about the Greek word *ekklesia*¹, which is a compound of two Greek words: *ek* (*out*) and *kaleo* (*called*). It is almost universally (but incorrectly) translated *church* (inferring a building or organization) in English bibles. But putting that aside, I think the word itself is one of the most unique and amazing words in all of the Word of God. Notice the first occurrence found in Matthew and used by Jesus Christ:

MATTHEW 16:18 And I say also to you, that you are Peter; but upon this Rock I will **build My church [ekklesia = called out ones]**, and *the* gates of the grave shall not prevail against it.

This is a very meaningful scripture for several reasons. First of all, Jesus said God's children are "**My** Called Out Ones." We belong to Jesus Christ who said of all God's children, "I **kept** them [*the disciples*] in Your name. I **protected** those whom You [*God the Father*] have given Me, and not one of them has perished." (John 17:12). God the Father gave Jesus Christ the responsibility for keeping and protecting His children. We belong to Jesus Christ because He was the ransom for our lives².

Something else to consider in this verse. The last word *it*, which points back to *ekklesia*, is translated from the Greek common pronoun *auto*. However, *ekklesia* refers to living human beings—God's **children**—so the Greek word *auto* should not be translated *it*, but *them*. This gives an entirely different emphasis in the last phrase, "and *the* gates of the grave shall not prevail against **[them]**," and now Jesus no longer sounds like He is referring to a church building or human organization but to living, breathing people AND He is their **protector**. Even so, *them* is still not quite correct.

All pronouns must match the gender of the referenced noun in both Greek and English. *Ekklesia* is feminine; therefore, *auto* should not be translated *it* or *them* but instead should be *her*: "and *the* gates of the grave shall not prevail against **[her]**." God's people are the feminine *ekklesia*—the Called Out Ones—because SHE is to be the **bride** of His Son³. *Bride* is always feminine and it is no coincidence that *ekklesia* is not neuter or masculine since it refers to the bride of Christ!

Finally, take a look at the word *build*. It is from the Greek verb *oikodomeo*, a compound of *oikos* (meaning dwelling, family, or household) and *doma* (meaning edifice or roof). This compound word literally describes a covering (*doma*) over a family or household (*oikos*). The phrase "**build My church**" implies the construction of a physical building

¹ Sabbath Thought 2023-02-25 – Ekklesia of God (<https://sabbathreflections.org/2023-02-25-ekklesia-of-god/>).

² Matt. 20:28.

³ Rev. 21:9; et al.

but *oikodomeo* means to *build up* or *edify* when referring to the *ekklesia*. This is evident in the other two scriptures that talk about *oikodomeo* in reference to the *ekklesia*. They both emphasize edification, not constructing a building:

ACTS 9:31 Then the **churches [ekklesia]** throughout the whole of Judea and Galilee and Samaria had peace indeed. *And they [the ekklesia] increased, being **edified [oikodomeo]** and walking in the fear of the Lord and in the comfort of the Holy Spirit.*

1 CORINTHIANS 14:4 The one who speaks in an *unknown* language is edifying *only* himself; but the one who prophesies is **edifying [oikodomeo] the church [ekklesia]**.

The beauty of the phrase “upon this Rock I will build-up/edify My Called Out Ones” is unmistakable. Along with the literal meaning of the Greek, it brings to mind Christ dwelling in His people (household of God⁴), protecting God’s children (Rock and Fortress⁵), atoning/covering us with His sacrificial blood (roof or edifice⁶), and preparing (edifying or building up) the Called Out Ones. The latter brings to mind the verse in Revelation 21:2 where the saints are “**prepared** as a **bride** adorned for her husband.” So, Jesus Christ dwells in His Called Out Ones⁷ and is the Rock that covers and protects them. He is edifying, building up, and preparing His Bride. When we put all of this together, the verse now reads:

MATTHEW 16:18 And I say also to you, that you are Peter; but upon this Rock I will **edify, build up, and prepare** My **[Called Out Ones]**, and *the gates of the grave shall not prevail against [her]*.

Does this not give a much deeper meaning and appreciation of our Lord and Savior’s role in our lives? It emphasizes Jesus Christ dwells in God’s children to edify and build us up, cover and protect us, and prepare His Bride in the fullness of His love for us.

However, none of this addresses the fact that *ekklesia* is an unusual word by itself. “Called Out Ones” is not a name or title anyone would use to describe a group of people in a normal conversation. I wonder if it even existed prior to Jesus using it in Matthew 16:18. And while it is a noun, it also infers a past action—a calling out from some place. If you think about it, many (if not all) of God’s people mentioned in the Bible have been called out from some place in this world. The list of names includes Noah, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Elijah, Jeremiah, the ancient Israelites, and many others. They all left someplace when called by God. The same is true for us even though most of us did not physically go anywhere. Satan is still the ruler of the earth, even though he has been

⁴ Eph. 2:19.

⁵ Ps. 18:2.

⁶ Atonement in Hebrew (*kaphar*) means to cover.

⁷ Gal. 2:20; 1 Cor. 2:16; Phil 2:5.

judged⁸ and rejected⁹ and we are awaiting the return of the King who now wears the crown¹⁰. The *ekklesia*, in most cases, are not called out of a place but to come out of Satan's world:

JOHN 15:19 If you were of the world, the world would love its own. However, because you are not of the world, but **I have personally chosen you out of the world**, the world hates you for this.

JOHN 17:6 I [*Jesus Christ*] have manifested Your name [*God the Father's*] to the men whom **You have given Me out of the world**. They were Yours, and You have given them to Me, and they have kept Your Word.

This world is an accumulation of Satan's wickedness. There is no love in him. If words could describe his odious and depraved evil ways, they might include hate, envy, jealousy, lust, greed, guile, hypocrisy, etc. He is so wicked that it is difficult to describe him by a single word, but one might be *malice*¹¹. A friend once pointed out the depths of the terrible wickedness behind the meaning of *malice*—it literally means a DESIRE OR LUST TO DO EVIL. Malice is spite, hatred, bitterness, enmity, cruelty, nastiness, venom, viciousness, etc.—it is absolute wickedness. It produces evil works that are ungodly, unholy, profane, blasphemous, atrocious, abominable, diabolical, fiendish, barbarous, horrible, heinous, depraved, etc. Because this is Satan's world, the world is filled with malice. It is no way of life for the Called Out Ones because agape love cannot coexist with malice, so we must come out of this world.

But if we leave one place we logically must *go* somewhere else. We are called out of the ways of this world to put on God's way of life! Obviously, we are not there yet, but the end of our journey OUT of this world will be INTO God's Kingdom. At baptism, we relinquished and rejected our citizenship under Satan and pledged an oath to God but we have not yet reached our destination. Paul said:

EPHESIANS 2:19 So then, you are no longer aliens and foreigners; but **you are fellow citizens [Gk. *sumpolites*]** with the saints, and **are of the household [Gk. *oikeios*] of God [in heaven]**.

PHILIPPIANS 3:20 For **our citizenship [Gk. *politeuma*] is in heaven**; from whence also we look for the Saviour, the Lord Jesus Christ:

(Note that *household* in Ephesians 2:19 is the Greek word *oikeios*, a form of *oiko* in *oikodomeo* used in Matthew 16:18.) This is a spiritual and mental journey. We are, as Paul said when describing the people of God who came before us:

⁸ John 16:10.

⁹ John 12:31.

¹⁰ 1 Tim. 6:15; Rev. 17:14; 19:16.

¹¹ Gk. *kakia* (G2549)—Matt. 6:34; Acts 8:22; Rom. 1:29; 1 Cor. 5:8; 14:20; Eph. 4:31; Col. 3:8; Titus 3:3; Jas. 1:21; 1 Pet 2:1, 16.

HEBREWS 11:13 All these [*Abel, Enoch, Abraham, Sarah, Isaac, Jacob, etc.*] died in faith, not having received the promises, but having seen them from afar, and having been persuaded of *them*, and having embraced *them*, and having confessed that they were **strangers and sojourners** [*KJV = pilgrims*] on the earth.

The literal meaning for the Greek word behind *sojourner* is “resident alien.” Our journey is not a physical one, so we still must continue in this physical life but as spiritual resident aliens—we must live in this physical world but we are no longer citizens of it and the ways of Satan.

I apologize for all the Greek words, but I wanted to emphasize the underlying meaning and beauty of these scriptures that is not apparent in English. We are the Called Out Ones by God our Father¹². To be a part of the Called Out Ones is the greatest offering given to flesh and blood. Having the covering of Christ’s blood for our sins is humbling. We can stake our lives on our protector, Jesus Christ, who is our Rock and Fortress. To be established in the Household of God is eternal life. Jesus Christ is preparing us to be His Bride, which is a blessing above anything this world could offer. No angel can attain unto that nor will they ever be of the Bride of Jesus Christ.

The Day of Trumpets, Atonement, and Feast of Tabernacles picture events at the end of this age and the great harvest of mankind. But prior to these days is the return of Jesus Christ when the Called Out Ones receive eternal life and are presented before God the Father who gives each a new name¹³. Passover, the Feast of Unleavened Bread, and Pentecost are the holydays that pertain directly to the *ekklesia*. Passover is the new covenant established by the sacrifice of Jesus Christ, the Feast of Unleavened Bread pictures being **called out** of this world, and Pentecost is early harvest of the firstfruits—the Called Out Ones. Pentecost is when the work in the Called Out Ones is completed. It is the completion of our journey out of this world and into the Kingdom of God. In that day, we will be made pillars in the temple that **is** God the Father and Jesus Christ¹⁴!

May God’s grace and peace be upon you!

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¹² John 6:44.

¹³ Rev. 2:17; 3:5, 12; 14:1.

¹⁴ Rev. 21:22.

SABBATH THOUGHT 2023-05-13—THE END OF THE LAW

May God bless you on His Sabbath day!

In the thirteenth chapter of Paul's first epistle to the Corinthians we find some of the most beautiful words ever written about agape love. It is the one thing not naturally possessed by humans that, in God's eyes, changes us from nothing into His children:

1 CORINTHIANS 13:2-3 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**. 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**.

The Greek word for *all* means everything in existence. *Nothing* is from a strong Greek negative and has the sense of nonexistence. Paul says having all the knowledge of God, having all faith that can move mountains, giving all to the poor¹, or dying for God is nothingness if agape love is not in us.

Paul concludes by saying, “And now, these three **remain**: faith, hope *and [agape] love*; but the greatest of these *is [agape] love*.” (1 Cor. 13:13). Paul said that only faith, hope, and agape love will “remain” and of those three things, agape love is the greatest. The Greek word for *remain* means to abide, continue, or endure in the sense of existing forever. What does it mean that they remain forever? Other things that Paul mentioned will not remain forever including prophecy, multiple languages, and knowledge (Gk. *gnosis*). In fact, Paul says they will cease to exist². But would that include the Law of God—will it cease or will it remain forever? Notice what Jesus said:

MATTHEW 5:18 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 [Gk. *ginomai* = come to pass]**.

Jesus seems to indicate that the Law of God will be around forever except that we KNOW that the heavens and earth WILL pass away:

ISAIAH 51:6 Lift up your eyes to the heavens, and look upon the earth beneath: for **the heavens shall vanish away like smoke, and the earth shall wax old like a garment, and they that dwell therein shall die** in like manner: ...

Isaiah prophesies that the heavens and earth of this age WILL vanish and he adds that all flesh and blood upon the earth at that time will also perish. When does this occur?

¹ Matt. 19:21.

² 1 Cor. 13:8.

REVELATION 21:1, 5-6 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. ... 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.” 6 And He said to me, “**It is done [Gk. ginomai = come to pass]**. I am Alpha and Omega, the Beginning and the End. ...

AFTER the first heaven and first earth pass away and AFTER making “**all** things **new**” does God proclaim that all things are completed (the Greek word for *done* is the same as *fulfilled* in Matthew 5:18.) Because the heavens and earth WILL “pass away,” is it possible that the Law WILL cease as Jesus Christ seemed to imply in Matthew 5:18? Will there be **no** Law in the Kingdom of God for all eternity after the new heavens and new earth and new Jerusalem come into being? Is that believable? That is an astounding thought. But to answer that question, we need to understand what happens at the resurrection and the true purpose of the Law.

Jesus said, “... the third day I shall be **perfected [Gk. teleios = complete]**” (Luke 13:32), which refers to the third day after His crucifixion when He was resurrected. What does it mean to be perfected? The use of *perfected* is somewhat misleading because the Greek means *complete* or *finish*. Obviously, flesh and blood is not the final stage of life, even for Jesus Christ when He was a man. Perfection and completion can only occur when flesh becomes spirit. While this was said of Himself, we know that it also applies to all flesh because we, too, will be made “perfect” and *completed*:

1 CORINTHIANS 13:9-12 For we know in part, and we prophesy in part; 10 But **when that which is perfect [Gk. teleios = complete] 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**.

The word *perfect* is the same Greek word used in Luke 13:32 about Christ’s resurrection. With the resurrection from flesh to spirit is a perfection and completion! Notice also these Scriptures:

MATTHEW 5:48 Therefore, **you shall be perfect [Gk. teleios = complete], even as your Father Who is in heaven is perfect**.”

EPHESIANS 4:13 Until we all come into the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, unto **a perfect [Gk. teleios = complete] man, unto the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ**;

But what exactly is perfection and completeness?

COLOSSIANS 3:14 And above all these things **put on [agape] love, which is the bond of perfection [Gk. teleiotes = completeness]**.

Being changed to spirit is the completion of a fleshly existence—it is the perfection of us. Agape love, is the BOND of that perfection; it is what binds us together as ONE with God the Father and Jesus Christ:

JOHN 17:23 **I in them, and You in Me, that they may be perfected [Gk. teleioo = to complete] into one**; and that the world may know that You did send Me, and have loved them as You have loved Me.

TO BE FINISHED OR COMPLETE MEANS BEING RESURRECTED TO SPIRIT AND BEING BONDED AS ONE WITH GOD THE FATHER AND JESUS CHRIST THROUGH PERFECT AGAPE LOVE!

Notice:

1 JOHN 2:5 On the other hand, *if* anyone is keeping His Word, truly in this one **the love of God is being perfected [Gk. teleioo = to complete]**. By this *means* we know that we are in Him.

1 JOHN 4:12 No one has seen God at any time. Yet, if we love one another, God dwells in us, and **His [God the Father's] own love is perfected [Gk. teleioo = to complete]** in us.

This is why Paul said in 1 Corinthians 13:13 that the greatest of ALL things that will “remain” FOREVER is agape love! But what about the the Law of God given to mankind, commonly called the Law and the prophets³ in the Bible? Will it “remain” along with agape love when all things are proclaimed by God to be “done”? To answer that question, begin by noticing the limitations of the Law of God:

HEBREWS 7:19 Because **the law brought nothing to perfection [Gk. teleioo = to complete]**; rather, *perfection* is brought about by a superior hope, through which we draw near to God.

Do you grasp the importance of that amazing statement? The Law of God does NOT bring us to perfection. Then WHY the Law?

ROMANS 3:20 Therefore, by works of law there shall no flesh be justified before Him; for **through the law is the knowledge of sin**.

GALATIANS 3:19 **Why then the law? It was placed alongside the promises for the purpose of defining transgressions, until the Seed should come** to whom *the* promise was made, having been ordained through angels in the hand of a mediator.

³ Matt. 5:17.

Paul also said that he “had **not known sin, except through the law.**” (Rom. 7:7). The Law of God REVEALS sin; in other words, we would not know what sin IS without the Law. But there is another purpose for the Law:

1 TIMOTHY 1:5 Now **the purpose of the commandment is [agape] love** out of a pure heart, and a good conscience, and genuine faith;

The Law exists so that we know what sin is (and be forgiven by God through the sacrifice of Jesus Christ). But the opposite is also true: we would not KNOW **agape love** unless we also know the Law (and have the Holy Spirit). Therefore, the Law does two things: it teaches what sin is and obedience to it produces agape love.

What is perfection and completeness? Those who are perfected in agape love of God the Father. So, when that perfection happens at the final resurrection, will there be any need for the Law—the “thou shall nots”? Will those perfected and completed in agape love—those who ARE agape love—ever be able to steal, lie, or covet? Can SIN of any kind exist when agape love is perfected and completed in us? NO!

1 CORINTHIANS 15:51-53 Behold, I show you a mystery: we shall not all fall asleep, but we shall all be changed [*resurrected to spirit eternal life*], 52 In an instant, in *the* twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet; for *the* trumpet shall sound, and the dead **shall be raised incorruptible, and we shall be changed.** 53 **For this corruptible must put on incorruptibility, and this mortal must put on immortality.**

Incorruptible in the Greek means “unending and immutable pureness.” In simple terms, if all flesh was pure and righteous before God, there would be NO need for the Law!
Notice:

1 TIMOTHY 1:9-10 Understanding this: that **law is not enacted for a righteous man, but for the lawless and disobedient,** for *the* ungodly and sinful, for *the* unholy and profane, for slayers of fathers and slayers of mothers, for murderers, 10 For fornicators, for homosexuals, for kidnappers, for liars, for perjurers, and **for any other thing that is opposed to sound doctrine;**

SINLESSNESS is PERFECTION and COMPLETION of the righteousness of God in us! That is PERFECTION and COMPLETION of God’s agape love in us! When the end of all things comes, there will be no more need for a Law to show us sin because there will be no more sin. At the final resurrection and after all things have come to pass, the Law and the prophets will cease and we will be complete! FOREVER one with God the Father and Jesus Christ in the bond of perfect agape love!

May God’s grace and peace be upon you!

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SABBATH THOUGHT 2023-05-20—SIGN OF CHRIST’S BIRTH (& DEATH)

May God bless you on His Sabbath day!

Over 2,000 years ago, around the time that people were keeping the latter holydays (Trumpets, Atonement, and Feast of Tabernacles), a child was born in Bethlehem. He was the very son of the Most High God! His birth was announced by the heavenly angels because this child was born to be the prophesied Savior of mankind. That proclamation was followed by great rejoicing in the heavens that was heard and witnessed by men:

LUKE 2:8-11 Now *there* were shepherds in the same country, who were dwelling in the fields and keeping watch over their flock by night; 9 And suddenly an angel of *the* Lord stood by them, and *the* glory of *the* Lord shined round about them; and they were seized *with* great fear. 10 But the angel said to them, “Do not be afraid; for behold, **I am announcing to you glad tidings of great joy**, which shall be to all people; 11 For today, in *the* city of David, a Savior was born to you, Who is Christ *the* Lord.

But back up and look at Luke’s record of the events leading up to Christ’s birth:

LUKE 2:4-7 And Joseph also went up from Galilee, out of *the* city of Nazareth, into Judea, to *the* city of David which is called Bethlehem, because he was from *the* house and lineage of David 5 To register himself along with Mary, who was betrothed to him as wife, *and* was great with child. 6 And it came to pass *that* during the *time* they were there, the days were fulfilled for her to give birth. 7 And she gave birth to her son, the firstborn, and wrapped Him in **swaddling clothes, and laid Him in a manger**, because there was no place for them in the inn.

Verse 7 is interesting because the swaddling clothes and the manger were mentioned by the angel who spoke to the shepherds:

LUKE 2:12 Now **this is the sign for you: you shall find a babe wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger**. 13 And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of *the* heavenly host praising God, and saying, 14 “Glory to God in *the* highest, and peace on earth among men *of* goodwill.”

Swaddle is an English word simply meaning to wrap with cloth. Swaddling cloths were commonly used in ancient times to wrap newborn infants. They were also used when someone died and swaddling cloths were especially common during long journeys, which were sometimes quite perilous. There are historical references of travelers who kept strips of cloth wrapped around their midsection under their robes so that if they died during the journey their body could be protected until they were buried. The most obvious examples of

swaddling cloths being used for the dead are Lazarus and Jesus¹. Another mention is found in the apocryphal book of Wisdom of Solomon, a Jewish work written in Greek and most likely composed in Alexandria, Egypt:

WISDOM OF SOLOMON 7:4-6 **In swaddling clothes** and with constant care I [Solomon] was nurtured. 5 For **no king has any different origin or birth; 6 one is the entry into life for all, and in one same way they leave it.**

The shepherds were also told that they would find the infant in a manger. Mangers are feeding troughs for animals and the newborn Jesus was kept in one. These are not the small, flimsy, wooden boxes as seen at many Christmas displays. They were cut from stone and the inside was about 2 feet long, as seen in the picture below.



But why was there a feeding trough in or around Bethlehem? The shepherds were out in the fields with the sheep where they could graze since grasses still grew at that time of year. But the manger that Mary used was not out in the fields—it was in the village of Bethlehem. Mangers were used when the animals required food and shelter during the winter so they were not out in the fields for the obvious reason that sheep in the fields could graze. But mangers existed for another reason.

Bethlehem is a small village located about six miles south-southwest of the Temple mount. Christ's birth was around the Feast of Tabernacles, a time when thousands of people would gather to Jerusalem from Israel and many other countries as commanded by God. Bethlehem was small, estimated to be only four square miles, with perhaps 2,000 to 3,000 residents. Jerusalem was around 100 times in size and population. Even so, the numbers of people who gathered for these holydays would have exceeded the means for all of them to stay in Jerusalem to be near the temple. As a result, they would seek inns or other places to stay in the nearby villages.

¹ John 11:44; 20:5-7.

Accompanying the visitors were the animals that they brought for holyday sacrifices, so they not only needed places to stay for themselves but also for their animals. Mangers provided the solution—they were not only used by locals for their animals during the winter but they were also used during the holyday seasons by the travelers as a way to feed their animals brought for the sacrifices.

People not only gathered in Jerusalem during the Feast of Tabernacles but also during the Passover and Feast of Unleavened Bread. During the Passover, mangers served an additional function. Each lamb had to be without blemish² so, after the lambs were chosen on Nissan/Abib 10³, they were washed and then wrapped in strips of cloth to prevent them from getting dirty or injured before the Passover sacrifice. As an additional precaution, many of these small lambs were kept in the feeding troughs.

Returning to the story of Jesus' birth, read what the shepherds did immediately after hearing the sweet sounds of the multitude of voices in that angelic choir:

LUKE 2:15-17 And it came to pass, as the angels were departing from them into heaven, that the shepherds said to one another, "Let us go now as far as Bethlehem, and let us see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us." 16 And they made haste, *and* came **and found** both Mary and Joseph, and **the babe lying in the manger**. 17 Now **after seeing Him, they made known everywhere the proclamation** that they had been told concerning this little child.

The angel said that the SIGN of the Savior was an infant wrapped in *swaddling clothes* and lying in a *manger*. When the shepherds arrived, they saw exactly what the angel described. The sight so convinced them that they left and everywhere proclaimed that they had seen the newborn prophesied Savior! Why would this be such a significant sight and why was THE sign that of a baby wrapped in cloth and lying in a manger?

In those days, most newborn infants were wrapped in swaddling clothes after birth so this could not have stood out as a sign. In fact, verse 16 does not even mention the swaddling clothes—only the manger. So what convinced these shepherds they had found the Savior? When they saw the infant lying in a feeding trough—a MANGER! That was obviously unusual and likely the most convincing evidence. Surely the significance of that sight was not lost on them: the fact that Jesus Christ was **wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a MANGER** was the picture of a Passover lamb! What the shepherds witnessed was Jesus Christ, as an infant, lying before them as a Lamb CHOSEN by God and prepared as THE Passover sacrifice! Just like the lambs without blemish that were chosen for the Passover sacrifice, Jesus Christ was wrapped in a swaddling cloth and lying in the manger!

² Exod. 12:5.

³ Exod. 12:3.

This is not a modern observation, either. Notice the following from two 4th century writers⁴:

From Gregory Nazianzen in his Oration 29: “He was wrapped in swaddling clothes—but He took off the swathing bands of the grave by His rising again.”

From Cyril of Jerusalem in his Lecture 15 on the Book of Daniel: “We preach not one advent only of Christ, but a second also, far more glorious than the former ... For all things, for the most part, are twofold in our Lord Jesus Christ: a twofold generation; one, of God, before the ages; and one, of a Virgin, at the close of the ages: His descents twofold; one, the unobserved, like rain on a fleece ; and a second His open coming, which is to be. In His former advent, He was wrapped in swaddling clothes in the manger; in His second, He covers Himself with light as with a garment.”

Jesus Christ was chosen by God the Father to be the Passover Lamb⁵ sacrificed once for all, and even His nativity pictured His *death* for the life of the world!

May God’s grace and peace be upon you!

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⁴ <https://aleteia.org/2019/12/21/the-symbolism-of-swaddling-clothes-at-jesus-birth/>.

⁵ John 1:29; Acts 8:32; 1 Peter 1:19.

SABBATH THOUGHT 2023-05-27—HEAR WHAT THE SPIRIT SAYS

May God bless you on His Sabbath day!

Revelation 2 and 3 have been the source of much discussion over the years but most of the time the real meaning has been overlooked. It is a natural tendency to want to label or associate ourselves according to those God praises rather than those He condemns. But that is exactly what we do when we read these chapters. In all things, Christ is our judge and only He knows our hearts well enough to assign praise (or condemnation) to us.

Regardless, the real message in these two chapters gets lost when we focus on the city labels (Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamos, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia, and Laodicea). Notice what Jesus Christ said SEVEN times: “The one who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the [ekklesia = *called out ones*].”¹ Seven times He repeated this! And instead of saying it to believers in a particular city, it was to the *ekklesia*—ALL of the called out ones! I do not know of any other words that God repeats seven times.

Moreover, each time Jesus said this, it was accompanied by promises “... to the one who **overcomes** ...” that they:

- Will eat of the tree of life.
- Will not be hurt of the second death.
- Will eat of the hidden manna and receive a new name.
- Will have authority over the nations.
- Will be listed in the Book of Life.
- Will be a pillar in the temple of God and receive the name of God.
- Will sit with Jesus Christ on His throne.

However, these promises are also NOT the message of Revelation 2-3. In fact, do not these promises apply to ALL who overcome, regardless of residence? Or is it just the Ephesians who will eat of the tree of life or some of those in Sardis whose names will be in the Book of Life? No, these promises apply to *everyone*—the *ekklesia*. This is clear in Revelation 21:7, which says, “The one who **overcomes** shall **inherit all things**; and **I will be his God, and he shall be My son.**” To put things into perspective, even Sardis and Philadelphia were warned to OVERCOME! Overcome what? Overcome evil (*ponereos*)² and the world³! But then these things are obvious, aren’t they?

I believe the main message of Revelation 2-3 is the warning Jesus repeated seven times: “**The one who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says.**” The fact that Jesus said this to the *EKKLESIA* means that IT APPLIES TO EVERYONE! The question is, do we? Do we REALLY *hear* what the spirit says?? And what is it saying?

¹ Rev. 2:7, 11, 17, 29; 3:6, 13, 22.

² Rom. 12:21; 1 John 2:13-14; Rev. 12:10-11.

³ 1 John 4:4; 5:4-5.

Everyone today has the Word of God. Most even study it every day. But, who today “**has an ear**” to hear? From the biblical perspective, having an ear to hear means to *hear* what is said, *understand* what is said, and then *do* what is said. When I consider the ancient Israelites I fear that many of us have trouble hearing. In those days, only the Levites and priests had a copy of the Law of God. It was a hefty cost to commission a personal copy. However, God made provision for this because the Levites were commanded to read the Law *in its entirety* every seven years, during the year of the release of debts, when the people gathered for the Feast of Tabernacles:

DEUTERONOMY 31:9-13 And Moses wrote this law, and delivered it unto the priests the sons of Levi, which bare the ark of the covenant of the LORD, and unto all the elders of Israel. 10 And Moses commanded them, saying, **At the end of every seven years, in the solemnity of the year of release, in the Feast of Tabernacles,** 11 When all Israel is come to appear before the LORD thy God in the place which he shall choose, thou shalt **read** this law before all Israel **in their hearing**. 12 Gather the people together, men, and women, and children, and thy stranger that *is* within thy gates, that they may **hear**, and that they may **learn**, and fear the LORD your God, and observe **to do** all the words of this law: 13 And *that* their children, which have not known *any thing*, may **hear**, and **learn** to fear the LORD your God, as long as ye live in the land whither ye go over Jordan to possess it.

Can you imagine remembering most, if not all, of the Law of God simply from hearing it once every seven years? Any person who can do that truly “has an ear” to hear what was spoken. I doubt that the same can be said of many of us today. I have personally known one or two who claim to have memorized over 100 verses from the Bible but that is a miniscule number compared to the 23,145 in the OT and 7,957 in the NT for a total of 31,102. Even so, *hearing* the Word of God is just the beginning:

DEUTERONOMY 4:1-2 Now therefore **hearken**, O Israel, unto the statutes and unto the judgments, which **I teach you**, for **to do** *them*, that ye may live, and go in and possess the land which the LORD God of your fathers giveth you. 2 Ye shall not add unto the word which I command you, neither shall ye diminish *ought* from it, that **ye may keep** the commandments of the LORD your God which I command you.

DEUTERONOMY 5:1 And Moses called all Israel, and said unto them, **Hear**, O Israel, the statutes and judgments which **I speak in your ears** this day, that **ye may learn** them, **and keep, and do them**.

Hearing God’s Word means we *understand* through “teach[ing]” and “learn[ing]” so we can subsequently “do” and “keep” it. The problem for the ancient Israelites was they, like us today, had trouble *remembering* what they heard and the only solution is for God to write His Law in our hearts:

JEREMIAH 31:32-33 Not according to the covenant that I made with their fathers in the day *that* I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt; which **my covenant they brake**, although I was an husband unto them, saith the

LORD: 33 But this *shall be* the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel; After those days, saith the LORD, **I will put my law in their inward parts, and write it in their hearts;** and will be their God, and they shall be my people.

This brings us back to the powerful emphasis in Revelation 2-3. Those who have an ear are to “hear what the **Spirit says.**” What does this mean? Notice what happened to the disciples when Jesus finally opened their hearts and minds to Scripture:

LUKE 24:27, 32 And beginning with Moses, and from all the prophets, **He [Jesus Christ] interpreted to them the things concerning Himself in all the Scriptures.** ... 32 And they said to one another, **“Did not our hearts burn** within us as He was speaking to us on the road, **while He was opening the Scriptures to us?”**

Jesus Christ began with Moses and ended with the prophets. He explained the ENTIRE Word of God to the disciples and, as He did so, the disciples’ hearts *burned*. The Holy Spirit LIT UP the Word of God in their hearts. The Holy Spirit allowed them to *hear* and gave them *understanding*. Later, after receiving the Holy Spirit, the apostles went about *doing* what they heard and understood. The Holy Spirit speaks to all those who have an ear to hear and “shall **teach you** all things, and shall **bring to your remembrance** everything that I have told you” (John 14:26). The Holy Spirit lights a fire in our hearts by which we “purified [our] lives by obedience to the Truth unto unfeigned brotherly love **through the Spirit, love** [of God the Father, Jesus Christ, and] one another **fervently with a pure heart.**” (1 Peter 1:22). Do our hearts burn and light up the “glorious gospel of Christ”⁴ when we *hear* God’s Word? Hearing what the *Spirit* says is the only way to “prepare to meet thy God.”⁵

Gone are the days when the Levites read the Word of God to the nation every seven years. No one today is even capable of remembering most of what they hear, even if it was just the first five books of the Bible. Hearing, understanding, and doing the Word of God requires the Holy Spirit. This is why Jesus Christ emphasized HEARING the Spirit SEVEN TIMES. It is the only way to survive the famine that is coming:

AMOS 8:11 Behold, the days come,” says the Lord GOD, “that **I will send a famine in the land;** not a *famine* of bread nor a thirst for water, but **of hearing** the words of the LORD.

When you read this, do you assume that this is a message to the world? I believe this is directed more at God’s people. Read the full warning:

AMOS 8:3-14 Then the LORD said to me, **“The end has come to My people** Israel: I will not again pass by them any more. 3 And the songs of the temple shall be howlings in that day,” says the Lord GOD. “The dead bodies *shall be* many. In every place one shall throw *them* out with silence.” 4 Hear this, **you**

⁴ 2 Cor. 4:4.

⁵ Amos 4:12.

who trample upon the needy, even to make the poor of the land to fail, 5 Saying, “When will the new moon be gone so that we may sell grain? **And the Sabbath,** that we may set forth wheat, making the ephah small and the shekel great, and perverting the balances by deceit; 6 **That we may buy** the poor for silver and the needy for a pair of sandals; and sell the chaff of the wheat?” 7 The LORD has sworn by the Glory of Jacob, “Surely I will never forget any of their works. 8 Shall not the land tremble for this, and all who dwell in it mourn? And all of it shall rise up like a flood. And it shall overflow and sink like the Nile of Egypt. 9 And it shall be in that day,” says the Lord GOD, “I will cause the sun to go down at noon, and I will darken the earth in the light of day. 10 And **I will turn your feasts into mourning, and all your songs into weeping;** and I will bring up sackcloth on all loins, and baldness on every head. And I will make it like the mourning of an only son, and the end of it like a bitter day. 11 Behold, the days come,” says the Lord GOD, “that I will send a famine in the land; not a *famine* of bread nor a thirst for water, but of hearing the words of the LORD. 12 And they shall wander from sea to sea, and from the north even to the east; they shall run to and fro to seek the Word of the LORD, and shall not find *it*. 13 In that day the **beautiful virgins** and the young men shall faint for thirst. 14 Those who swear by the sin of Samaria and say, ‘As your God lives, O Dan,’ and, ‘As the way of Beersheba lives’—even they shall fall and never rise up again.”

Are we not spiritual Israel (v. 1)? Do the COGs not enrich themselves to build campuses filled with expensive buildings and fancy offices for a few and in doing so withhold helping needy brethren (v. 4)? Do we eagerly look forward to sundown on the Sabbath so we can buy and sell (vv. 5-6) or engage in “fun” activities? Do we dishonor the holydays such that God will turn them into days of “mourning” (v. 10)? Do the “virgins” in verse 13 refer to the foolish five in the parable of Matthew 25:1-13? Solomon warned:

PROVERBS 28:9 He that turneth away his ear from hearing the law, even his prayer shall be abomination.

Pentecost is the day when the Creator God gave this world His Law. It is the day when He wrote it with His Holy Spirit upon the hearts of a few who live in this age. It is the day when Jesus Christ returns to gather the early harvest of the children of God. Pentecost is a day of SPIRITUAL things. We know that the Law is **spirit**⁶, the mind and power of God is in us by the Holy **Spirit**, and true life is **spirit**⁷. Pentecost is truly the day to remind ourselves that “The one who has an ear, **let him hear what the Spirit says.**”

May God’s grace and peace be upon you!

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⁶ Rom. 7:14.

⁷ John 6:63; Rom. 8:2, 10; 2 Cor. 3:6; Gal. 6:8.

SABBATH THOUGHT 2023-06-03—WHY PROPHECY?

May God bless you on His Sabbath day!

The Ten Commandments are the cornerstone of the Law of God. They are so concise, uncomplicated, easy to remember, and comprehensive in their scope especially when contrasted with any other system of law. In fact, they are so much so that Exodus 34:28 calls them the “ten *dabar* [*Heb.* = *words*].” When originally written by God on the two tablets of stone, it seems that God wrote the Ten Commandments using ten simple words, not the text as found in Exodus 20 and Deuteronomy 5:

THE TEN COMMANDMENTS:

- I. Thou shalt have no other gods before Me.
- II. Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image, or any likeness of any thing ... Thou shalt not bow down thyself to them, nor serve them ...
- III. Thou shalt not take the name of the LORD thy God in vain ...
- IV. Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy ...
- V. Honor thy father and thy mother ...
- VI. Thou shalt not murder.
- VII. Thou shalt not commit adultery.
- VIII. Thou shalt not steal.
- IX. Thou shalt not bear false witness [*testimony*] ...
- X. Thou shalt not covet ...

God made the Law such that even children could learn it from a very early age. God gave it to Israel because of Abraham’s obedience and love¹. They were not the mightiest nation but God intended to make them the greatest if they would simply keep the Law and be an example to all others². Sadly, even the simplicity of the Law was not enough for them as the Bible clearly shows the Israelites continually rebelled.

But such is the case still today. The vast majority of modern Jews are not Torah-keepers, partly because the Oral Law (“traditions of men”) has made it so hard to understand and keep the Written Law. The Orthodox rabbis (modern Pharisees) have truly fulfilled the Scripture that says, “they bind heavy burdens ... and grievous to be borne”³ upon the people. As a result, most modern Jews have given up even trying.

However, *all* of the tribes of Israel have led the world in rebellion and wickedness. Throughout their history, the USA and Britain have been Sunday-worshippers in

¹ Deut. 4:38.

² Deut. 4:6-8.

³ Matt. 23:4.

violation of the fourth commandment. However, in the last few decades history has recorded that the rest of the commandments have been completely rejected as well.

The first three commandments were the victims of the elimination of the Bible in society. The result is that vainly using God's name is both public and ubiquitous. Banning the Bible also promoted acceptance (not just "tolerance") of once unthinkable pagan religions⁴. (Remember the popularity of Buddhism and crystals?) The remaining six commandments, while they certainly have always been violated, are no longer done in secret. Children rule over their parents; abortion is a "right"; murder and theft are no longer serious crimes; adultery is not only rampant but a way of life; people lie so much it is hard to know the truth; false testimony is common in the courts; and greed is an accepted business practice. People disparage, spit upon, and hold the Ten Commandments in utter contempt. No one feels shame for violating them.

Considering the state of disobedience by the descendants of the chosen nation Israel, is it any wonder that God is angry? The only difference between ancient and modern Israelites is how much worse the disobedience and wickedness is today. In ancient times, God sent prophets or judges to warn them. If that did not cause them to turn from disobedience then plagues, droughts, and even foreign invasion or slavery usually worked. Most times, when things got bad enough the ancient Israelites turned back to God—at least to some extent.

Since WW2, history has painted a picture of a society that is receiving its due for turning its back on God. Beginning with the Korean War (fought to a stalemate), every war that the US has engaged in has been a failure (including the Iraq War, which was essentially just one battle of a war that actually continues to this day against so-called rogue insurgents that have never been defeated). God has obviously withdrawn His hand of protection! Throw in massive debt, drought/floods, crop failures, inept and weak military, sickness and disease, and invasion of foreigners (illegal immigrants) and one can see Deuteronomy 28 being fulfilled before our very eyes! At this point, God has stopped sending prophets or judges to a world that refuses to hear:

JEREMIAH 25:4-7 And the LORD hath **sent unto you all his servants the prophets**, rising early and sending *them*; but **ye have not hearkened, nor inclined your ear to hear**. 5 They said, Turn ye again now every one from his evil way, and from the evil of your doings, and dwell in the land that the LORD hath given unto you and to your fathers for ever and ever: 6 And go not after other gods to serve them, and to worship them, and provoke me not to anger with the works of your hands; and I will do you no hurt. 7 Yet **ye have not hearkened unto me**, saith the LORD; that ye might provoke me to anger with the works of your hands to your own hurt.

⁴ In my lifetime, popular rock-n-roll singers proclaimed the wonders and benefits of eastern religious practices in the 1960s. Prior to that, even Catholicism was frowned upon as was the case with the campaign and presidency of John F. Kennedy.

Since the modern Israelites have rejected the Word of God by banning the Bible, God will have to once again resort to plagues, droughts, foreign invasion, slavery, and all the other things mentioned in Deuteronomy 28. But it is not just to bring a humble few back to God—it will DESTROY a large percentage of people in this world⁵.

So, what does all this have to do with prophecy? Everything. For example, if you continue reading Jeremiah 25, it prophesies of the consequences of disobedience. Many estimate that one-third of the Bible is prophetic and I have no reason to doubt it. Sadly, many overlook the purpose of biblical prophecy. Many in the *ekklesia* focus on the how, what, when, and where of future *events and timelines* rather than the **why** of prophecy.

Biblical prophecy actually contains scant details of the timing and accomplishment of end-time events. Except for Daniel, Revelation, and a few chapters and verses scattered elsewhere in the Bible, most prophecy does not contain **any** details of end-time events and timelines. Instead, it records serious WARNINGS against the nations of the world. In biblical terms, these are prophetic Testimonies and Judgments, which are records of the **sins** of the people—witnessed by God—and the **punishments** promised for continued disobedience.

Interestingly, if one considers how much of prophecy talks about actual events and timelines at the end times, it makes up only about 3% of the entire Bible or 10% of all prophecy by my estimation. So, if one third of the Bible is prophecy and only 10% of *that* contains details of events and timelines, 90% of prophecy is Testimonies and Judgments—warnings of punishments for disobedience to God!

Not surprisingly, most Bible study focuses on the 10% of events and timelines but few consider the 90% that is Testimonies and Judgments! People spend an enormous amount of time examining those things that have the least amount of information while largely ignoring the big prophetic message in God's Word! If God wanted us to understand the specifics of end-time events and timelines, then why did He give us so little information? The purpose of prophecy is not to provide us with a map of future events and timelines but to warn the world against sin!

The sole purpose of this physical life is to grow in agape love, develop the deep faith of Jesus Christ, learn and obey God's Law of love and justice, and do good works! The firstfruits of His Kingdom make up only a small contingent of the world's population, but God's desire is the salvation of the entire WORLD⁶ and prophecy is for both the rebellious nations **and** the *ekklesia*. The warnings will be ignored by this world, but once the punishments and destruction come upon it, there will be those who repent and turn to God who will save them! We are witnesses of a sinful world that suffers because of foolishness, pride, arrogance, and rebellion. We grieve when we contemplate the coming

⁵ Isa. 6:11-13.

⁶ John 3:16.

vengeance of God because the world has refused to take to heart ten simple “words”—the Ten Commandments:

EZEKIEL 9:4-10 And the LORD said unto him, Go through the midst of the city, through the midst of Jerusalem, and set a mark upon the foreheads of **the men that sigh and that cry for all the abominations** that be done in the midst thereof. 5 And to the others he said in mine hearing, Go ye after him through the city, and smite: let not your eye spare, neither have ye pity: 6 Slay utterly old *and* young, both maids, and little children, and women: but come not near any man upon whom *is* the mark; and begin at my sanctuary. Then they began at the ancient men which *were* before the house. 7 And he said unto them, Defile the house, and fill the courts with the slain: go ye forth. And they went forth, and slew in the city. 8 And it came to pass, while they were slaying them, and I was left, that I fell upon my face, and cried, and said, Ah Lord GOD! wilt thou destroy all the residue of Israel in thy pouring out of thy fury upon Jerusalem? 9 Then said he unto me, The iniquity of the house of Israel and Judah *is* exceeding great, and the land is full of blood, and the city full of perverseness: for they say, **The LORD hath forsaken the earth**, and the LORD seeth not. 10 And as for me also, mine eye shall not spare, neither will I have pity, *but* I will recompense their way upon their head.

God has withheld much from us when it comes to understanding prophetic events and timelines. So, next time you are reading prophecy, put aside speculations of events and timelines for a little while to focus on the main message—the Testimonies and Judgments of God coming upon the world for their sins. God will reveal the details soon enough⁷. The Testimonies and Judgments are humbling to read because they give us insight into OUR purpose! The firstfruits of the *ekklesia* are being prepared for a work—to minister and teach those who will be in the future great spiritual harvest of mankind. We will encounter much pain, sorrow, and ignorance that will require great love, compassion, mercy, and healing. Are we growing in these things? Are we becoming like God IS? While there is terrible suffering coming upon the world, our calling is to **change** the world. We will have a part in reuniting families destroyed by war; eliminating crime and poverty; restoring justice and truth; healing broken hearts; and promoting prosperity and peace. Can you imagine having a part in anything so great and wonderful? DO you?

May God’s grace and peace be upon you!

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⁷ Amos 3:7.

SABBATH THOUGHT 2023-06-10—WHO IS A BELIEVER?

May God bless you on His Sabbath day!

Have you ever heard someone say, “Believe **on** Jesus Christ and you will be saved”? I would guess that the use of “on” comes from the KJV that makes prolific use of this preposition. One such example is:

[KJV+] ACTS 16:31 And they said, **Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved**, and thy house.

It seems to be a common saying among Protestants but Scripture contains a number of statements very similar to this. In fact, those who are baptized and have received the Holy Spirit are actually called *Believers*:

ACTS 5:14 And **believers were added all the more to the Lord**, multitudes of both men and women.

But what or who is a Believer? Is it someone who believes *on* Christ? I have to admit I am not certain I understand what it means to believe **ON** Christ. How does someone believe “on” a *person*? In general, prepositions show a *relationship* with something or someone (a noun). Having faith or believing “on” someone is rather difficult to understand given the literal meaning of this particular preposition.

When the Greek preposition *eis* is translated *in* instead of *on*, then it all makes more sense. It is quite possible to believe *IN* someone. It might seem rather nitpicky, but it is an important distinction to understand what it means to be a Believer. If you are a Believer, what or whom makes you one? Perhaps the first thing that comes to mind is belief in baptism and you might think of this well-known verse¹:

ACTS 2:38 Then Peter said to them, “**Repent and be baptized each one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins**, and you yourselves shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.

What does it mean to be baptized in the name of someone? Any act performed in the name of someone establishes it in accordance with, and authorized by, the one who has supremacy over the matter. Why are we baptized?

ROMANS 6:4-7 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**

¹ Also Acts 4:10, 12; 8:12; 8:15-16; 10:48; 19:5; 22:16; Rom. 6:3-4.

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.

Being baptized in the name of Jesus Christ means the act of water immersion is a likeness of, and a conjoining with, His death, burial, and resurrection. Why do this? Because Jesus Christ died for the remission (cancellation) of the penalty of death for sin. Obviously baptism is required, along with receiving the Holy Spirit, for eternal life. However, the apostle Mark said something that you may have not noticed before:

MARK 16:16 The one **who believes and is baptized shall be saved**, but the one who does not believe shall be condemned.

Salvation requires belief AND baptism. It is not enough to be baptized; one must also BELIEVE! But what is there to believe? The answer is simple: baptism is required for salvation but those of the *ekklesia* must also believe IN Jesus Christ. Why must a Believer *believe* in Him?

ACTS 10:43 To Him all the prophets bear witness, *that* everyone who **believes in Him [Jesus Christ] receives remission of sins through His name.**

A Believer is someone who believes that remission of sins comes through baptism into the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Why? Because “He [*God the Father*] **made Him [Jesus Christ]** Who knew no sin **to be sin for us**” (2 Cor. 5:21). That singular sacrifice “takes away the sin of the world.” (John 1:29).

But believing in the remission of sins through the sacrifice of Jesus Christ is just the beginning. A Believer also²:

JOHN 20:31 But these have been written, so that you may **believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing, you may have life through His name.**

Salvation is to those who not only believe in the remission of sins through the sacrifice of Jesus Christ but also believe that He is the Son of God! It is clearly important because it is used many times in the NT. The book of Mark begins with, “The beginning of the gospel of **Jesus Christ, the Son of God**” (Mark 1:1), the demons referred to Him as the “Son of God”³ (instead of Jesus), and John the Baptist witnessed (testified) that He was the Son of God⁴. The apostle John even wrote an entire chapter that emphasizes Jesus was the Son of God⁵. Here is an excerpt:

1 JOHN 5:11-13 And this is the witness: that God has given us eternal life, and this life is in His Son. 12 The one who has the Son has *eternal* life; the one who does not have the Son of God does not have *eternal* life. 13 These things I have written to you who **believe in the name of the Son of God** in order that you may know that you have eternal life, and that you may *continue to* **believe in the name of the Son of God.**

² Also John 6:40, 69; 11:25-27; Acts 8:37; 1 John 5:5.

³ Luke 4:41; 8:28.

⁴ John 1:34.

⁵ 1 John 5.

Believing Jesus is the Son of God implies that God the Father SENT Him. This very fact is part of the WORK of God the Father:

JOHN 6:28-29 Therefore, they said to Him, “What shall we do, in order that we ourselves may do the works of God?” 29 Jesus answered and said to them, “**This is the work of God: that you believe in Him [Jesus Christ] Whom He has sent.**”

The fact that Jesus Christ is the Son of God and was sent by God is obvious to Believers. Those are core principles of Christian faith. But something emphasized over and over in the Bible is obviously important⁶. Why does the Bible mention it so often?

JOHN 12:44-45 Then Jesus called out and said, “The one who **believes in Me does not believe in Me, but in Him Who sent Me.** 45 And the one who sees Me sees Him Who sent Me.

Jesus said whomsoever believes in Him also believes in God the Father. This almost sounds like circular logic. So, there is belief in the sacrifice of Jesus Christ, baptism, Jesus is the Son of God, and Jesus was sent by God the Father. There is nothing new with all of these connections because they are commonly held beliefs among the Christian faith. However, understanding these things is all according to a purpose:

2 TIMOTHY 1:9-10 Who has **saved us and called us** with a holy calling—not according to our works, but **according to His [God the Father’s] own purpose and grace, which was given us in Christ Jesus** before the ages of time; 10 But has now been **revealed by the appearing of our Savior Jesus Christ,** Who has annulled death, and has brought to light *eternal* life and incorruptibility through the gospel

What is God the Father’s purpose that was revealed by Jesus Christ? Salvation through His calling. Again, this is obvious—to those living in modern times!! It is quite different from the understanding of ancient times. Read this Scripture very carefully:

ISAIAH 43:10-13 Ye *are* my witnesses, saith the LORD, and **my [God Most High’s] servant [Jesus Christ] whom I [God Most High] have chosen: that ye may know and believe me [God Most High], and understand that I [God Most High] am he: before me [God Most High] there was no God formed, neither shall there be after me [God Most High].** 11 **I, even I, am the LORD [God Most High]; and beside me [God Most High] there is no saviour.** 12 I have declared, and have saved, and I have shewed, when *there was* no strange *god* among you: therefore ye *are* my witnesses, saith the LORD, that I *am* God. 13 Yea, before the day *was* I *am* he; and *there is* none that can deliver out of my hand: I will work, and who shall [prevent] it?

There it is. The ancients knew that the God Most High would send His Servant to save Israel. They also knew He would be of the lineage of David. Mostly, however, they knew He would be the **Son of God**⁷:

⁶ John 5:24, 38-40; 11:41-42; 12:44-45; 16:27; 17:8, 21;

⁷ Also 2 Sam. 7:12-16; Ps. 89:3-4; Dan. 3:25 (KJV).

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, Counsellor, **The mighty God**, The everlasting Father, The Prince of Peace.

The ancients knew God Most High as their Savior and that He would send His Son the Servant. Today, Christian Believers emphasize Jesus Christ as the Savior but rarely acknowledge that God the Father is also the Savior⁸:

1 TIMOTHY 1:1 Paul, an apostle of Jesus Christ according to *the* commandment of **God our Savior, and of the Lord Jesus Christ**, *Who is* our hope,

1 TIMOTHY 2:3-5 For this *is* good and acceptable before **God our Savior**, 4 Who desires all men to be saved and to come to *the* knowledge of *the* truth. 5 For **there is one God, and one Mediator between God and men—the man Christ Jesus**,

The reason believing Jesus was the Son of God and sent by God is so important is that **Jesus Christ fulfilled all the prophecies that God Most High would send His Servant Son to save Israel**:

LUKE 24:27 And beginning at Moses and all the prophets, he [*Jesus Christ*] **expounded unto them in all the scriptures the things concerning himself**.

The ancients were waiting for God to send His Son and that is why salvation requires believing Jesus was both the Son of God and sent by God! It was proof that He fulfilled ancient prophecy!

Salvation requires BOTH Saviors, a reflection of the Hebrew plural word for the Godhead—*Elohim*. One was the Sacrifice for the remission of sins and the other killed the Sacrifice⁹ and resurrected Him. The former is Jesus Christ, the Son of God, and the latter is God the Father. A Believer, therefore, is someone who believes that:

- Jesus Christ was the Passover sacrifice for the remission of sins,
- Baptism conjoins a person into the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus Christ,
- Baptism is in the name of Jesus Christ,
- Jesus Christ is the Son of God,
- Jesus Christ was sent by God the Father,
- Jesus Christ was resurrected by God the Father,
- **God the Father and Jesus Christ are the Savior** of mankind!

May God's grace and peace be upon you!

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⁸ Also 1 Tim. 4:10; Titus 1:1-4; 3:4-5.

⁹ Isa. 53:12 and the [Sabbath Thought 2023-03-11 - Who Killed Christ](#).

THOUGHT 2023-06-17—TWO DIVINE LAWS

May God bless you on His Sabbath day!

Every single human being is eventually presented with a choice that determines eternal life or eternal death. The choice is between two systems of Divine Law¹. *Divine* is a word that is not well understood by Bible-minded people. For many, it is a reference solely to the God Most High. However, *divine* refers to any god OR God so it can refer to the Christian God, pagan gods, or even Satan himself (“the **god** of this world”²). In fact, divination is the practice of seeking *supernatural* knowledge even though it is specific to wicked spirits in the Bible.

Divine Law, therefore, is defined as the legislation of a spirit being (i.e. god OR God) as opposed to laws established by *humans*. There are two systems of Divine Laws enacted by two separate spirit beings. In the time of Adam, one Divine Law was represented by the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil and the other by the Tree of Life. The god of this world—Satan—is the author of the one called the Law of Sin and Death; whereas the other is established by God Most High and it is called the Law of the Spirit of Life³.

ROMANS 8:2 Because **the law of the Spirit of life** in Christ Jesus has delivered me from the **law of sin and death**.

These two systems define completely opposite *ways* of life because they reflect the mind and heart of the two lawgivers—Satan and God. Choosing one over the other is a matter of swearing allegiance and loyalty to the author of that Divine Law. But the choice is limited because there is a *default* Divine Law for all mankind, established by the first Adam:

ROMANS 5:12-14 Wherefore, as **by one man** sin entered into the world, and death by sin; and so **death passed upon all men**, for that all have sinned: 13 (For until the law sin was in the world: but sin is not imputed when there is no law. 14 Nevertheless **death reigned from Adam** to Moses, **even over them that had not sinned after the similitude of Adam’s transgression**, who is the figure of him that was to come.

Adam alone was given the choice between the Law of Death and the Law of Life. As the first human, he *represented* all mankind and his decision has affected everyone ever since⁴. After Adam, even if a person does not intentionally choose one of the Divine Laws, the Law of Death prevails upon everyone. It became the **default** when Adam “chose” it on behalf of the world. For this reason, the choice is no longer a decision *between* two Divine Laws, but only whether or not to *reject* the Law of Death and *choose* the Law of Life. This is emphasized in Acts 26:16-18 where Paul was sent by Jesus to “**turn [the people] from ... the authority of Satan to God.**”

“All have sinned, and come short of the glory of God” (Rom. 3:23) because all are born and live under the Law of Death as a result of Adam’s decision⁵. However, his choice only set the *default*

¹ Prov. 16:10.

² 2 Cor. 4:4.

³ NOTE: these are shortened to *Law of Death* and *Law of Life* throughout.

⁴ Acts 26:18.

⁵ Gal. 4:3-5.

Divine Law (Law of Death) that mankind is born under; it does not MAKE the CHOICE for each **individual**. Therefore, all who have not yet done so will have to choose either to continue in the Law of Death or reject it to live according to the Law of Life:

DEUTERONOMY 30:19 **I [God] call heaven and earth to record this day against you, that I have set before you [Laws of] life and death**, blessing and cursing: therefore **choose [the Law of] life**, that both thou and thy seed may live:

If someone rejects the Law of Life they will continue in the Law of Death. Choosing Satan over God that is the end of the matter because the result is a judgment to eternal death⁶:

2 TIMOTHY 4:1 I charge *thee* therefore **before God, and the Lord Jesus Christ, who shall judge the quick [living] and the dead** at his appearing and his kingdom;

REVELATION 20:15 And if **anyone was not found written in the book of life [those who reject the Law of Life], he was cast into the lake of fire.**

If, instead, the decision is to submit to and obey the Law of Life, then what naturally follows is repentance, baptism, and receiving God's Holy Spirit. This point is the *beginning* of judgment. When someone chooses to continue in the Law of Death and reject the Law of Life, the judgment is determined and set, even if their physical life continues for awhile. However, when someone rejects the Law of Death and chooses the Law of Life, judgment BEGINS and continues UNTIL their death:

1 PETER 4:17 For **the time has come for judgment to begin with the household of God**; and if it first *begins* with us, what *will be* the end of those who do not obey the gospel of God?

What is being judged?

JOHN 15:9-10 As the Father hath loved me, so have I loved you: **continue [Gk. meno] ye in My love**. 10 If ye keep my commandments, **ye shall abide [Gk. meno] in My love**; even as I have kept my Father's commandments [*the Law of Life*], and abide in his love.

The Greek word for *continue* means “to exist permanently in” a relationship. The same Greek word is also used for *abide* in the next verse. Choosing the Law of Life is a daily choice to forever live—**continue and abide**—in a relationship of agape love with God and mankind.

What exactly is the Law of Life? It is the system of God's laws, commandments, statutes, precepts, and testimonies that define behaviors intended to produce agape love toward God, brethren, neighbors, and enemies⁷. For this reason, the Law of Life can also be called the Law of Agape Love. Agape love is foreign to humans because it only comes from God. It is a Way of Life that must be lived in a world where the default Divine Law is the Law of Death. Choosing the Divine Law of Life is not just a one-time decision—it is not “once saved, always saved.” It

⁶ Also Matt. 12:31-32.

⁷ Matt. 22:37; 39; John 13:34; Matt. 5:43.

is a choice that must be made every single day until the time of one's physical death. Agape love is the foundation and purpose of the Law of Life⁸. This was the message of Paul:

1 CORINTHIANS 13:1-3, 8, 13 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**. 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**. ... 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*. ... 13 And now, these three **remain [Gk. *meno*]**: faith, hope *and* love; but the greatest of these *is* love.

Remain (v. 13) is the same Greek word that was used for *continue* and *abide* in John 15:9-10. What will continue / abide / remain forever? Faith, hope, and agape love but the greatest of all is agape love! Why is it the greatest? Because agape love is the basis for RELATIONSHIPS! Faith and hope are personal beliefs and expectations but agape love is between people as well as with God. What will assuredly cease and vanish? Prophecy, mysteries, and ALL knowledge—not just some, but ALL. Why? Because they are specific and limited to this age. They become meaningless after “the old things have passed away [and] all things become new” (2 Cor. 5:17). Only agape love will continue / abide / remain forever.

While knowledge and understanding of prophecy and mysteries are wonderful and useful gifts, their *purpose* is to establish agape love. Forever studying every jot and tittle of biblical prophecy, mysteries, and knowledge without regard for agape love serves no purpose—it does nothing for relationships:

EPHESIANS 4:16 From Whom [*Jesus Christ*] 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*.

Biblical knowledge and understanding are intended to build (edify) the Body of Christ into agape love. They are meant to supply and increase agape love in each “part” (person):

2 PETER 1:5-7 And for this very reason also, having applied all diligence besides, **add to** your faith, virtue; and to virtue, knowledge; 6 And to knowledge, self-control; and to self-control, endurance; and to endurance, godliness; 7 And to godliness, brotherly love; and to brotherly love, **the love of God**.

Adding to or increasing in the fruits of the Holy Spirit **perfect** God's agape love in us. Agape love is only established in a heart of flesh that continues / abides / remains in it toward God and mankind. This is why choosing the Law of Life is the BEGINNING of judgment—agape love must BECOME the way of life.

⁸ John 14:6.

Knowledge of the Law of Life is an absolute necessity for understanding agape love, but love does not increase without LIVING according to that *knowledge*⁹. One must continue / abide / remain forever in relationships of agape love with God, brethren, neighbors, and enemies:

EPHESIANS 2:10 For **we are His [God the Father's] workmanship**, created in Christ Jesus **unto good works [that edify]** that God ordained beforehand in order that we might walk in them.

KNOWLEDGE of the Law of Life gives understanding but it must also PRODUCE agape love. The Kingdom of God is about *relationships* of agape love that will continue / abide / remain forever. The verdict for everyone who chooses the Law of Life is decided according to the perfection of agape love in them:

1 JOHN 4:16-17 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.

I write a lot about agape love. Some may wonder why. From the time I was baptized, I spent a many years reading various translations and studying all manner of topics—the Law, doctrines, history, prophecy, etc. One day (I think I was reading the three epistles of John), I was struck by his absolute focus on agape love. That particular day, when I read “God IS love” I realized I had a KNOWLEDGE of it, but I was not BECOMING it. Those three words changed everything. It was then that I started to truly understand the real purpose of our calling. Everything is “hung” upon agape love—not just the Law but also the sacrifice of Jesus, holydays, Sabbaths, prophecy, history. We are to grow in agape love in this life such that we not only love God, brethren, and neighbors but even our enemies. This is only possible through agape love, something that comes only from God. But He is also merciful. While it is hard to love our enemies, we are not asked to *die* for them—just *love* them. Only Jesus Christ had to die for His enemies. That required unimaginable agape love. Growing and living in agape love such that we are worthy of the resurrection is all that matters. That is why I write about it more than any other topic.

Those who have chosen the Law of Life must *daily* continue / abide / remain in agape love—nurturing, perfecting, and living it through repentance, reconciliation, obedience, and good works. Sometimes, it requires taking it on the cheek, so to speak, on occasion with enemies. The purpose of this life is to be worthy of the salvation of God the Father and Jesus Christ so that in the Day of our hope we ARE **love!**

May God’s grace and peace be upon you!

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⁹ Rom. 10:2.

SABBATH THOUGHT 2023-06-24—UNDER THE LAW

May God bless you on His Sabbath day!

In last week's Sabbath Thought, I discussed two systems of law—the Law of Sin and Death and the Law of the Spirit of Life:

ROMANS 8:2 Because **the law of the Spirit of life** in Christ Jesus has delivered me from the **law of sin and death**.

When Adam chose to eat the fruit of a tree against the command of God, he chose the Law of Sin and Death as the default law for all mankind:

ROMANS 5:12 Wherefore, as **by one man [the Law of Sin and Death] entered into the world**, and death by sin; and so death passed upon all men, for that all have sinned:

The trees in the garden in Eden were *symbolic* of the two laws. The Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil symbolized the Law of Sin and Death that was authored by Satan and the Tree of Life represented God's Law of the Spirit of Life. Ever since Adam made his choice, all mankind live "under" the Law of Sin and Death, as Paul affirms:

ROMANS 3:19 Now then, we know that whatever the law says, it speaks to those **who are under the law [of Sin and Death]**, so that every mouth may be stopped, and **all the world may become guilty** before God.

So what does it mean to be "under the law"? In simple terms it means to be governed, influenced, or controlled by a set of rules and regulations. Strange as it may sound, though, simply living *under* the Law of Sin and Death has caused **ALL to sin**:

ROMANS 5:12-14 Wherefore, as **by one man sin entered** into the world, and death by sin; and so **death passed upon all men, for that all have sinned**: 13 (For until the law sin was in the world: but sin is not imputed when there is no law. 14 Nevertheless **death reigned from Adam** to Moses, **even over them that had not sinned after the similitude of Adam's transgression**, who is the figure of him that was to come.

This is astounding when you think about it. Even though it was **Adam** who disobeyed God, this says that all have sinned simply because they are *under* the Law of Sin and Death! Before examining why this is the case, notice verse 13, which can be somewhat confusing: "until the law, sin was in the world: but **sin is not imputed** when there is no law." (I added the comma after "until the law," to make it clearer.) If all have sinned (v12), then what does it mean that "sin is **not** imputed"? This in no way suggests that sin does not **exist**; it simply says that it is not *imputed*—or attributed—against the sinner. In other words, God does not judge people for their sin UNTIL they have a choice and the means to repent:

JOHN 12:47-48 But if anyone hears My [*Jesus Christ's*] words and does not believe, I do not judge him; for **I did not come to judge the world, but to save the world.** 48 The one who rejects Me and does not receive My words has one who judges him; the word which I have spoken, **that shall judge him in the last day.**

However, there is still the question of how and why all have sinned simply because they live under the Law of Sin and Death. The answer is that it is a WAY of life that CAUSES people to sin. The Law of Sin and Death directs this world to operate on principles of competition and greed, which *produce* lust, pride, envy, jealousy, selfishness, etc. How? It rewards those who act in accordance with those principles and punishes those who do not. In fact, it is hard to survive in this world except by competition and greed:

TITUS 3:3 For we also were once **foolish**, disobedient, **deceived**, **serving all kinds of lusts and pleasures, living in malice and envy, hateful and hating one another.**

As abhorrent as these sins are, we have all been “foolish” and “deceived” into LIVING the way of the Law of Sin and Death. To see how this works, ask yourself: Why does starvation exist in a world that can produce food for everyone? It exists because of principles of competition and greed: Farmers produce food so they can make a profit; shippers transport the food to other countries so they can make a profit; and distributors sell the food locally so they can make a profit. However, the poor cannot buy the food because they obviously have no money. See the problem? Distributors cannot pay the shippers unless the poor pay for the food. Shippers cannot pay the farmers unless the distributors pay for the shipping. Farmers cannot produce the food unless the shippers pay for it. Even if all of those involved in this chain of food production and distribution *wanted* to feed the poor, the Law of Sin and Death makes it hard to do so. It actually *promotes* starvation because the law is *based* upon principles of competition and greed.

Living under the Law of Sin and Death sets our minds and causes us to act according to the WAY of sin—“the lust of the flesh, and the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life.” (1 John 2:16). Satan is the author of the Law of Sin and Death, so in living by it, a person becomes more like him. Even the most well-intentioned people sin because those rules are designed to make those under it take on the ways of Satan.

DEFINITION: Being <u>under</u> the Law of Sin and Death means being subject to laws that cause sin simply because they are the status quo—the manner and thinking in which all live their lives.

“Sin is the transgression of [God’s Law of the Spirit of Life]” (1 John 3:4). The Law of Sin and Death is *sin* because it is contrary to God’s Law. The Law of Sin and Death causes all to sin eventually because it influences the thoughts, actions, and words of people.

One might think that simply keeping the Law of the Spirit of Life would change things. But there was a problem—the ancient Israelites proved beyond any doubt that mankind is incapable of keeping it:

EZEKIEL 20:21, 24-25 But **the children [of Israel] rebelled against Me. They did not walk in My statutes, nor keep My ordinances to do them**—the ordinances which, *if* a man do, he shall even live in them. And **they polluted My Sabbaths**, and I said, I would pour out My fury on them, to fulfill My anger against them in the wilderness. ... 24 Because **they had not done My ordinances, but had despised My statutes and had polluted My Sabbaths**, and their eyes **were after their fathers' idols**. 25 Wherefore **I also gave them over to ~~their own~~ statutes that were not good, and ~~their own~~¹ ordinances [of the Law of Sin and Death]** which they could not live.

The Law of the Spirit of Life is “is spiritual” (Rom. 7:14), so it cannot be kept physically. In fact, the only way to keep it is mentioned in the name: it is a law “**of the Spirit.**” Unlike the Law of Sin and Death, physical people cannot perfectly live UNDER the Law of the Spirit of Life; eventually, they fall away. The Law of the Spirit of Life must be IN a person and lived *spiritually* through God, not physically. Physical humans are subject to “the sin [*transgression of Law of the Spirit of Life*] that so easily entraps us” (Heb. 12:1). Without a spiritual component, physical people cannot keep the Law of the Spirit of Life:

EZEKIEL 36:27 And **I [God] will put My Spirit within you and cause you to walk in My statutes, and you shall keep My ordinances and do them.**

Only with God’s Holy Spirit IN a person can physical people continue in the Law of the Spirit of Life. The Holy Spirit is also required because it liberates people from living UNDER the Law of Sin and Death:

ROMANS 8:2 Because the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus **has delivered me** from the law of sin and death.

Freedom from the Law of Sin and Death only comes through *baptism*—which releases a person from being under it by ‘death’ in a watery grave. **Choosing** the Law of the Spirit of Life only happens through *repentance*. **Living** by the Law of the Spirit of Life requires the *Holy Spirit* in one’s heart and mind. The indwelling of the Holy Spirit is so crucial to having the Law of the Spirit of Life IN a person that:

MATTHEW 12:31 Because of this, I say to you, every sin and blasphemy shall be forgiven to men except the **blasphemy against the Holy Spirit; that shall not be forgiven** to men.

Anyone who blasphemes the Holy Spirit CANNOT have the Law of the Spirit of Life IN them. *Blasphemy* is hateful and spiteful condemnation or rejection of something. Blaspheming the Holy Spirit is the “unpardonable” sin because it is an absolute rejection of the Law of the Spirit of Life!

¹ “*Their own*” were added by the translator.

God IS agape love², so His Law *defines* agape love. The Law of the Spirit of Life is His WAY of life. A person with the Holy Spirit dwelling in them is committed to living according to the Law of the Spirit of Life and, as a result, BECOMING agape love.

The indwelling of the Holy Spirit also brings judgment. Romans 5:13 said, “**until the law** sin was in the world: but **sin is not imputed** when there is no law.” God postponed judgment of sin UNTIL the law. Which law? The Law of the Spirit of Life:

JOHN 16:7-8 But I [*Jesus Christ*] am telling you the truth. It is profitable for you that I go away because if I do not go away, the Comforter [*the Holy Spirit*] will not come to you. However, if I go, I will send it to you. 8 And when that one [*the Holy Spirit*] has come, **it will convict the world concerning sin**, and **righteousness**, and **judgment**:

Once the Holy Spirit is offered to a person, it begins God’s judgment. Notice:

1 PETER 4:17 For **the time has come for judgment to begin** with the household of God; and if it first *begins* with us, **what will be the end of those who do not obey** the gospel of God?

When Peter asks, “what *will be* the end of those who do not obey?” he is referring to the time when God judges the rest of the world by offering to give them His Holy Spirit. Those who then reject the Law of the Spirit of Life will have their sin IMPUTED to them—and sin brings death.

The Law of Sin and Death is a way of competition and greed whereas the Law of the Spirit of Life is a way of giving and receiving³. They are two completely different rules for living. All live *under* the Law of Sin and Death but the Firstfruits of God have rejected it and have the Law of the Spirit of Life IN them. As for the rest of the world, there is coming a day when “I [*God will*] sprinkle clean water upon you, and ye shall be clean: from all your filthiness, and from all your idols, will I cleanse you. A new heart also will I give you, and **a new spirit will I put within you**: and I will take away the stony heart out of your flesh, and I will give you an heart of flesh. And **I will put my spirit within you**, and cause you to walk in my statutes, and ye shall keep my judgments, and do *them*.” (Ezek. 36:25-27). Then will the Law of Sin and Death vanish away forever!

May God’s grace and peace be upon you!

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² 1 John 4:8, 16.

³ Phil. 4:15.

SABBATH THOUGHT 2023-07-01—BOND-SERVANTS

May God bless you on His Sabbath day!

I have recently heard several disturbing stories of ministers who have rebuked or disfellowshipped members of their organizations. Apparently the ‘offenders’ organized a campout and other gatherings without obtaining permission from their minister or failed to include someone who was ordained. The results were worse if brethren from other organizations were included.

Over the decades, I have heard a number of similarly upsetting stories. Some have been disfellowshipped simply for questioning a tenet of their organization that does not align with the Bible. (I often wonder how many of those topics were salvational?) I have also witnessed several disconcerting situations myself. One was older gentleman who, it seemed to me, was sincerely searching for the truth. He came to services with questions about God and salvation. He was single, of a very small stature, poor, and obviously not well educated so the ministry and much of the congregation were standoffish and avoided him. Some were even offended merely because he did not have ‘appropriate’ Sabbath apparel! The elders gave him the usual booklets but, as far as I know, no one ever counseled with him so he only visited a few times. I think about him from time to time.

Another case was someone who asked for financial help from the organization where they attended. In order to receive it, they were required to hand over proof of income, tax records, itemized lists of expenses, etc. Only then MIGHT they be ‘approved.’ While organizations must be good stewards of any donations, why did it require the entire organization to approve it? The local minister should have been engaged enough to be aware of the situation and evaluate their needs without those outrageous and invasive methods. There are also many similar abuses in cases of marriage and divorce.

Then there were those who left an organization and, almost before the door shut behind them, I heard all manner of evil-speaking that spread doubt about their conversion, lies, and false rumors. If a person subsequently returned to the organization, they were immediately showered with hypocritical displays of ‘love.’

Many ministers tell someone at baptism that they are not baptized into any organization but into the Body of Christ as part of the ceremony. The fact that they have to mention this as part of the most important act of entering into a covenant with God says a lot about how organizations truly operate and what is in their hearts¹. Who has not also heard organizations proclaim something to the effect that “there are God’s people in other groups but ours has the most truth”? I have never heard any of them ever say they regard other organizations as equals when it comes to God, the Bible, and salvation. In fact, has anyone ever heard of organizations *merging* together in unity? All I hear are of splits. Unreconciled offenses² continue to be the way of life in this age but it seems ministers can be the catalyst for much of it.

¹ Matt. 24:12.

² Matt. 18:6-7.

I hope it is obvious that none of the stories I mentioned involved people who were *intentionally* causing division or offenses³. Rather, they were well-meaning and faithful brethren as far as I could tell. But this has been the way of every organization for many decades. As upsetting as they are, they are also expected. You probably have not only heard similar stories, but may have been a victim, too.

Most of these things happen because the relationship between ministers and brethren is not a biblical one. What has been socialized into the minds of all who have been involved with organizations under the banner of a ‘church of God’ name is one of authority and control. Where do ministers get the authority to control God’s people? Why do they think they are the earthly judges of the saints? I have yet to find any such authority or judgment given to a minister by God the Father or Jesus Christ⁴. So, what exactly does the Bible say about a minister?

1 TIMOTHY 3:1 This *is* a true saying, If a man desire the **office of a bishop**, he desireth a good work.

Desiring the “office of a bishop” (FV says, “to be *an* overseer”) is a good WORK. What do good works have to do with ruling over others? In fact, the Greek noun for *bishop* (or *overseer*) is *episkope*, meaning “inspection for relief.” The verb form means to *inspect, see, visit, relieve*. That means *episkope* describes someone who “**inspects or observes others for the purpose of providing relief.**” In that regard, *bishop* and *overseer* are poor English substitutes, because both describe a supervisory position. Who is a supervisor? He is “one who observes **and directs** others.” That is not the same as “one who observes (inspects) **and relieves** others.” While I have not yet thought of an appropriate substitute, I think that *episkope* describes a ‘relief worker’—certainly not a supervisor.

To even be considered for such a position requires certain mental and moral qualities, i.e., character. Take a look at the prerequisites for a minister—the list is not a suggestion, it is MANDATORY and COMPULSORY:

1 TIMOTHY 3:2-16 **A bishop then must be [FV = obligatory] blameless**, the husband of one wife, **vigilant, sober, of good behaviour, given to hospitality, apt to teach; 3 Not given to wine, no striker, not greedy of filthy lucre; but patient, not a brawler, not covetous;** 4 One that ruleth [Gk. *proistemi, lit. “to stand before; preside; practice”*] well his own house, having his children in subjection with all gravity; 5 (For if a man know not how to rule his own house, how shall he take care of the church of God?) **6 Not a novice**, lest being lifted up with pride he fall into the condemnation of the devil. 7 Moreover **he must have a good report of them which are without [the ekklesia];** lest he fall into reproach and the snare of the devil. 8 Likewise *must* the deacons **be grave, not doubletongued, not given to much wine, not greedy of filthy lucre;** 9 **Holding the mystery of the faith in a pure conscience.** 10 **And let these also first be proved;** then let them use the office of a deacon, being **found blameless.**

³ Rom. 16:17.

⁴ Matt. 28:18; John 5:21-30.

2 TIMOTHY 2:24-25 And the servant of the Lord **must not strive**; but **be gentle** unto all *men*, **apt to teach**, **patient**, 25 **In meekness instructing** those that oppose themselves ...

All who desire to be a minister SHALL be blameless, circumspect (cautious), self-controlled, modest, hospitable, able to teach, sober, peaceable, not greedy, not a novice, have a good report from those OUTSIDE of the Body of Christ, honorable, not double-tongued, faithful, have a pure conscience, gentle, able to endure wrongdoings, and meek. (Note: Several of these words differ from the various Bible translations because they were taken directly from a Greek-English dictionary for clarity.)

In addition, verses 4-5 say a man must “**rule well** his own house ... if a man know not how to **rule** his own house, how shall he take care of the [*ekklesia*]?” What does it mean to “**rule well**” a household? *Well* means in a good way, honestly, and virtuously. The main problem is that many completely misread the last part of verse 5! It says that a man who does not “**rule well his own house**” will not be able **to care for** the *ekklesia*! It does **not** say he is to rule over the Body of Christ, but TO CARE FOR THE *EKKLESIA*!

However, just in case some might still believe ministers are given authority over the *ekklesia*, lookup the Greek word *proistemi*, which is translated *rule*. It means “to stand before” in the sense of a *leader*⁵. It is **not** a position of authority as an overlord. In all regards, ministers are to lead the brethren by being an EXAMPLE! The proof is in Phil. 3:17; 1 Thess. 1:7; 2 Thess. 3:9; and especially:

1 PETER 5:3 **Neither as being lords over God’s heritage, but being ensamples to the flock.**

NOTE: The FV says, “over your **possessions**.” *Possessions* is categorically wrong! The Greek word is *kleros* means “those given into someone’s care,” i.e., an *inheritance* or *heritage*.

After taking all of this into account, how did the APOSTLES view their roles?

2 CORINTHIANS 4:5 For we preach **not ourselves**, but Christ Jesus the Lord; and ourselves **your servants** for Jesus’ sake.

GALATIANS 1:10 For do I now persuade men, or God? or do I seek to please men? for if I yet pleased men, I should not be the **servant of Christ**.

PHILIPPIANS 1:1 Paul and Timotheus, the **servants of Jesus Christ**, to all the saints in Christ Jesus which are at Philippi, with the bishops and deacons:

COLOSSIANS 4:12 Epaphras, who is *one* of you, a **servant of Christ**, saluteth you, always **labouring fervently for you** in prayers, that ye may stand perfect and complete in all the will of God.

⁵ *Proistemi* is similarly used in Rom. 12:8; 1 Thess. 5:12; 1 Tim. 3:12; 5:17. A different Greek word (*hegeomai*) is translated *rule* in the KJV of Hebrews 13:7, 17, 24 and it also means to *lead*. Interestingly, *hegeomai* is missing from these scriptures in the FV (which was largely based upon the *Interlinear Greek NT* translated by George Berry). This conflict in the Greek manuscripts lends uncertainty to *hegeomai* being original text.

2 TIMOTHY 2:24 And **the servant of the Lord** must not strive; but be gentle unto all *men*, apt to teach, patient

TITUS 1:1 Paul, a **servant of God**, and an apostle of Jesus Christ, according to the faith of God's elect, and the acknowledging of the truth which is after godliness;

JAMES 1:1 James, a **servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ**, to the twelve tribes which are scattered abroad, greeting.

2 PETER 1:1 Simon Peter, a **servant** and an apostle **of Jesus Christ**, to them that have obtained like precious faith with us through the righteousness of God and our Saviour Jesus Christ:

JUDE 1:1 Jude, the **servant of Jesus Christ**, and brother of James, to them that are sanctified by God the Father, and preserved in Jesus Christ, *and* called:

Every apostle claimed the title, “**servant** of Jesus Christ”. Paul even said he was “**your servant**,” referring to the saints. *Servant* is *doulos* in the Greek and means a **bond-servant**. Unlike a slave, a bond-servant usually entered into service to a master to repay a debt. But masters were required to treat bond-servants well, providing food and board and sometimes even a wife. There was even an option to remain a bond-servant out of love for the master⁶. The role of a minister as a bond-servant was even a command of Jesus Christ:

MATTHEW 20:25-28 But Jesus called them to *Him and* said, “You know that the **rulers of the nations exercise lordship** over them, and the **great ones exercise authority** over them. 26 However, **it shall not be this way among you**; but whoever would become great among you, **let him be your [bond-]servant**; 27 And whoever would be **first among you, let him be your [bond-]servant**; 28 Just as **the Son of man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life** as a ransom for many.”

Can it be any clearer? “IT SHALL **NOT** BE THIS WAY AMONG YOU”!!! Ministers are **not** given authority and rule over others nor are they to be overseers or overlords of the saints of God! Any man who desires to be a ‘relief worker’ is a **bond-servant** who voluntarily devotes his life to serving the Body of Christ through **good works** in the same manner as Jesus Christ and the apostles. A true minister serving in this manner is both blessed by God and a blessing to God’s people!

May God’s grace and peace be upon you!

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⁶ Exod. 21:5.

SABBATH THOUGHT 2023-07-08—THE MIND OF CHRIST

May God bless you on His Sabbath day!

The Bible mentions the heart around 900 times. What is interesting is that I can find only one Scripture that talks about anyone seeking after God's own heart (1 Sam. 13:14, which is quoted in Acts 13:22). This is odd because, in the Bible, the heart symbolizes the core essence and character of a person—who they are. It is what God searches to prove a person. But instead of the heart of God, the Bible focuses on the mind of Christ:

1 CORINTHIANS 2:16 For who hath known the mind of the Lord, that he may instruct him? But **we have the mind of Christ.**

The Bible uses *mind* to refer to thoughts, words, or emotions. This should be no surprise because it is evident in our common, modern phrases. We say, speak your mind. What is on your mind? Bear in mind. Mind what you say. Never mind. Are you out of your mind? Have you lost your mind? Have an open mind. Have peace of mind. Put your mind at ease. The word *mind* usually refers to a consciousness that is a perception of the world in terms of both thought and emotions.

The Bible has much to say about how Jesus thought and felt. So, have you ever considered what it means to have the mind of Christ? If the mind is both thoughts and emotions, then having the mind of our Lord expresses the notion that we are to BECOME like Him in every aspect. So, what are some characteristics of the mind of Christ? There are many examples, so I can mention only a few of them. An important one is suffering:

1 PETER 4:1 Forasmuch then as **Christ hath suffered for us in the flesh** ...

Obviously, Jesus Christ knew suffering. He suffered so that our sins can be cast into the grave and God the Father can forgive us. But for us to have the mind of Christ requires our own, personal suffering:

1 PETER 2:19-21 For this *is* thankworthy, if a man for conscience toward God **endure grief, suffering wrongfully.** 20 For what glory *is it*, if, when ye be buffeted for your faults, ye shall take it patiently? but if, **when ye do well, and suffer for it, ye take it patiently, this is acceptable with God.** 21 For even **hereunto were ye called: because Christ also suffered for us, leaving us an example,** that ye should follow his steps:

As strange as it may sound, Jesus Christ was an example of suffering because personal suffering is how WE put aside SIN! Really? That is what Scripture says:

1 PETER 4:1 Forasmuch then as Christ hath suffered for us in the flesh, arm yourselves likewise **with the same mind:** for **he that hath suffered in the flesh hath ceased from sin;**

How does personal suffering cause us to cease from sin? Because “we are dead **to** sins!”
Read Romans 6:1-13 and 1 Peter 2:24.

2 CORINTHIANS 4:11 For **those of us who are living are always delivered to death for Jesus’ sake, that the life [and mind] of Jesus may also be manifested in our mortal flesh.**

In the midst of suffering, it is hard to be tempted by the lusts of the flesh and of this world. This is what was said about Abraham:

HEBREWS 11:25 [*Abraham*] **Choosing rather to suffer affliction** with the people of God, **than to enjoy the pleasures of sin** for a season;

Suffering prompts us to seek God continually in our times of need with our petitions and supplications, both for ourselves AND others. Suffering is a reminder of our death through baptism. Read the next verse of 1 Peter 4:

1 PETER 4:1-2 Forasmuch then as Christ hath suffered for us in the flesh, arm yourselves likewise with the same mind: for he that hath suffered in the flesh hath ceased from sin; 2 That **he no longer should live the rest of his time in the flesh to the lusts of men**, but to the will of God.

Regardless of age, suffering is for the purpose of removing temptations and avoiding sin because it reminds us to put to death the flesh. Life is only established by Jesus Christ living in us¹. Notice this powerful proclamation by Solomon:

PROVERBS 20:30 **The stripes that wound purge away evil, and yea, strokes cleanse the innermost parts of one’s being.**

Obviously, there is much suffering. While it is difficult to increase in agape love and the faith of Jesus Christ in the midst of physical suffering, that is exactly when we are closest to God. It is, in fact, **acceptable** to God when we suffer patiently (1 Pet. 2:20 above). Did you know *acceptable* is translated from the Greek *charis*, which is usually translated *grace*? All who endure suffering, **especially through no fault of their own**, RECEIVE FAVOR, MERCY, AND COMPASSION FROM GOD! When Jesus Christ suffered the death of the cross, He found favor with His Father:

ISAIAH 53:10 Yet **it pleased the LORD [God the Father]** to bruise Him [*Jesus Christ*]; He hath put *Him* to grief: when thou shalt make His soul an offering for sin, He shall see *His seed*, He shall prolong *His days*, and the pleasure *desire* of the LORD shall prosper in His hand.”

Did Jesus do anything to merit His suffering and death? NO!! Ten thousand times ‘no.’ How many brethren suffer innocently? Having the mind of Christ means we patiently endure our sufferings and, just as with Jesus Christ, it is pleasing to God the Father.

¹ Gal. 2:20.

Another form of suffering comes as we strive to obey God, which is at odds with almost everything in this world. It is not easy to keep the Law, Sabbaths, Passover, and Holydays. This can mean becoming a target at work and losing family, friendships, neighbors, etc. Patiently suffering these things is another example of the mind of Christ:

ROMANS 15:2-7 Accordingly, let each one of us please *his* neighbor for good, unto edification; 3 For even **Christ did not please Himself**; rather, as it is written, **“The reproaches of those who are reproaching You [God the Father] have fallen upon Me [Jesus Christ].” (Psa. 69:9)** 4 For all the things that were written before were written for our instruction, so that through **patient endurance** and encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope. 5 Now may the God of patience and encouragement **grant you to be likeminded toward one another** according to Christ Jesus, 6 So that **with one accord and one mouth you may glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.** 7 Therefore, **receive one another, according as Christ has also received us, to the glory of God.**

Did you know that the “reproaches” (contemptuous ridicule or mockery) of God the Father were borne by Christ? Jesus took it upon Himself to patiently endure everything that has ever been said or done against the Father as well being personally mocked during His passion (Matt. 27:29, 31, 41). He also bore temptations, especially those from Satan². But He also had to deal with the scribes, Pharisees, and Sadducees who were constantly trying to cause Him to sin³:

MATTHEW 16:1 Then the Pharisees and Sadducees came to *Him [Jesus Christ]*, **tempting Him** and asking Him to show them a sign from heaven.

We are to be “likeminded” as Jesus Christ and patiently endure reproach, mockery, and derision. In so doing, we also GLORIFY God the Father (Romans 15:6 above). Was that not the PURPOSE of Jesus’ life—to glorify the Father?

JOHN 13:31-32 When he was gone, Jesus said, “Now has the Son of man been glorified, and **God has been glorified in Him.** 32 If **God has been glorified in Him**, God shall also glorify Him in Himself, and shall immediately glorify Him.

Even the sacrifice of Jesus Christ glorified God the Father—“Now He [*Jesus Christ*] said this to signify by what death **He would glorify God.**” (John 21:19).

Having the mind of Christ also pertains to our relationship with our brethren:

1 CORINTHIANS 1:10 Now I exhort you, brethren, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you all speak the same thing, and **that there be no divisions among you; rather, that you be knit together in the same mind and in the same judgment [purpose].**

² Matt. 4:1-11.

³ Also Matt. 19:3; 22:35.

This is one of the major issues among the *ekklesia*. Having the mind of Christ means reconciling divisions among us because we all have the same **purpose**. (The Greek word is *gnome* meaning *purpose*. If *judgment* was intended, the word would have been *krino*.) What is that PURPOSE? Your first thought may be that you are resurrected into the Kingdom of God. But is it also our purpose—not just *desire*, but **purpose**—that ALL those begotten by God the Father **also** enter into the Kingdom? That is the mind of Christ because He died for ALL! How can we fulfill our purpose for others to be in the Kingdom if we are separated by divisions among us? Divisions are contrary to unity:

PHILIPPIANS 2:2-8 Fulfill ye my joy, that **ye be likeminded, having the same love, being of one accord, of one mind.** 3 *Let nothing be done* through strife or vainglory; but **in lowliness** of mind let each **esteem other[s]** better than themselves. 4 Look not every man on his own things, but every man **[[look] also on the things of others.** 5 **Let this mind be in you, which was also in Christ Jesus:** 6 Who, being in the form of God, thought it not robbery to be equal with God: 7 But made Himself of no reputation, and **took upon him the form of a servant**, and was made in the likeness of men: 8 And being found in fashion as a man, **He humbled himself**, and became **obedient unto death**, even the death of the cross.

Verse 1 is not implying we are to have the same mind as *each other*, but that we are to have the same mind as *Christ* exactly as it says in Romans:

ROMANS 15:5 Now may the God of patience and encouragement grant you to **be likeminded toward one another according to Christ Jesus,**

This requires having the SAME agape love and the SAME heart (the meaning behind “being of one accord” in Phil. 2:2). We esteem others better than ourselves because that is exactly what Jesus did! Philippians 4:6-8 says that Jesus Christ esteemed us by humbling Himself and taking on the form of a lowly servant to die for our sins! Do we see other brethren in the same way? What about the people of this world? Do we esteem ALL in this world such that we would die for them? That is also the mind of Christ!

Having the mind of Christ means BECOMING like He is. It means producing the heart and mind—the character, thoughts, and emotions—of God Himself. This physical life is meant to make us like God the Father and Jesus Christ in every way. As you suffer, struggle, and are faced with temptations, “bear in mind” that you are being made into a god—a child of the God Most High by putting on the mind of His first Son, Jesus Christ!

May God’s grace and peace be upon you!

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SABBATH THOUGHT 2023-07-15—ONE WITH GOD

May God bless you on His Sabbath day!

Last week I talked about having the mind of Jesus Christ. It is how we are being made like He is—it is Jesus Christ LIVING in us¹. But it is much more than just having similar characteristics such as when a son takes after his father. It is literally having the mind of Christ. That does not mean that we are becoming replicas of Christ because each of us has unique personalities. However, having the mind of Jesus Christ literally produces a change to our thoughts and emotions. It is making us into a NEW creation—not a modification but something completely new:

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

Individually we all have unique thoughts and emotions but having the mind of Christ means our motives, desires, and hopes are becoming exactly as His. We could even say that we are to become one with Him. But it is still more than what you might guess. Jesus said, “I and my Father are one.” (John 10:30), and they have been that way from the beginning. Read the verse that the Jews refer to as the Shema:

DEUTERONOMY 6:4 Hear, O Israel: **The LORD our God is one LORD.**

This has been subjected to much debate and discussion, but it is also very simple. It says that the *Elohim* (“God” = plural)—are one. We know that this refers to both God the Father and God the Christ because the Bible says:

JOHN 1:1-2 In the beginning was the Word, and **the Word was with God**, and **the Word was God**. 2 The same [*being*] was in the beginning with God.

But the Jews believe that the Shema literally means there is only *one being* who is God. Since *Elohim* refers to more than one being, what does their oneness mean? In Hebrew, *one* is the word *echad*, which means the quantity one, first, or **united**. Notice these examples of two or more people united in the sense of being one (*echad*):

GENESIS 2:24 Therefore shall a man leave his father and his mother, and shall cleave unto his wife: and **they shall be one [echad]** flesh.

GENESIS 11:6 And the LORD said, Behold, **the people is one [echad]**, and they have all one language; and this they begin to do: and now nothing will be restrained from them, which they have imagined to do.

¹ Gal. 2:20.

EXODUS 24:3 And Moses came and told the people all the words of the LORD, and all the judgments: and **all the people answered with one [echad] voice**, and said, All the words which the LORD hath said will we do.

ZEPHANIAH 3:9 For then will I turn to the people a pure language, that they may all call upon the name of the LORD, to **serve him with one [echad] consent**.

Being one in these verses means united together with common purpose and thinking like a husband and wife. However, as spirit beings, the oneness of God the Father and Jesus Christ is much deeper.

The ancient Israelites did not have the means to connect with God because they were physical. In fact, they were given an impossible task. Read what God commanded immediately following the Shema:

DEUTERONOMY 6:4-5 Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God *is* one LORD: 5 And **thou shalt love the LORD thy God with all thine heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy might**.

To love God in the fullness of their heart, soul, and strength is impossible for flesh and blood because physical beings cannot even comprehend that kind of love much less mentally or emotionally connect with spiritual beings. People are born with the ability to love friends (Gk. *phileo*), family (Gk. *storge*), and spouses (Gk. *eros*), but they do not have agape love naturally—it only comes from God. Agape love is the highest form of love. God the Father somewhat revealed the depths of it when He sacrificed His Son who willingly died because they both LOVED us as enemies².

No one without the Holy Spirit in them, is capable of agape love. It is a deep love such that hate and malice can never coexist with it. It says in 1 John 4:20, “If a man say, I love God, and **hateth his brother, he is a liar**” But even this fails to fully describe the depths of agape love. If I might be so bold, agape love is such that, “If a man say, I love God, and **hateth his ENEMY, he is a liar**”³ Those of the flesh begotten with the Holy Spirit will never have perfect agape love in this physical life—but loving our enemies is a start. Becoming one with God is somewhat of a mystery as Jesus Christ alluded to:

JOHN 17:11, 20-23 And now I am no more in the world, but these are in the world, and I come to thee. Holy Father, keep through thine own name those whom thou hast given me, **that they may be one, as we are**. ... 20 Neither pray I for these alone, but for them also which shall believe on me through their word; 21 **That they all may be one; as thou, Father, art in me, and I in thee, that they also may be one in us**: that the world may believe that thou hast sent me. 22 And the glory which thou gavest me I have given them; **that they may be one, even as we are one: 23 I in them, and thou in me, that they may be**

² John 3:16; Rom. 5:10; Col 1:2.

³ Matt. 5:44.

made perfect in one; and that the world may know that thou hast sent me, and hast loved them, as thou hast loved me.

Obviously, God the Father and Jesus Christ ARE one with each other. Of us, however, Jesus said, “that they **may be** one....” Even with the Holy Spirit, being one with God the Father and Jesus Christ and each other will never be fulfilled in this life because only spirit beings can be fully one with each other.

The fullness of agape love is much more than the complete absence of hate and malice or loving our enemies, even if we are willing to die for them. Over the years I have tried come up with a definition and, perhaps, this comes close:

DEFINITION: Agape love is the state of one’s heart and mind in which every thought, emotion, desire, motive, spoken word, action, and work is for the sole purpose of doing good for others without any regard to the needs, wants, or desires of the self.

But by this definition, agape love is not something that can be perfected in this life because we are limited by the pulls of the flesh. There is a huge gulf between being one with someone—or even God—as physical beings compared to being one in a spiritual life. Only a spirit being can know the innermost heart and mind of someone and, thereby, be at one with them. Christ living in us is crucial to becoming one with Him because our thoughts are being changed:

2 CORINTHIANS 10:5 Casting down imaginations, and every high thing that exalteth itself against **the knowledge of God, and bringing into captivity every thought to the obedience of Christ;**

Every thought that is “against **the knowledge** of God” must be cast down (lit. demolished). Knowledge of God means having thoughts motivated by agape love: “... **everyone who loves** has been begotten by God, and **knows God**. The one who does not love does not know God because God is love.” (1 John 4:7-8). All thoughts that are not *of* agape love must be eliminated.

It also says all other thoughts must be brought into the captivity of “the obedience of Christ.” What does that mean? Our thoughts must be motivated by agape love: “... **! [Jesus Christ] have kept My Father’s commandments and live in His love.**” (John 15:10). Thoughts of agape love reflect the same obedience of Christ to the Father.

So, what does it mean to capture our thoughts? Simply put, it is anchoring our thoughts IN agape love. Staying with the analogy of bringing our thoughts into captivity, our thoughts are to be ‘prisoners’ of agape love. Captives can only do what their captors allow so, if our thoughts are captives of agape love, then they are ruled by agape love. This is close to being one with God the Father and Jesus Christ because they ARE love.

However, we still fall far short of perfection because physical beings are limited in their ability to connect with others. For example, no matter how much we might desire it, no

one can actually feel the pain of a friend who is suffering. Besides all the other reasons people suffer, suffering also enhances oneness with God. Suffering causes us to reach out to God and plead for mercy and healing. At the same time, others are driven to earnestly pray for and encourage us. This brings a oneness with each other AND God. But why suffering? Ask yourself, would there be the same emotional depth if someone was blessed with great happiness or immense joy? No, because suffering exacts the greatest sympathy, empathy, concern, care and love! We might be happy for someone who is joyful, but that does not produce the same depth of agape love as when someone suffers.

So, we are limited. None of us can be perfectly be one with each other or God in this physical life. We cannot truly know the pain of others or their grief except by what is revealed by their facial expressions and words. Even though that is sometimes more than we can bear to see, that is not the same as KNOWING and FEELING exactly what is in their mind and heart:

1 CORINTHIANS 13:12 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.**

Some might think Paul was referring only to God the Father or Jesus Christ but he did not specifically mention them. Perhaps, he was speaking to everyone—God and us! At the resurrection, we will finally be FULLY ONE with God the Father, Jesus Christ, AND each other! We will actually BE agape love! We will **know** and be **known** with a depth, familiarity, and singleness of purpose that transcends words.

So, having the mind of Christ and letting Jesus Christ live in us are not merely “memorization” scriptures.” It is the method of growing, testing, and proving the increase of the agape love from God in us. We are physical embryos suffering in a womb called the earth and agape love from God is the life blood of the spiritual umbilical cord called the Holy Spirit. Just as a human embryo cannot see and communicate with its parents until after it is born, we will not be fully one with our Father, Elder Brother, and each other until we are born of spirit and ARE that brand new creation. But then, the most amazing thing happens:

REVELATION 21:3, 5, 7 Behold, the tabernacle of God *is* with men, and he will dwell with them, and they shall be his people, and **God himself shall be with them, and be their God.** ... 5 And he that sat upon the throne said, Behold, **I make all things new.** ... 7 He that overcometh shall inherit all things; and **I will be his God, and he shall be my son.**

May God’s grace and peace be upon you!

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SABBATH THOUGHT 2023-07-22—ETERNITY OF INCREASE

May God bless you on His Sabbath day!

One thing is true about this world. Few are perfectly satisfied with their station in life. Those without electricity or indoor plumbing look longingly at houses that have them. People who live in small houses want bigger ones. Workers in cubicles are jealous of those with offices that have a door. Buying used items usually is looked down upon.

I have a nephew who has five trucks for two people. Four of his vehicles are paid off but he has one that is under a loan. He recently found himself in a financial bind. When it was suggested that he sell that one and a couple of others to eliminate the loan and reduce insurance and maintenance costs he did not want to 'lower' his standard of living.

But it is not just the poor. The wealthy are never content either. They buy the largest and most luxurious homes. Since those mansions have the very best of everything, they are only 'satisfied' by buying more mansions with everything. With homes all around the world, they buy personal jets to get there. At some point, they have so many homes that they cannot spend much time in them so they literally become guests rather than residents. When they run out of mansions to buy, they buy multi-billion dollar yachts, and so forth. I would guess Revelation 3:17 popped into your mind.

Why is no one ever satisfied? We put it all down to greed, but is that really it? Such desire only becomes greed when it comes at the expense of other people or with the suicide of morality. Still, why is it that most people are never happy with what they have? This behavior is not evident in animals. They will fight for and defend those things necessary for survival but I am unaware of them being discontented with their lot in life.

On the other hand, humans will literally fight to keep things of little value in the scheme of things. How many have been murdered because they refused to give up their wallet or purse to a thief or a vehicle to a carjacker? Is money worth dying for? Perhaps this was the case with Lot:

GENESIS 19:1-8 And there came two angels to Sodom at even; and Lot sat in the gate of Sodom: and Lot seeing *them* rose up to meet them; and he bowed himself with his face toward the ground; 2 And he said, Behold now, my lords, turn in, I pray you, into your servant's house, and tarry all night, and wash your feet, and ye shall rise up early, and go on your ways. And they said, Nay; but we will abide in the street all night. 3 And he pressed upon them greatly; and they turned in unto him, and entered into his house; and he made them a feast, and did bake unleavened bread, and they did eat. 4 But before they lay down, the men of the city, *even* the men of Sodom, compassed the house round, both old and young, all the people from every quarter: 5 And they called unto Lot, and said unto him, Where *are* the men which came in to thee this night? bring them out unto us, that we may know them. 6 And Lot went out at the door unto them, and shut the door after him, 7 And said, I pray you, brethren, do not so wickedly.

8 Behold now, I have two daughters which have not known man; let me, I pray you, bring them out unto you, and do ye to them as *is* good in your eyes: only unto these men do nothing; for therefore came they under the shadow of my roof.

While his was a huge cultural gulf for me, what is puzzling is why Lot chose to live in Sodom at all. His decision was the result of conflicts between the herdsmen of Abraham and Lot for grazing space and water rights. Abraham gave Lot the choice of the lands of Canaan or the Jordan plains with the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah and he chose the latter. I think it came down to a desire to seek the grander things in life. Lot "... lifted up his eyes, and beheld all the plain of Jordan, that it was well watered every." (Gen. 13:8). The plain of Jordan was a most appealing place; notwithstanding the wickedness of Sodom and Gomorrah.

But then Lot did something that would put his whole family at risk. Not only did he choose to live in the rich, expansive plains around the river Jordan but he deliberately "pitched *his* tent toward [*next to*] Sodom." (Gen. 13:12) and eventually moved into the city. Why? Perhaps he was looking to up-scale from his tent when he saw the houses there. Whatever the reason, he did this knowing that the residents of Sodom were hideously wicked¹. As strange as it sounds, he referred to those evil men as "brethren" (Gen. 19:7) even though he must have personally witnessed their evil after moving into the city. But still he chose to live there. In the end, his desire for living in a wicked city versus that of his tent caused him to offer two daughters to a rape gang. But, still, his decision cost him at least two other daughters who married local men, and his wife. Even though he escaped to Zoar before the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, he ended up living in a cave because he feared Zoar would be destroyed next. His up-scale life ended up with living conditions worse than his tent.

But the Bible says something remarkable about Lot—he was righteous²! I have to admit this is somewhat hard to understand, but Scripture is plain that his heart was right with God. It seems that mankind has certain desires that are good, but do not always have the best execution. To that point, Solomon wrote something very interesting:

ECCLESIASTES 3:12-13 I know that nothing is better for them than to rejoice and to do good as long as they live. 13 And also that every man should eat and drink, and enjoy the good of all his labor, it is the gift of God.

What is the "good" he mentions? As a noun, Solomon was referring to good works and then enjoying the *result* of good works ("enjoy the good of all his labor"). Having opportunities to do good works is a gift of God because the heart rejoices in the beauty of good. Could it be that what is usually motivated by greed comes from a corrupted desire to do good works that is built into every human being from birth?

¹ 1 Pet. 2:6-8.

² 1 Pet. 2:7.

I do not know with certainty the answer to that question, but I absolutely believe that Satan quite easily twists and distorts anything built into us. God gives mankind a natural desire for good works as well as the results of doing good. This is one of the endearing qualities that are woven into the fabric of each human heart if it is not corrupted by Satan.

Sadly, Satan has been quite successful. Of all beings, he knows better than any how to change good hearts into malice, hatred, and wickedness. He was successful with one third of the angels who saw the face of God continually so, attacks on the frail hearts and minds of people are like shooting fish in a barrel.

I think the natural desire for good works and beautiful things are a gift from God. It really all depends upon priorities. Do we pursue them even if they hurt others or trample on moral absolutes? Why did God give mankind those desires? Solomon pondered these things when he concluded that God put “eternity in their heart” (Eccl. 3:11). But why eternity? Is it just to live forever? I hope it is much more than that. I cannot think of a worse punishment than to live forever doing the same thing over and over and never experiencing nothing new. That is one of my issues with Protestantism. It portrays eternity as the most boring existence that I can imagine. But God has something more in mind. Notice the reason Solomon said God put eternity into our hearts:

ECCLESIASTES 3:10-11 I have seen the task which God has given to the sons of men to be exercised by it. 11 He has made everything beautiful in its time; He has also set eternity in their heart, so that no man can find out the work that God makes from the beginning to the end.

This is about the WORK OF GOD who does not only does good works but wants to enjoy the result of His good works. I do not believe that Solomon is referring only to the work of God only in this age even though it says from the “beginning to the end.” It is talking about God making everything beautiful “in its time”! So, what is coming is an eternity OF good works and beauty. These are the “tasks which God has given to the sons of men to be exercised by it”—now and in the eternity to come!

ECCLESIASTES 5:18 Behold *that* which I have seen: it is good and [beautiful] for one to eat and to drink, and to enjoy the good of all his labour that he taketh under the sun all the days of his life, which God giveth him: for it is his portion.

Good works and beauty are our PORTION from God. A wealthy few have tasted of the most beautiful things but they have also reached the limit—they possess the best and there is nothing more for them. How sad. It is like an eternity doing nothing and experiencing nothing new. Wealth will always be insufficient to satisfy those desires:

PSALM 49:16-20 Be not thou afraid when one is made rich, when the glory of his house is increased; 17 For when he dieth he shall carry nothing away: his glory shall not descend after him. 18 Though while he lived he blessed his soul: and *men* will praise thee, when thou doest well to thyself. 19 He shall go to

the generation of his fathers; **they shall never see light**. 20 Man *that is* in honour, and understandeth not, is like the beasts *that* perish.

Light infers happiness. The wealthy will never have happiness or contentment in this life. The rest of us will never have our desire for good works and beautiful things ever satisfied. This life is too filled with sufferings, too filled with malice and hatred, and too filled with Satan for that to happen. But we have a hope for something SO much greater—there will never be an end to the INCREASE of good works and beauty:

PSALM 115:13-15 He will bless them that fear the LORD, *both* small and great.
14 The **LORD shall increase you more and more**, you and your children. 15 Ye *are* blessed of the LORD which made heaven and earth.

While this is a physical promise, the Bible records a lot about increases from God. His promises are always INCREASING blessings, not just one and done. Physical blessings were **increased** food, children, wealth, etc. Spiritual blessings are **increasing** fruits of the spirit. There are so many verses about the promises of God to increase those He blesses that it is impossible to list them all. (Interestingly, Hosea 4:10 is a curse from God NOT to increase.) Our Father is the GOD of all INCREASE. The eternity to come is not a stagnant life. Our hope is not in the increase of this world—it is in the eternity to come:

ISAIAH 9:7 **Of the increase of His government** and peace **there shall be no end** ... The zeal of the LORD of hosts will perform this.

Most translations say *government* (a ruling authority) but the Hebrew word means *empire* or *dominion*. What is the empire and dominion of God? His KINGDOM! It is not referring to a government, but the kingdom of God. It does not say there is no end to the kingdom of God, but there is no end to the INCREASE of it. The kingdom of God is an **ETERNITY OF INCREASE**. Can you imagine a life that never ceases to INCREASE in good works and beauty?

Perhaps that is as close as I will ever get to understanding the “**unutterable** joy” that Peter mentioned (1 Pet. 1:8). To me, that kind of joy cannot be described; only felt. It stuns the mind and stops all rational thought! Senses are overwhelmed! Tears of happiness flow like a river! The heart explodes with emotions never before known! Now THAT is an eternity I get excited about. How about you?

May God’s grace and peace be upon you!

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SABBATH THOUGHT 2023-07-29—ARE YOU RELIGIOUS?

May God bless you on His Sabbath day!

What would you say to someone who asks if you are religious? Is your response simply “yes”? Do you respond that you believe in God the Father and His Son Jesus Christ of the Bible? Do you know what ‘religious’ means? That would be important in order to accurately answer the question. Religion is defined two ways:

- 1) A particular system of faith and worship;
- 2) The belief in and worship of a superhuman power or powers, especially a God.

The first definition refers a system organized around common teachings, rituals, and participation. In modern terms—a church. Many will likely immediately identify this use of the term ‘religion’ with Protestants and Catholics. Some might expand it to include Muslims, Buddhists, etc.

As I have discussed in a past article, *church* is a word that came into existence after the days that Jesus Christ lived in the flesh. In the last two millennia, it not only was the common reference to organized worship systems but it has been transformed into the second definition: a system of beliefs. You might have noticed that I added *system* to the above second definition, but it is more accurate. In any case, it has become so deeply ingrained in our conscience that it completely replaced every instance of the Greek word *ekklesia* (“called out ones”) in the Bible. Let me explain.

The second definition of religion—belief in a God—is generally the result of the *influence* of organized systems of teachings, rituals, and participation. For example, Protestants *teach* certain principles and rules that include baptism, loving Jesus, and Sunday observance. They add certain *rituals* they regard as important reinforcement of their teachings. One such is Sunday ‘worship’ services featuring an audience of congregants (the students of their teachings) who participate in an agenda of prayers, song service, and a preacher who gives a lecture. In other words, the first definition of religion—an organization focused on particular beliefs and worship—**transforms** into the second definition—a system of beliefs—simply through repetitive teachings, rituals, and participation. At the very least, it develops rote behaviors not based upon the original source of truth. At the worst, it is deceptive.

Does all of the above reflect your view of Protestants, Catholics, Muslims, Buddhists, etc.? I suspect it does. Now the hard question—does it describe YOUR religion? Please do not take offense. I hope that I show you that the entire world has been trained to believe that any relationship of mankind with God is one that requires belonging to an organization that promotes its own teachings, rituals, and participation. Sadly, this includes some who belong to groups typically named with a prefix to “Church of God.”

The problem with a ‘religion’ (i.e., a system of beliefs) is that even Satan and the demons believe:

JAMES 2:19 Thou believest that there is one God; thou doest well: **the devils also believe**, and tremble.

Satan and the demons believe but they do **not** have a relationship with God. They were rejected by Him even though they believe! So, simply believing is not enough. The really important and fundamental question is not “Are you religious” or “Do you believe in Jesus.” The big question is: “Do you have a RELATIONSHIP with God?”

You see, God is a living Being. While He is the Most High who is above all in power and authority and has created all life and everything in the heavens and earth, He also has desires and feelings. Unlike organizations that lord power over others, God desires to have eternal relationships with people based upon love. Who might those people be? Are they those who try come to God solely through THEIR rote teachings, rituals, and participation of an organization? Or are they those who develop a direct relationship with God by listening to His words and talking to Him in prayer? Notice what God’s Son said:

JOHN 4:23-24 But the hour cometh, and now is, when the **true worshippers** shall worship the Father in spirit and in truth: for **the Father seeketh such [people]** to worship him. 24 **God is a Spirit**: and they that worship him must **worship him in spirit and in truth**.

Wait a minute. Doesn’t *worship* infer some form of ‘religion’? In the Greek, the word means “*a humble submission with an attitude of utmost adoration or respect.*” This attitude can be physically manifested by bowing or prostrating oneself. In all regards, *worship* of God means to acknowledge the fullness of His eternity, greatness, power, and authority with an attitude of humility and contriteness that comes as a result of HAVING a relationship with the God Most High. So, the answer is no—*worship* is not a form of religion. It is an attitude toward God by those in the flesh who desire above all else to have a **personal** relationship with Him, not according to how others define it. In other words, TRUE WORSHIPPERS know that God loves them in spite of the fact that they are utterly weak, corruptible, and pitiable. For that reason, true worshippers love God in return because there is no greater love than His¹. Who would not want to experience that kind of love?

So, what is required to have a RELATIONSHIP with God? Aside from the aforementioned humility and respect for His magnificence and majesty, He simply asks us to become like He is:

¹ John 3:16.

1 JOHN 4:12-17 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.** 13 By this *standard* we know that we are dwelling in Him, and He *is dwelling* in us: because of His own Spirit, *which* He has given to us. 14 And we have seen *for* ourselves and bear witness that the Father sent the Son *as the* Savior of the world. 15 Whoever confesses that Jesus is the Son of God, **God dwells in him, and he in God.** 16 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.

“As God is, so are WE.” That is profound. On the day that we are born as spirit children, love will be PERFECT in us! We might still be lacking in certain things but, if nothing else, we will nonetheless be *perfect love* on that day. Friends become close because they have common feelings, beliefs, interests, and proclivities. To have a close relationship with God is no different than that of a friend. And Jesus told us what God wants:

MARK 12:30-31 And **thou shalt love the Lord thy God** with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind, and with all thy strength: this *is* the first commandment. 31 And the second *is* like, *namely* this, **Thou shalt love thy neighbour** as thyself. There is none other commandment greater than these.

God loves us and wants a relationship with those who **also** love Him. It would not make sense even for God to try to have an eternal relationship with those who hate Him. But a relationship with Him also requires that we love our neighbors because God loves them, too. In other words, we have to love everyone that **God** loves. That only makes sense. We might love God but if we do not love our neighbors, then *can* we become eternal children of God? I think not. These are the TWO requirements. We cannot fulfill the First Commandment and not the Second or vice versa.

Okay, now for all the purists out there. Does a relationship with God exclude certain teachings, rituals, and participation? No, they are certainly a part of it. However, while they play a part in developing that relationship, they are not the foundation of it as Paul discussed:

HEBREWS 6:1-2 Therefore **leaving the principles of the doctrine of Christ, let us go on unto perfection; not laying again the foundation of repentance from dead works, and of faith toward God, 2 Of the doctrine of baptisms, and of laying on of hands, and of resurrection of the dead, and of eternal judgment.**

Yes, we must have the faith OF Christ² to believe that He is the Son of God and was sacrificed for our sins. Yes, we must be baptized in the name of Jesus. Yes, we must obey the Law of God. Yes, we must do good works³. Yes, there are required teachings (“doctrines of baptisms ...”), rituals (baptism, Passover, etc.), and participation (keeping the Sabbaths and Holydays) but it is what is in the “heart, soul, mind, and strength” that establishes a relationship with God. These rituals⁴ simply demonstrate a desire to have one.

In short, Paul says that we must set aside any obsessive expectations that ‘religious’ doctrines establish a relationship with God. Instead, we must go on to PERFECTION. What perfection? “Be ye therefore **perfect, even as your Father which is in heaven is perfect.**” (Matt. 5:48). But what makes God perfect? Above all, “God is **love**” (1 John 4:8). Love is the basis of a relationship with God. Yes, there are components of ‘religion’ required even for those who are called to be His children. But those things are part of showing God that we ARE seeking a relationship with Him.

Do not misunderstand. I am not saying that attending Sabbath services with an organization is at all wrong. Singing hymns, praying, reading the Law, and learning the word of God is all VERY good. In fact, these things are ways to love God and our neighbors sincerely and deeply: “Then they that feared the LORD spake often one to another: and the LORD hearkened, and heard *it*, and a book of remembrance was written before him for them that feared the LORD, and that thought upon his name.” (Malachi 3:16). But do not confuse the ‘religion’ of an organization with a relationship with God and Jesus Christ.

If you refer to God as “Father” and if you call yourself a “child” of God, then you are describing a RELATIONSHIP, not a religion. It is a relationship with God, His Son and our Elder Brother, and all of His other children. So, when someone asks if you are religious, perhaps the answer is, “To some extent. But much more than that—God is my Father and I am part of His family!”

May God’s grace and peace be upon you!

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² Gal 2:16; Phil. 3:9; Heb. 11:6.

³ Eph 2:10; 4:12-16.

⁴ Hos. 6:6.

SABBATH THOUGHT 2023-08-05—THE LAW & RIGHTEOUSNESS

May God bless you on His Sabbath day!

Obedience to the Law of God is required for salvation. While I have not yet met anyone of the *ekklesia* who does not accept this, many are ignorant about much of the Law. Generally speaking, when there is a reference to “the Law” in the New Testament, it is referring to Scripture contained within Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy—the Pentateuch, which is a reference to first five books of the Old Testament. However, when these books are read it seems the focus is on the rituals of the Holydays, the stories about ancient peoples, tithing, or a few other points. All “scripture *is* given by inspiration of God, and *is* profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for **instruction in righteousness**.” (2 Tim. 3:16), so have you have diligently studied the *entirety* of the Law?

The scribes, Pharisees, and Sadducees had a depth of understanding of the statutes, precepts, testimonies, and judgments that is lost upon many today. Today, I think the Law is largely ignored, perhaps due to lost knowledge of ancient practices and understanding. I would venture to say that we today, in the *ekklesia*, fall far short of even the Jewish religious leaders in the time of Christ. But we should study ALL aspects of the Law contained in the Pentateuch. Yes, there are a number of points of the Law that many observe including the Sabbaths, Passover, Holydays, clean and unclean meats, and tithing. But the Law contains MUCH more than that. No one can obey the Law if they do not read and understand it. This brings me to something else that Jesus Christ said:

MATTHEW 5:17-18, 20 Think not that I am come to destroy the law, or the prophets: I am not come to destroy, but to fulfil. 18 For verily I say unto you, Till heaven and earth pass, one jot or one tittle shall in no wise pass from the law, till all be fulfilled. ... 20 For I say unto you, That **except your righteousness shall exceed *the righteousness* of the scribes and Pharisees, ye shall in no case enter into the kingdom of heaven.**

Let that sink in. “**Except your righteousness shall exceed *the righteousness* of the scribes and Pharisees, ye shall in no case enter into the kingdom of heaven.**” The righteousness of God’s people—the *ekklesia*—MUST EXCEED that of the scribes, Pharisees, and Sadducees! They knew the Law inside and out but how many of the *ekklesia* can say that? If the righteousness of the priests and Levites is insufficient but our righteousness must exceed theirs, then the crucial question is what is righteousness? By definition, “unrighteousness is sin” (1 John 5:17) and “all sin is the transgression of the Law” (1 John 3:4); therefore, *righteousness* is the perfect keeping of the Law.

It is interesting that Christ NEVER condemned the scribes, Pharisees, and Sadducees for **not** knowing the Law. Instead, He excoriated them in Matthew 23 where He called them hypocrites seven times because “they bind heavy burdens and grievous to be borne, and

lay *them* on men's shoulders; but they *themselves* will not move them with one of their fingers." (Matt. 23:4). They understood that righteousness was the result of obeying the Law of God, so they had a problem.

The problem for all humanity is the simple statement: "The wages of sin *is* death" (Rom. 6:23). In fact, "all have sinned" (Rom. 3:23), meaning that EVERYONE has been condemned to death because "**there is none righteous**, no, not one" (Rom. 3:10). From the time of Adam and Eve, God has offered eternal life to but human nature and wicked spirits have thwarted every attempt. Job testified of this. So, the ancient religious leaders determined that if righteousness is only attainable through strict obedience to the Law, then THAT could only be accomplished by imposing traditions and rules that forced people into compliance. This is what Paul accused them of:

ROMANS 10:2-3 For I bear them record that **they have a zeal of God**, but not according to knowledge. 3 For they being ignorant of God's righteousness, and **going about to establish their own righteousness, have not submitted themselves unto the righteousness of God.**

It is quite clear that it is impossible to attain righteousness through perfect obedience to the Law because SIN brings death. Instead of trying to obey the Law, perhaps the answer lies in eliminating sin. Enter the Catholic Church—their solution was that THEY claimed the authority to forgive sin. It was a clever approach to a serious issue that has plagued all of mankind. And it seemed to work (at least in their minds) until one man came along who disagreed that the Catholic Church had that right. That man was Martin Luther. However, his opposition to the Catholic doctrines meant that righteousness was once again unattainable because of sin.

But Martin Luther was also a clever man. He came up with a new 'solution'—eliminate the Law! As Scripture says, "without the Law sin *was* dead" (Rom. 7:8) so if the Law is abolished then it is impossible to sin. If sin does not exist then suddenly everyone is righteous! While he did not say these things in so many words, it is effectively the message in his treatise, *Two Kinds of Righteousness* written in 1519AD. But how did he eliminate the Law? Contrary to the Catholic doctrine that they could forgive sin, he believed that forgiveness was through the sacrifice of Christ. However, he still did not want to have to abide by the Law. Instead, he selectively used Scripture to say that all can achieve a state of righteousness if they simply have "faith in Christ." He gave to the world the solution that solved everything: a righteousness **without** the Law. The only requirement was a person had to proclaim their faith in Jesus Christ. Henceforth the Protestants call it "the Law of Christ" (Gal. 6:2).

To someone who knows nothing about the Protestants that statement would be very confusing. They overlook the fact that the phrase clearly includes the Law AND Christ, who not only upheld it but refused to abolish a single 'jot or tittle'. So, they teach that Christ somehow kept the Law *by His sacrifice* on behalf of mankind so salvation is only

through *faith* in His sacrifice. Their problem is they do not understand His sacrifice was for sin, which exists BECAUSE of the Law. So, they wander about thinking that the Law is no longer important.

Given this, one might understand why the scribes, Pharisees, and Sadducees tried so hard to enforce the letter of the Law even though they established loopholes in it so they could satisfy their lust for sin. It never occurred to them to actually abolish the Law as did the Protestants. In fact, the foundation for this false salvation is grounded in Romans chapter 10 (among others):

ROMANS 10:4-6, 9-11 For Christ *is* the end of the law for righteousness to every one that believeth. 5 For **Moses describeth the righteousness which is of the law**, That the man which doeth those things **shall live by them**. 6 But **the righteousness which is of faith** speaketh on this wise, ... 9 That **if thou shalt confess with thy mouth the Lord Jesus, and shalt believe in thine heart that God hath raised him from the dead, thou shalt be saved**. 10 For with the **heart man believeth unto righteousness; and with the mouth confession is made unto salvation**. 11 For the scripture saith, Whosoever believeth on him shall not be ashamed.

In particular, they love verse four which says, “**Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to every one that believeth**.” But does that say that Christ put an end to the Law? If so, that would contradict Jesus Christ in Matthew 5:17-18. So, either Paul was the ‘first’ Protestant or “end of the law” does not mean the Law is eliminated. Obviously, the latter is the case because the Protestants ignore verse 3 which says Israel had “not submitted themselves unto the **righteousness of God**.” What is that? It is the result of forgiveness of sin through the sacrifice of Jesus Christ BUT it still requires obedience to the Law. In fact, Paul mentioned this well before chapter 10:

ROMANS 3:26-28, 30-31 Through the forbearance of God; yes, to publicly declare **His [God's] righteousness** in the present time, that He might be just, and **the one [God] Who justifies [makes righteous] the one who is of the faith of Jesus**. 27 Therefore, where *is* boasting? It is excluded. Through what law? *The law* of works? By no means! Rather, *it is* through a **law of faith**. 28 Consequently, we reckon that **a man is justified [made righteous] by faith**, separate from works of law. ... 30 Since *it is* indeed **one God Who will justify [make righteous] the circumcision by faith**, and *the* uncircumcision through faith. 31 **Are we, then, abolishing law through faith? MAY IT NEVER BE! Rather, we are establishing law.**

Sadly, it seems that many in the *ekklesia* have an altogether different solution to attain righteousness—ignore the Law by staying ignorant of all the statutes, precepts, testimonies, and judgments. Are we, today, exempt from knowing these things? Can we ignore laws because they “do not apply”? Who determines that? When Christ came to “fulfill” the Law did He not emphasize the critical spiritual motive of agape love to ‘fill

up' the Law? It says in Hebrews 7:12, "For the priesthood being changed, there is made of necessity a **change** also of the law." It says some of the Law *changed* but was never eliminated. Are we not to be kings and *priests* in God's Temple? Read Revelation 3:12 and 7:15. Obeying the Law requires knowing it—all of it.

The Jews, Catholics, and Protestants all tried to find alternatives to keeping the Law because everyone understands salvation requires righteousness. The *ekklesia* of God understand the Law still applies and it is through the sacrifice of Jesus Christ for our sins that God imputes His righteousness to us. If we must obey God's Law, then we absolutely need to know it. The Feast of Tabernacles is rapidly approaching and it is a time that the Law was read to all of Israel (Deut. 31:9-13). It is a good reminder to be studying it. Ignorance of the Law may, in fact, result in God imputing SIN instead:

ROMANS 4:7-8 *Saying*, Blessed *are* they whose iniquities are forgiven, and whose sins are covered. 8 Blessed *is* the man to whom **the Lord will not impute sin.**

So, having God's righteousness imputed to us requires knowing the Law:

ROMANS 4:22-24 And therefore it was imputed to him [*Abraham*] for righteousness. 23 Now it was not written for his sake alone, that it was imputed to him; 24 **But for us also, to whom it shall be imputed**, if we believe on him that raised up Jesus our Lord from the dead;

Brethren, do not be ignorant as have many throughout the ages when it comes to the Law of God. We are obligated to study, know, and understand all of it:

ROMANS 10:3-4 For they being **ignorant of God's righteousness [the perfect keeping of the Law]**, and going about to establish their own righteousness, have not submitted themselves unto the righteousness of God. 4 For **Christ is the end [result, purpose] of the law for righteousness to every one that believeth.**

Christ did not put an 'end' to the Law, His sacrifice was the RESULT of sin and for the PURPOSE of imputing God's righteousness. Salvation it is to those who not only keep His Law but repent unto forgiveness when they fall short. Repentance only happens when we are aware of sin and sin requires knowing the Law of God.

May God's grace and peace be upon you!

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SABBATH THOUGHT 2023-08-12—THE LAW IS SPIRITUAL

May God bless you on His Sabbath day!

Last week's Sabbath Thought was titled *The Law and Righteousness*. By definition, "unrighteousness is sin" (1 John 5:17) and "all sin is the transgression of the Law" (1 John 3:4); therefore, *righteousness* is the perfect keeping of the Law. But avoiding sin means that we need to know and study the Law. But is that even possible? Even the scribes, Pharisees, and Sadducees knew Scripture better than anyone today were condemned by Jesus Christ for failing to understand the "weightier *matters* of the Law" (Matt. 23:23). Then there is the question about all those pesky statutes that address, dare I say "banal," topics such as clothing materials, animal husbandry, priestly duties, sacrifices, rituals, etc. Still, we know that all who desire eternal salvation are required to keep the Law of God:

MATTHEW 19:17 ... **if thou wilt enter into life, keep the commandments.**

JOHN 14:15 **If ye love me [Jesus Christ], keep my commandments.**

JOHN 15:10 **If ye keep my [Jesus Christ] commandments, ye shall abide in my love;** even as I have kept my Father's commandments, and abide in his love.

JAMES 2:10 For **whosoever shall keep the whole law, and yet offend in one point, he is guilty of all.**

1 JOHN 2:3-4 And hereby **we do know that we know him [God], if we keep his commandments.** 4 He that saith, I know him, and **keepeth not his commandments, is a liar, and the truth is not in him.**

REVELATION 12:17 And the dragon was wroth with the woman, and went to make war with the remnant of her seed, **which keep the commandments of God,** and have the testimony of Jesus Christ.

REVELATION 14:12 Here is the patience of the saints: here *are* **they that keep the commandments of God,** and the faith of Jesus.

To begin to understand how the Law of Moses is understood and applied under the New Covenant, read what Jesus Christ said:

MATTHEW 5:17-18 **Think not that I [Jesus Christ] am come to destroy the Law,** or the prophets: I am not come to destroy, but to fulfil. 18 For verily I say unto you, **Till heaven and earth pass, one jot or one tittle shall in no wise pass from the Law,** till all be fulfilled.

Which Law? The Law of Moses (the Torah—the first five books of the Bible). There is *no other Law* that Jesus was referring to; therefore, it is very clear that the Law of Moses must be obeyed. But He said something in verse 17 that is well known but not well understood—He came to FULFILL the Law. This is absolutely key. Jesus said that He came to bring a new level of understanding to the Law of MOSES! Why? Because it was impossible to perfectly keep nor did it take away sin. In fact, that is why many have tried

to do away with it entirely, not understanding that was the very reason for giving the Holy Spirit.

So, from the perspective of God, what is the PURPOSE of the Law? It does three things. First, it defines sin, which is the transgression of the Law¹. Second, obeying it is required for God to love us (and offer the gift of salvation):

JOHN 14:21 He that hath [possesses] my [Jesus Christ] commandments, and keepeth them, he it is that loveth me: and he that loveth me shall be loved of my Father, and I will love him, and will manifest myself to him.

1 JOHN 5:2-3 By this we know that we love the children of God, when we love God, and keep his commandments. 3 For **this is the love of God, that we keep his commandments:** and his commandments are not grievous.

The third purpose is obedience to the Law. Because God IS LOVE, His children must also BECOME love and THAT is the purpose for keeping the Law:

1 JOHN 2:5 But **whoso keepeth his word [Law], in him verily is the love of God perfected:** hereby know we that we are in him.

Obeying the Law of God is salvational. The issue for many is HOW to keep the Law that was given to Moses. Why? Because it says odd things like do not light a fire on the Sabbath² or do not mix certain types of cloth³. To that end, it is critical to understand what changed in the New Covenant:

HEBREWS 7:12-28 For since the priesthood has **changed [transferred, not eliminated], it is obligatory that a change [transference, not elimination] of the law also take place;** ... 15 And it is even more evident because **a different Priest arises according to the order of Melchisedec;** ... 19 Because **the Law brought nothing to perfection;** rather, *perfection* is brought about by a superior hope, **through which we draw near to God.**

Obviously, the priesthood changed and Jesus Christ is now the High Priest. Moreover, the greatest failing of the Law of Moses is that it was a physical one that could never be kept nor perfect those who were under it. Read the last phrase carefully: “**perfection [in righteousness] is brought about by a superior hope [Jesus Christ], through which we draw near to God.**” How do we draw near to God? With the Holy Spirit in us! So, the New Covenant draws people to God in a far superior way—spiritually. The Holy Spirit is required not only for forgiveness of sin whereby God imputes His righteousness to us⁴, but it also gives understanding of how to FULFILL the Law! Okay, so how exactly do we “fulfill” the Law? Examples are usually better than long explanations, so begin with the statute about muzzling an ox:

¹ 1 John 3:4.

² Exod. 35:3.

³ Lev. 19:19; Deut. 22:11.

⁴ Rom. 4:6, 11, 22.

DEUTERONOMY 25:4 You shall not muzzle the ox when he treadeth out *the corn*.

Does this apply only if you own an ox and use it to tread grain? If you feed the ox either before or after the grain is threshed does the Law still prohibit you from muzzling him? Is this statute to prevent animal abuse? It would be difficult to argue that the ox is being abused or harmed if it is fed and watered before treading the grain, so why is it a sin to muzzle it? Obviously, there is more to this and now I want to show you how to THINK of the Law FROM A SPIRITUAL PERSPECTIVE.

1 CORINTHIANS 9:1-14 Am I not an apostle? am I not free? have I not seen Jesus Christ our Lord? are not ye my work in the Lord? 2 If I be not an apostle unto others, yet doubtless I am to you: for the seal of mine apostleship are ye in the Lord. 3 Mine answer to them that do examine me is this, 4 Have we not power to eat and to drink? 5 Have we not power to lead about a sister, a wife, as well as other apostles, and as the brethren of the Lord, and Cephas? 6 Or I only and Barnabas, have not we power to forbear working? 7 Who goeth a warfare any time at his own charges? who planteth a vineyard, and eateth not of the fruit thereof? or who feedeth a flock, and eateth not of the milk of the flock? 8 Say I these things as a man? or saith not the Law the same also? 9 For **it is written in the Law of Moses, Thou shalt not muzzle the mouth of the ox that treadeth out the corn. Doth God take care for oxen? 10 Or saith he *it altogether for our sakes? For our sakes, no doubt, this is written*: that he that ploweth should plow in hope; and that he that thresheth in hope should be partaker of his hope. 11 If we have sown unto you spiritual things, is it a great thing if we shall reap your carnal [physical] things?**

Paul is discussing receiving physical things necessary for life (he does NOT say WAGES!) for their labor of preaching the gospel and he claims it several times as a RIGHT (vv 4, 5, 12). He likens this to the army that provisions a soldier, a farmer or a shepherd who reaps the produce of his work, and the priests and Levites living off of the sacrifices. Then, just when you might think he would try to prove his point by referring to scriptures mandating tithes and offerings to the priesthood, he refers to the scripture in Deuteronomy 25:4 that prohibits muzzling an ox! Paul says that statute is not about the ox but about PEOPLE (vv 9-10). It has **nothing** to do with the ox. The spiritual understanding, fulfillment, and application of it produces agape love toward PEOPLE.

While there is not enough space to cover this topic in depth, the Bible is clear we must keep the Law of God. But first I must admit that I have been using two terms for the Law without an explanation. It is important to understand that I use the phrase the Law of Moses (the Torah) to refer to the physical Law given at Mount Sinai and the Law of God to refer to the agape love spiritual fulfillment of the Law of Moses. Paul said, “**the Law is [now] spiritual**” (Rom. 7:14) and “**love is the fulfilling of the Law**” (Rom. 13:10). He understood that “**the PURPOSE of the commandment [the Law] is love out of a pure heart**” (1 Tim. 1:5). The Law of Moses failed because it was physical and could never be perfectly kept. However, with the addition of the Holy Spirit, people can finally fulfill the true purpose for keeping the Law—to grow in agape love. As it says:

1 CORINTHIANS 2:12-14 Now **we have received**, not the spirit of the world, but **the spirit which is of God**; that we might know the things that are freely given to us of God. 13 Which things also we speak, not in the words which man's wisdom teacheth, but which **the Holy [Spirit] teacheth; comparing spiritual things with spiritual**. 14 But **the natural man receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God: for they are foolishness** unto him: neither can he know *them*, because **they are spiritually discerned**.

There you have it. Do we need to know the Law of Moses? Yes, but we fulfill or perfect it in agape love. The Psalmist (perhaps David, Ezra, Daniel, or Jeremiah) understood this well before Jesus Christ came:

PSALMS 119:96-105 I have seen an end to every purpose, but **Your [God's] commandment [Law] is exceedingly broad [more than physical]**. 97 O how love I Your law! **It is my meditation all the day**. 98 Your commandments make me **wiser than my enemies**, for they are ever with me. 99 **I have more understanding than all my teachers**, for Your testimonies are my meditation. 100 **I understand more than the ancients** because I keep Your precepts. 101 I have **held back my feet from every evil way**, so that I might keep Your word. 102 I have not departed from Your ordinances, for You have taught me. 103 **How sweet are Your words** to my taste! Yea, sweeter than honey to my mouth! 104 **Through Your precepts I get understanding; therefore I hate every false way**. 105 Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path.

Why would the Psalmist need to meditate all day on a statute such as one that prohibited muzzling an ox? Did he really 'love' (v97) such a statute? It is not that complicated or very interesting except maybe to a farmer. Knowing such a statute surely would **not** make him wiser than his enemies, teachers, or the ancients, either. You see, the Psalmist **meditated** on the Law to understand its SPIRITUAL fulfillment in agape love. He summed it up by saying, "Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path" (v105). What path is he referring to? Some well worn dirt trail through a field at night? No! He was thinking of the narrow path to eternity, God the Father, and Jesus Christ!

We, too, need to read the Law of Moses and spend time meditating upon its spiritual fulfillment so that it becomes the Law of GOD in our hearts and minds and we BECOME AGAPE LOVE!

(This topic is discussed in greater depth in the website audio message *Understanding God's Law*—<https://sabbathreflections.org/bible-studies/messages>.)

May God's grace and peace be upon you!

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SABBATH THOUGHT 2023-08-19—ARMOR OF GOD

May God bless you on His Sabbath day!

All of us need to be reminded and stay alert because we are fighting against a spiritual enemy—Satan and the demons. Their sole purpose is to cause all of mankind to reject the Holy Spirit of God and they hold a special malice for the children of God. The methods of their warfare against us vary from direct attacks to more subtle ones. Of the latter Paul says, “we are not ignorant of [*Satan’s*] devices.” (2 Cor. 2:11). But I wonder if that is the case today. For example, when Paul wrote that he was telling the Corinthians that they needed to forgive the man who had slept with his stepmother after he had repented. He said:

2 CORINTHIANS 2:6-11 Sufficient to such a man *is* this punishment, which was *inflicted* of many. 7 So that contrariwise **ye ought rather to forgive him, and comfort him**, lest perhaps such a one should be swallowed up with overmuch sorrow. 8 Wherefore I beseech you that **ye would confirm your love toward him**. 9 For to this end also did I write, that I might know the proof of you, whether ye be obedient in all things. 10 To whom ye forgive any thing, I *forgive* also: for if I forgave any thing, to whom I forgave *it*, for your sakes *forgave I it* in the person of Christ; 11 **Lest Satan should get an advantage of us**: for we are not ignorant of his devices.

Paul was effectively saying that unforgiveness is a device of Satan! So, too, are any unreconciled offenses. Had you considered that before? But Satan and his demons can attack us in ways that are more direct by influencing our thoughts, emotions, and dreams. Our main defense against such attacks is to keep our minds filled with thoughts of the Kingdom, growing in agape love, obedience, repentance, forgiveness, and doing good works. However, every child of God can be vulnerable at times and we all are subject to the weaknesses of the flesh. Again, Satan and the demons are unrelenting so do not be surprised when they attack. Instead, it is important to remember our strength lies in putting on the armor of GOD! While this is a very well known metaphor, have you noticed that Paul wrote this SPECIFICALLY as an encouragement against Satan and the demons? Notice:

EPHESIANS 6:10-18 Finally, my brethren, be strong in the Lord, and in the power of his might. 11 Put on the whole armour of God, that **ye may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil**. 12 **For we wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world, against spiritual wickedness in high places**. 13 Wherefore take unto you the whole armour of God, that **ye may be able to withstand in the evil day**, and having done all, to stand. 14 Stand therefore, having your loins girt about with truth, and having on the breastplate of righteousness; 15 And your feet shod with the preparation of the gospel of peace; 16 Above all, taking the shield of faith, wherewith ye shall be able to quench all **the fiery darts of the wicked**. 17 And take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God: 18 Praying always with all

prayer and supplication in the Spirit, and watching thereunto with all perseverance and supplication for all saints;

These scriptures focus exclusively on defeating unclean spirits. Truth, righteousness, peace, and faith are of God so they are hated by the wicked. While this is old news for anyone who has a modicum of familiarity with the Bible, do you take it seriously? The demons are constantly looking for an advantage over us so we cannot let our guard down...ever. Remember Peter¹? If it was not for Jesus Christ, Satan would have ‘sifted him as wheat.’ While that may not sound too terrible, notice what happens when God sifts the nations:

AMOS 9:9-10 For, lo, I [God] will command, and I will **sift the house of Israel** among all nations, **like as corn is sifted in a sieve**, yet shall not the least grain fall upon the earth. 10 **All the sinners of my people shall die** by the sword, which say, The evil shall not overtake nor prevent us.

Do not be deceived; the wicked spirits would like to sift all of us to our destruction. To prevent it from happening depends upon us—and the armor of God! Putting on the armor of God makes us soldiers of our Lord Jesus who is our King with all authority in heaven and on earth². But we are merely soldiers—only God knows the entire war plan. As such, we only know a small part of the many battles that take place during the war and all of our armaments come from God alone. Nothing of ourselves can equip us to deal with such a strong spiritual enemy so our victory comes through power of God’s truth, peace, faith, salvation, His Word, and...PRAYER.

It is important to also realize that God not only provides us with the means to defend ourselves but also the weapons with which to fight. The armor protects against the weapons of the enemy but the sword allows us to carry the fight to him. We need both. No one can predict when and where the enemy attacks and the armor is our protection when it happens. However, God gives us the sword of His Word to take up against our foes. How can a soldier be victorious if all he has is for his defense? To win, we must actually FIGHT the enemy.

Each of us also must be WILLING to walk out onto the battlefield. God gives us the means to defend against and fight the enemy, but we must have the heart to engage them. Our spiritual fight is not for the fainthearted. Courage is required to step onto the battlefield and carry the fight to the enemy. God’s armor will defend against the enemy but we must also engage him with the sword of the Word of God.

The problem is that we cannot always SEE our enemy. Sometimes, after we step out onto the battlefield it seems we are the only one standing there. Where is the enemy? If there is no apparent enemy, then why do we even have a sword? This is when we must remember that our enemy could be somewhere else on the larger battlefield. No soldier can see

¹ Luke 22:31.

² Matt. 28:18.

much beyond what is in front of him. Perhaps the enemy is over the next hill or hidden on our flanks. What then? This is when we must give our own personal fight—our individual part of the war—completely over to the Great King who directs the whole battle. This is what prayer is about—communicating with the General of the Army.

Even if the enemy is right in front of us, we may not know what to do. While each of us has a part in God’s army, we may not always be able to directly strike at our foe. That can be very troubling. When that is the case, we must seek out others who are soldiers in this fight. One of the tactics of our enemy is to isolate us and attack in force. That is why together, we are encouraged. Together, our defense is stronger and our offense is superior. When we—together—call upon God for each other!

We must always be ready for battle but sometimes it is only God that can see and direct the fight against our enemy. That can be very unsettling especially if we are attacked when we are alone. But are we alone? God is making us into kings³ and do you know what every king and prominent soldier had in ancient times? An armor-bearer. While the title may sound rather mundane and passive, their role was anything but. The story of Jonathan tells of a fight with an entire garrison (over twenty soldiers) of the Philistines:

1 SAMUEL 14:6-14 And Jonathan said to **the young man that bare his armour**, Come, and let us go over unto the garrison of these uncircumcised: it may be that the LORD will work for us: **for there is no restraint to the LORD to save by many or by few.** 7 And his armourbearer said unto him, Do all that *is* in thine heart: turn thee; behold, I *am* with thee according to thy heart. 8 Then said Jonathan, Behold, we will pass over unto *these* men, and we will discover ourselves unto them. 9 If they say thus unto us, Tarry until we come to you; then we will stand still in our place, and will not go up unto them. 10 But if they say thus, Come up unto us; then we will go up: for the LORD hath delivered them into our hand: and this *shall be* a sign unto us. 11 And both of them discovered themselves unto the garrison of the Philistines: and the Philistines said, Behold, the Hebrews come forth out of the holes where they had hid themselves. 12 And the men of the garrison answered Jonathan and his armourbearer, and said, Come up to us, and we will shew you a thing. And Jonathan said unto his armourbearer, Come up after me: for the LORD hath delivered them into the hand of Israel. 13 And **Jonathan climbed up upon his hands and upon his feet, and his armourbearer after him: and they fell before Jonathan; and his armourbearer slew after him.** 14 And that first slaughter, which **Jonathan and his armourbearer made, was about twenty men**, within as it were an half acre of land, *which a yoke of oxen might plow.*

Although he is not named, Jonathan’s armor-bearer accompanied him and killed several of the Philistines while fighting alongside Jonathan. Together, the two of them defeated an entire garrison by killing twenty of them. Do we have an “armor-bearer?” Yes, they are called angels. Paul said the angels are “ministering spirits, sent forth to minister for

³ Rev. 1:6; 5:10.

them who shall be heirs of salvation” (Heb. 1:14). They do many things similar to an armor-bearer. This is part of God’s promise that “I will never leave thee, nor forsake thee.” (Heb. 13:5). He has given us angels to attend to us in every fight of every battle. And, most of all, God promises us the victory if we are willing to do one thing:

EPHESIANS 6:13 Wherefore take unto you the whole armour of God, that ye may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand.

We must take up the whole armor of God—not some, but all of it. Only with the full armor can we stand against evil, stand against temptation, stand against threats, and stand against enemies. Also, we must stand in the sacrifice of Jesus Christ⁴, stand in God’s grace⁵, stand in the faith of Jesus Christ⁶, and stand in the power of God⁷! Those who do these things will also stand in the day of VICTORY:

REVELATION 15:2 And I saw as it were a sea of glass mingled with fire: and them [the saints] that had gotten the victory over the beast, and over his image, and over his mark, *and* over the number of his name, stand on the sea of glass, having the harps of God.

ISAIAH 25:8 He [God] will swallow up death in victory; and the Lord GOD will wipe away tears from off all faces; and the rebuke of his people shall he take away from off all the earth: for the LORD hath spoken *it*.

1 CORINTHIANS 15:54-57 Now when this corruptible shall have put on incorruptibility, and this mortal shall have put on immortality, then shall come to pass the saying that is written: “Death is swallowed up in victory.” 55 O death, where is your sting? O grave, where is your victory? 56 Now the sting of death *is* sin, and the power of sin *is* the law. 57 But thanks be to God, Who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.

When we gain the victory over temptations...victory over sin...and victory over all the wicked, we will finally be **raised from our knees** at the resurrection to STAND on our feet on the sea of glass in the presence of our Father and our Lord.

May God’s grace and peace be upon you!

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⁴ Gal. 5:1; Phil. 4:1; 1 Thess. 3:8.

⁵ 1 Pet. 5:12.

⁶ 1 Cor. 16:13.

⁷ 1 Cor. 2:5.

SABBATH THOUGHT 2023-08-26—GOATS IN SHEEP'S CLOTHING

May God bless you on His Sabbath day!

True life is one *without* death. Obviously, that is eternal life. So, this physical life is more of an *existence* because life that ends with death is not really life, is it? So what is the purpose of this physical existence? I believe there are two main reasons (for those in covenant with God). The first is to be perfected in agape love; that is, to be made like God IS—into agape love.

The second reason for this physical existence is to prove to God—and ourselves—whether or not we are growing in and becoming agape love. In my estimation, this almost always involves some form of suffering whether it is illness, disease, pain, poverty, persecution, etc. It should not come as a surprise to anyone that the begotten children of God must suffer in this life¹:

PHILIPPIANS 1:29 For **unto you it is given in the behalf of Christ**, not only to believe on Him, but also **to suffer for His sake**;

Those who suffer are being perfected in love, faith, and hope. But there is another side of suffering that reaches beyond the person who is afflicted. I am speaking of those who know of others who are suffering. In that lies opportunities to do good works, as it says:

2 TIMOTHY 3:17 That the man [*or woman*] of God may be perfect, throughly **furnished [equipped] unto [for the purpose of doing] all good works**.

EPHESIANS 2:10 For we are His [*God the Father's*] workmanship, **created in Christ Jesus unto [for the purpose of doing] good works**, which God hath before ordained that we should walk in them.

Many messages have been given on the various townships of the *ekklesia* in Revelation 2-3, but I have not heard one that recognizes what Jesus Christ said to those who lived in Thyatira:

REVELATION 2:18-19 And unto the angel of the church in Thyatira write ... 19 I [*Jesus Christ*] know **thy works, and charity, and service**, and faith, and thy patience, **and thy works**; and the last *are* more than the first.

What are their works? Charity (love) and service to others, especially for brethren. Something else that no one mentions is the fact that this was great PRAISE from Jesus Christ to those in Thyatira. Obviously, not all were followers of Jezebel (Rev. 2:20-23):

¹ Also 2 Tim. 3:12; 1 Pet. 4:16-17; 1 Pet. 5:10.

REVELATION 2:24 But to you I say, and **to the rest who are in Thyatira, as many as do not have this doctrine, and who have not known the depths of Satan,** as they speak; **I will not cast upon you any other burden,**

Actually, I believe that the *ekklesia* in Thyatira were more highly praised by Jesus Christ than all the others, including those of Philadelphia whom many believe were the ‘best’ of all the townships. Why? While Jesus acknowledged that the Philadelphians had a “little strength” (Rev. 3:8) and “kept the word of My patience” (Rev. 3:10), those are basic expectations. Jesus said, “when ye shall have done all those things which are commanded you, say, ‘We are unprofitable servants: we have done that which was our duty to do.’ ” (Luke 17:10). Those in Thyatira likewise had “patience” but, unlike the Philadelphians, the Thyatirans were praised for faith AND having **good works of love and service** to the brethren! Above all, Jesus said their last works were even *greater* than the first. Why such praise? Because good works are a reflection of God’s agape love IN a person. Love and good works are pleasing to God above all else. I have written and spoken many times about good works. They ARE salvational, as confirmed in the parable of the sheep and goats:

MATTHEW 25:31-46 When the Son of man shall come in His glory, and all the holy angels with Him, then shall He sit upon the throne of His glory: 32 And before Him shall be gathered all nations: and He shall separate them one from another, as a shepherd divideth *his* sheep from the goats: 33 And He shall set the sheep on His right hand, but the goats on the left. 34 Then shall the King say unto them on His right hand, **Come, ye [the sheep—those who do good works] blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world:** 35 For I was an hungred, and ye gave Me meat: I was thirsty, and ye gave Me drink: I was a stranger, and ye took Me in: 36 Naked, and ye clothed Me: I was sick, and ye visited Me: I was in prison, and ye came unto Me. 37 Then shall the righteous answer him, saying, Lord, when saw we Thee an hungred, and fed *Thee*? or thirsty, and gave *Thee* drink? 38 When saw we Thee a stranger, and took *Thee* in? or naked, and clothed *Thee*? 39 Or when saw we Thee sick, or in prison, and came unto Thee? 40 And the King shall answer and say unto them, Verily I say unto you, Inasmuch **as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto Me.**

Doing good works for those who suffer or are in need are a test of the heart—of agape love living and working in a person. Right now, at this very moment, there are a number of brethren who suffer. So here is my concern: many of them are alone and unattended. Among all of those who claim to be children of God, why would that ever be the case?!?

Much of the time it seems the excuse is that those in need are not a member of a certain organized ‘church!’ This is not unheard of and I suspect that every one of you know that this sort of rejection goes on. You have seen and likely experienced it. However, that does not answer the question of WHY this occurs. Could it be that the *ekklesia* have come to rely upon organizations to do the good works for them? Are good works the

responsibility of the ‘headquarters’ of a COG of which they are a ‘member’? Who believes that sending money (‘tithes’) to an organization fulfills the responsibilities WE have for one another? If any of these are true, then there is a problem—a really BIG problem. No one who sends money to an organization and thinks that satisfies their own good works for brethren in which they have the means and opportunity to help will be in the Kingdom! Those who doubt this must read:

MATTHEW 25:41-46 Then shall **he [Jesus Christ] say also unto them on the left hand [the goats, those who do NO good works], Depart from Me, ye cursed, into everlasting fire**, prepared for the devil and his angels: 42 For I was an hungred, and ye gave Me no meat: I was thirsty, and ye gave Me no drink: 43 I was a stranger, and ye took Me not in: naked, and ye clothed Me not: sick, and in prison, and ye visited Me not. 44 Then shall they also answer him, saying, Lord, when saw we Thee an hungred, or athirst, or a stranger, or naked, or sick, or in prison, and did not minister unto Thee? 45 Then shall He answer them, saying, Verily I say unto you, Inasmuch as ye did *it* not to one of the least of these, ye did *it* not to Me. 46 And **these shall go away into everlasting punishment: but the righteous into life eternal.**

Most needs are *not* about money nor can they be solved with money. In fact, the parable of the sheep and goats does not even MENTION money. It describes those who need food or drink; those who are isolated and need a friend; those who need clothes; those who are sick or ill and need help; and those are lonely and need encouragement (in prison). Refusing to help others as we have means and opportunity reflects an utter LACK of agape love, and that is the definition of a “goat.”

One lady lives within fifteen minutes from brethren who completely ignore her. Some are isolated and confined to their home without any help although brethren live nearby (even if only an hour or two away). Obviously, there are circumstances where it is not possible to be involved, but, remember, I am referring to those who HAVE the means and opportunity. How serious does the suffering or affliction have to be before someone steps in? Those things mentioned in the parable of the sheep and goats are SIMPLE but necessary. Many times, they are no more difficult than providing a ride to a Sabbath meeting or the grocery store, taking time to visit with the lonely, calling or writing a card of encouragement, visiting someone in the hospital, or helping with home repairs.

Is their excuse to avoid good works that someone is not a ‘member’ of the same organization? What does it take for someone to have enough agape love to help a brother or sister even if they are a “stranger” to them? Paul said, “**by love serve** one another” (Gal. 5:13). The *ekklesia* of God should not be divided by ANYTHING! Certainly not by a man-made organization. Paul also said in Ephesians 4:2-6 that we SUFFER (the meaning of the Greek word for *forebear*) **with one another** in love because there is only ONE body, ONE spirit, ONE hope, ONE Lord, ONE faith, ONE baptism, and ONE God the Father of all of us. In fact, “all *men* know that ye are My [Jesus Christ’s] disciples, **if**

ye have love one to another.” (John 13:35). We are to be ONE WITH EACH OTHER²! To what end?

EPHESIANS 4:16 **From whom [Jesus Christ]** the whole body fitly joined together and compacted **by that which every joint [that is you and me]** **supplieth**, according to the effectual working in the measure of every part, **maketh increase of the body unto the edifying of itself in love.**

What does that mean? It means that Jesus supplies those things TO the children of God so that they have the means and opportunities to do good works that build one up another in agape love! Who withholds those things they have been blessed to do from those in need? Who is blessed with time to talk? Who is a handyman (or woman)? Who can provide transportation? Who has gifts to encourage, or provide wisdom or console those who are hurting? Many of the *ekklesia* act like the current generations who ‘socialize’ solely through a cell phone. Too many will only pray for those who suffer because they do not want to actually take the time to engage with them. Prayer is NOT all that God expects of us if, as Paul said in Ephesians 4:16, Jesus Christ supplies us with the means and opportunity to do good works. James clearly backs this up:

JAMES 2:14-17 What *doth it* profit, my brethren, though a man say he hath faith, and **have not works**? can faith save him? 15 If a brother or sister be naked, and destitute of daily food, 16 And one of you say unto them, Depart in peace, be ye warmed and filled; notwithstanding **ye give them not those things which are needful to the body; what doth it profit?** 17 Even so **faith, if it hath not works, is dead**, being alone.

Let me be blunt. James, along with the parable of the goats, etc., tells us that unless we do good works (I will say it again—AS Jesus Christ provides the means and opportunity), THERE...IS...NO...SALVATION! Our Father wants loving SHEEP, not a people who have no love for their fellow brethren. The latter are behaving simply as goats in sheep’s clothing! He wants children whose heart, mind, and soul—their very being—ARE agape love and PROVE it through good works to one another. May we, brethren, be worthy of the praise of Jesus Christ, like He gave to those in Thyatira, because OUR last good works were more—MUCH more—than the first!

May God’s grace and peace be upon you!

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² John 17:21-24.

SABBATH THOUGHT 2023-09-02—PUZZLING SCRIPTURES #1

May God bless you on His Sabbath day!

Many scriptures in the Bible are difficult to understand. Some for reasons of language or culture while others are lost in idiomatic expressions. Then there are those that are either poor or wrong translations into English. I thought I would discuss a few that have puzzled me until either they were answered through my own experience or by the wisdom of others. I hope you find them interesting and useful.

One that was driven home by personal experience is the statute “Ye shall kindle no fire throughout your habitations upon the sabbath day.” (Exod. 35:3). For years I thought this applied to fireplaces, cooking fires, and the like. But one day at a Sabbath gathering, while talking to a man I knew fairly well, he burst out in anger and started yelling at me. While he was prone to anger, this was the first time I had witnessed it on the Sabbath. His tirade upset me so much so that I heard nothing of the prayers, songs, or message during the service. It was later that I realized he had ‘kindled a fire’ that consumed my Sabbath. I have recounted this story in the past, so forgive me if you have heard it before, but I believe it is a lesson of how to spiritually understand the Law of God. Actually, the Bible had the answer all along (and describes exactly how I felt on that particular Sabbath):

PSALMS 57:4 My soul *is* among lions: *and I lie even among them that are set on fire, even the sons of men, whose teeth are spears and arrows, and their tongue a sharp sword.*

Recently, I was asked if I could explain a scripture that, frankly, always puzzled me:

EXODUS 23:19 ... Thou shalt not seethe a kid in his mother’s milk.

My answer at the time was simply a guess and it turns out that I missed the whole point of it. After looking into it over the last couple of weeks, this phrase is not just randomly inserted into Scripture. In fact, it is mentioned two more times but ALWAYS in the same CONTEXT. Read carefully the three instances and pay attention to the highlighted text associated with that statute:

EXODUS 23:19 The first of the firstfruits of thy land thou shalt bring into the house of the LORD thy God. Thou shalt not seethe a kid in his mother’s milk.

EXODUS 34:26 The first of the firstfruits of thy land thou shalt bring unto the house of the LORD thy God. Thou shalt not seethe a kid in his mother’s milk.

DEUTERONOMY 14:21-22 ... Thou shalt not seethe a kid in his mother’s milk. 22 Thou shalt truly tithe all the increase of thy seed, that the field bringeth forth year by year.

“Thou shalt not see the kid in his mother’s milk” is always mentioned along with tithes (“first of your firstfruits”). Interestingly, tithes were ALWAYS from animals or crops, but only one of these scriptures specifically refers to crops when it mentions *seed* and *field*. That seems odd, since the statute is directed at animals.

So, what does it mean? First, examine two important phrases: “the FIRST of the firstfruits [*tithes of animals or crops*]” (Exod. 23:19, 34:26) and “INCREASE of thy seed, that the field bringeth forth YEAR BY YEAR” (Deut. 14:22). Obviously, the statute applies to both animals AND crops but it emphasizes the FIRST of the firstfruits and the INCREASE so it applies to each year. In other words, tithes were to be of the animals born that year or from the crops harvested that year. Tithes were never to be taken from previous years.

In that sense, “Thou shalt not see the kid in his mother’s milk” is an idiom referring to a tithe from the new year—the kid—PLUS something from the previous years—the mother’s milk. In fact, the Hebrew scholar J. Webb Mealy “... hypothesizes that the expression ‘boil a kid in its mother’s milk’ was a figure of speech used by the Hebrews to refer to a common peasant farmer’s tactic ... of secretly making up a portion of the yearly rent [*tithe*] obligation ... with surplus grain from the previous year’s harvest.”

Obviously, a female goat that gave birth was not born in the current year so it could not be included as part of a tithe on the INCREASE of the new year. However, what if someone wanted to keep one of the kids born that year that should have been given as part of the tithes and, instead, substitutes milk from last year’s goat? This obviously is a way to avoid the 20% penalty for redeeming an animal in Leviticus 27:9-13. According to Mealy, some Israelites found ways to circumvent tithing on new animals or new crops. Who would not prefer to keep the new animals or crops by substituting or supplementing with the old? Regardless, this seems like a reasonable answer to this puzzling statute especially when we read how God views inappropriate tithes or offerings:

MALACHI 1:8, 10-14 And **if ye offer the blind for sacrifice, is it not evil? and if ye offer the lame and sick, is it not evil?** offer it now unto thy governor; will he be pleased with thee, or accept thy person? saith the LORD of hosts. ... 10 ... I have no pleasure in you, saith the LORD of hosts, **neither will I accept an offering at your hand.** 11 ... in every place **incense shall be offered unto My name, and a pure offering:** for My name *shall be* great among the heathen, saith the LORD of hosts. 12 But **ye have profaned it,** ... 13 ... and **ye brought that which was torn, and the lame, and the sick;** thus ye brought an offering: **should I accept this of your hand?** saith the LORD. 14 But **cursed be the deceiver,** which hath in his flock a male, and voweth, **and sacrificeth unto the Lord a corrupt thing:** for I *am* a Great King, saith the LORD of hosts, and My name *is* dreadful among the heathen.

Another verse that has been widely misunderstood is about swearing. I will only briefly mention it because it is covered in much greater depth in the booklet “Swearing of Oaths—Does Matthew 5:34 Forbid Them?” at <https://sabbathreflections.org/bible-studies/booklets/>. The Scripture in question is:

MATTHEW 5:34 But I [*Jesus Christ*] say unto you, **Swear not at all**; neither by heaven; for it is God's throne:

The problem is that this seriously conflicts with a plethora of scriptures in both the Old and New Testaments that advocate, and even require (such as for a marriage or baptismal covenant), the swearing of oaths. The short version is that this is not upheld in the Bible EXCEPT in the case of swearing FALSE oaths. Again, refer to the booklet for the in-depth exegesis.

Context is very important but here is a case where a clue to the meaning of three 'separate' statutes is found in just one of the verses:

DEUTERONOMY 22:9-11 Thou **shalt not sow thy vineyard with divers seeds**: lest the fruit of thy seed which thou hast sown, and the fruit of thy vineyard, **be defiled**. 10 Thou **shalt not plow with an ox and an ass** together. 11 Thou **shalt not wear a garment of divers sorts**, as of woollen and linen together.

All three verses describe diverse or dissimilar things that do not work together similar to the way that oil and water do not mix. I cannot count the number of times each of these has been academically debated in a literal sense. But the fact that 'diverse' seeds produce fruit that can be *defiled* immediately tells us this statute has a much greater spiritual implication. *Defiled* means to be ceremonially or morally unclean, something that is utterly impossible for anything produced by seeds. The Hebrew word for *defiled* comes from *qadash*, which is a state of being holy to God. God called the ground holy (*qodesh*) where He stood when meeting with Moses (Exod. 3:5) but it was 'undefiled' because of God's PRESENCE. Nothing can be holy unless established by God and, likewise, nothing can be defiled except by the actions of people.

So, these verses are not referring to seed, an ox and ass, or garments. Is God concerned with incompatible seeds, animals, or clothing? Or is God concerned with PEOPLE and helping them to make wise decisions in their lives. Does a law about garments have any real importance? Whether scripture is talking about dissimilar seeds, oxen and donkeys, or wool and linen, these are all examples of diverse things that **oppose** each other. If we apply them to PEOPLE of different cultures and beliefs, we can see they are spiritual statutes. Paul recognized that there were people who would be incompatible together for cultural or religious differences. In fact, he was actually referring to Deuteronomy 22:10 when he said:

2 CORINTHIANS 6:14 **Be ye [believers] not unequally yoked together with unbelievers**: for what fellowship hath righteousness with unrighteousness? and what communion hath light with darkness?

Paul says **righteousness is to lawlessness** and **light is to darkness** in the same way that dissimilar seeds produce bad fruit, wool is to linen, and oxen are to donkeys. These scriptures are about incompatibility between people, whether in a marriage, family, or

fellowship. Do they pertain to the physical? Perhaps, but God is mainly concerned with PEOPLE and those things mentioned in Deuteronomy 22:9-11 are not salvational.

It is a fact that much of the NT is either a direct quote or a reference or an inference of the OT, because the NT is in many ways ‘sermons’ from the OT. But today believers tend to emphasize study of the NT without similar regard to the Old. However, many scriptures are answered by delving into the OT Law, Prophets, and Writings. One such example is from the Beatitudes: “Blessed *are* the meek: for they shall inherit the earth.” (Matt. 5:5).

Who are the meek? Are they simply those who are quiet, gentle, easily imposed on, or submissive (Oxford dictionary)? Does the Bible explain meekness? Actually, Matthew 5:5 is a quote of Psalm 37:11, which lists at least six synonyms for those who are ‘meek’:

PSALM 37:9 ... **those that wait upon the LORD, they shall inherit the earth.**

PSALM 37:11 ... **the meek shall inherit the earth; and shall delight themselves in the abundance of peace.**

PSALM 37:18 The LORD knoweth the days of **the upright: and their inheritance shall be for ever.**

PSALM 37:21 ... **the righteous sheweth mercy, and giveth. 22 For such as be blessed of Him shall inherit the earth.**

PSALM 37:29 **The righteous shall inherit the land,** and dwell therein for ever.

PSALM 37:34 **Wait on the LORD, and keep His way, and He shall exalt thee to inherit the land.**

Meekness is so much more than the dictionary definition. Those who inherit the earth are waiting upon God, lovers of peace, behave uprightly, merciful, giving, righteous, and keepers of God’s Law. This gives a whole new meaning to the meek of the earth!

The depth of Scripture cannot be determined and I hope this has been useful, encouraging, and informative. I plan to write about more puzzling scriptures in the future and I would love to hear from you about scriptures you have been inspired to understand.

May God’s grace and peace be upon you!

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SABBATH THOUGHT 2023-09-09—OF SUCH IS THE KINGDOM

May God bless you on His Sabbath day!

One of the most widely recognized scriptures in the Bible also concerns me. I am referring to the time when children were brought to Jesus, likely by their parents, for Him to bless them:

MARK 10:13-16 And they brought young children to Him [*Jesus Christ*], that He should touch them: and *His* disciples rebuked those that brought *them*. 14 But when Jesus saw *it*, He was much displeased, and said unto them, [Allow] the little children to come unto Me, and forbid them not: for of such is the kingdom of God. 15 Verily I say unto you, Whosoever shall not receive the kingdom of God as a little child, he shall not enter therein. 16 And He took them up in his arms, put *His* hands upon them, and blessed them.

What bothers me is that some or all of the twelve disciples tried to keep the children from coming to Jesus. Why in the world would they do that? It is not as if Jesus had ever given them any indication that He had ever refused to see anyone before. In fact, He dedicated His life and ministry to the people feeding, teaching, and healing them. He did it almost to exhaustion because there were times He really needed to be alone with His Father¹.

I wonder what was in the minds of the disciples. Did they consider children to be a waste of Jesus' time because of their age? Were they so ingrained with the ways of the priests and scribes who thought they were more important than the common people that they tried to shut them out of the Kingdom²? Regardless, it says that Jesus was “**much** displeased.” He was plainly annoyed or perhaps even angry with the disciples for keeping the children away. I will probably never know their true motives at the time but their behavior baffles me.

The parents, on the other hand, brought their children so that Jesus could “touch” them. That word in the Greek has a very intimate and caring meaning. It means to attach oneself to or take hold of in the sense of a deep relationship similar to that with a spouse. To me, the parents brought their children so they could be hugged and kissed by Jesus as He blessed them. I cannot imagine that the parents saw Jesus as a stranger or even as the Messiah and brought their children simply for a blessing. They must have followed Jesus often, listening to Him and had come to believe in Him. Maybe they even loved Him because they entrusted their precious children to His care and blessing. Perhaps they were moved by the words of Jesus when He said:

MATTHEW 18:3-5 And said, Verily I say unto you, Except ye be converted, and become as little children, ye shall not enter into the kingdom of heaven. 4 Whosoever therefore shall humble himself as this little child, the same is greatest

¹ Matt. 14:23; Luke 9:18.

² Matt. 23:13.

in the kingdom of heaven. 5 And **whoso shall receive one such little child in my name receiveth me.**

But the point of the story is that Jesus said “of such [*that is, children*] **is** the Kingdom of God.” In other words, the Kingdom of God is MADE UP of innocent, meek, loving, and obedient children. This is exactly what is described in the Beatitudes: those who are humble, meek, righteous, merciful, pure in heart, and peacemakers. These are the characteristics of the eternal children of God who will inherit the Kingdom:

MATTHEW 5:3, 5-9 Blessed are the **poor [humble]** in spirit: for theirs is the **kingdom of heaven.** 5 Blessed are the **meek:** for they shall **inherit the earth.** 6 Blessed are they which do hunger and thirst after **righteousness:** for they shall be filled. 7 Blessed are the **merciful:** for they shall obtain mercy. 8 Blessed are the **pure in heart:** for they shall **see God.** 9 Blessed are the **peacemakers:** for they shall be called the **children of God.**

Many times when we think about the Kingdom of God it is in terms of the New Heavens and New Earth. We envision the city New Jerusalem descending out of heaven “having the **glory of God!**” If flesh and blood cannot look upon the glory of the face of God without perishing³, that is a glory unimaginable. The city and the streets are made entirely of transparent gold. There is a great high wall around it made of jasper with twelve gates made of pearls and an angel beside each one. The wall sits on twelve foundations made of twelve precious stones.⁴

Is this your vision at the beginning of the Kingdom of God? I hope so. I also hope you dwell upon this as the beginning of an eternity when we “rejoice with joy unspeakable and [*are*] full of glory” (1 Pet. 1:8). It will be a time when “**the increase of His [Kingdom]** and **peace there shall be** no end, upon the throne of David, and upon his kingdom, to order it, and to establish it with **judgment** and with **justice** from henceforth even **for ever.**” (Isa. 9:7).

But HOW will this be possible? I know that might sound like an odd question, but consider how it will be possible for rejoicing, joy unspeakable, and peace and justice to not just to continue but *increase* for all eternity? Simplistically, we could say that it will just simply happen because New Jerusalem “is the city of the **Great King**”⁵ who is God the Father possessing all power, might, majesty, glory, and honor! He will just MAKE it happen.

But that is not very satisfying because the answer is foundational to what the Kingdom IS. Yes, we have a vision of WHAT the Kingdom will be as portrayed in all its glory in Revelation 21. But *what* of something is many times dependent upon *who* reside in it.

Think of it this way. Few buy a house they personally designed and built. A husband looks at the practical aspects of it. To a certain extent, so does the wife but what makes a

³ Exod. 33:20.

⁴ Rev. 21:11-21.

⁵ Matthew 5:35.

house unique to the occupants is the personalization of it, usually by the wife. In other words, a wife many times makes it a home that uniquely reflects the two of them. It is her personality, tastes, and character that determine the furniture, the wall colors, pictures hanging in various rooms, family photos deliberately placed throughout, etc. that make it unique, not so much the design and construction. When someone visits, there is a certain feel about the home that mirrors the personality of the people who live there.

The same is true in some regards with the Kingdom. In all its glory, New Jerusalem will be so much more than anyone can dream or imagine. But, just like a house, New Jerusalem will reflect the character of those who will inhabit it and it will be the home of the WIFE of the Son of God! In fact, New Jerusalem is “**prepared as a Bride adorned for her Husband**” (Rev. 21:2)! The preparations the Bride of Christ is making are very specific and very special because she wants to please her Husband, Jesus Christ, the very son of GOD! Her character will be PERFECT. Her ways PERFECT. Everything about her will be PERFECTION—her heart, words, beauty, humility, service, smile, joy, and dedication. She will not only be the perfect Wife, but the perfect Bride whose Husband formally presents her to His Father in a wondrous ceremony. And her home, New Jerusalem will reflect her perfection as well. Perhaps we could say that city will be made a **home**—prepared and adorned—by the Bride for her Husband, the Son of God.

When someone enters into New Jerusalem, they will know that the Wife of Jesus Christ lives there and that she is humble, meek, righteous, merciful, pure in heart, and a peacemaker. All will know the Wife of Christ when they walk through one of the twelve gates. New Jerusalem will reflect her perfect character and heart. In addition to God the Father and Jesus Christ, she is the WHO of the Kingdom! But who are those who visit the home of the Wife of Christ?

REVELATION 21:24-25 And **the nations of them which are saved** shall walk in the light of it [*New Jerusalem*]: and **the kings of the earth** do bring their glory and honour into it [*New Jerusalem*]. 25 And the gates of it shall not be shut at all by day: for there shall be no night there.

The New Jerusalem is the city of the Great King, His Son, and the Son’s Bride. If I understand Scripture, those who are saved after the firstfruits are not given residence there, but they will visit often because they will live around it. However, the residents of New Jerusalem must PREPARE as a Bride before they will take up residence there—and it all comes down to BECOMING agape love and DOING good works.

I speak about those two topics often because they DEFINE those who will be the Bride of Christ in New Jerusalem! NO ONE who has not BECOME agape love and dedicates their lives to serving others will be a part of it. That is the story of the sheep and goats (Matt. 25: 31-46).

MATTHEW 25:34-36 Then shall the King [*Jesus Christ*] say unto them on His right hand [**the sheep**], Come, ye blessed of My Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world: **35 For I was an hungred, and ye gave Me meat: I was thirsty, and ye gave Me drink: I was a stranger,**

and ye took Me in: 36 Naked, and ye clothed Me: I was sick, and ye visited Me: I was in prison, and ye came unto Me.

MATTHEW 25:41-43 Then shall He say also unto them on the left hand **[the goats]**, Depart from Me, ye cursed, into everlasting fire, prepared for the devil and his angels: **42 For I was an hungred, and ye gave Me no meat: I was thirsty, and ye gave Me no drink: 43 I was a stranger, and ye took Me not in: naked, and ye clothed Me not: sick, and in prison, and ye visited Me not.**

Those who fail in this life to grow in agape love and works of service are also likened to the five foolish virgins who were bereft of the Holy Spirit (Matt. 25:1-12) and were told by Jesus Christ that He did not know them. Those who fail to invest their “talents” in doing good works for others end up weeping and gnashing their teeth (Matt. 25:14-30).

The common theme of all of these parables is the success or failure of **becoming** agape love and having a heart that **desires and strives** to do good works. Those who fail in this will not receive eternity. Those who would make New Jerusalem their home are those who zealously seek to do those things NOW, in this life of flesh and blood. New Jerusalem will be one that is overwhelmingly inviting, secure, beautiful, comfortable, peaceful, generous, calm, loving, and a place where everyone desires to be and where all are welcome. Entering into THIS home, one will experience a sense of perfect love and where all who come will be served.

I think of the Passover, Days of Unleavened Bread, and Pentecost as **Covenant Days**. Passover is the blood of the New Covenant, Days of Unleavened Bread portray having liberty from sin through partaking of God’s righteousness, and Pentecost is the seal of the New Covenant. These days are pieces of our covenant with God.

The autumn holydays—Trumpets, Atonement, and Tabernacles—are what I call **Kingdom Days**. They portray the utter destruction of the wicked and liberation of the world from sin and the offering of eternal life. This culminates in the New Heavens and New Earth with the glorious entrance of New Jerusalem upon the scene. In other words, the beginning of the eternal Kingdom of God and Jesus Christ.

Together, these days portray the Plan of Salvation of God Most High and His Son. But to truly have a vision of the Kingdom requires having more than a mind’s eye picture of a new universe of stars and planets or a glorious city of gold. It also requires seeing that it is a place where love, peace, joy, service and generosity are the NATURE of the inhabitants. It is a place filled with children who have the perfect character of love and give service to all! And because perfect love begets more love, the Kingdom will always be ever-increasing love, joy, and peace for all eternity!

May God’s grace and peace be upon you!

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SABBATH THOUGHT 2023-09-16—PURPOSE OF THE DAY OF THE LORD

May God bless you on His Sabbath day!

The holyday known as Trumpets is one that is filled with the contradiction of both dread and hope. The end-time events consist of the Seven Seals that are opened by the Lamb, Jesus Christ. These seals make up the whole of the Day of the LORD also known as the Day of the LORD'S Vengeance:

ISAIAH 34:8 For *it is* **the day of the LORD'S vengeance**, and the year of recompences for the controversy of [*strife against*] Zion.

ISAIAH 61:2 To proclaim **the acceptable year** of the LORD, and **the day of vengeance of our God**; to comfort all that mourn;

JEREMIAH 46:10 For this *is* **the day of the Lord** GOD of hosts, **a day of vengeance**, that He may avenge Him of His adversaries: and the sword shall devour, and it shall be satiate and made drunk with their blood: for the Lord GOD of hosts hath a sacrifice in the north country by the river Euphrates.

Scripture indicates that the first six seals are terrors of Satan unleashed through the hand of the Beast who is the leader of the resurrected ancient Babylonian system. These destructions come upon the whole world; however, it also serves to punish the national descendants of Israel. Once the first six seals are complete, things then change and the punisher (Babylon) becomes the target of punishments. This is a focus of the Day of Trumpets.

As it says in Isaiah 61:2 above, the Day of Trumpets portrays a set of events that occur over a year when the Seven Trumpets announce the various and increasing punishments of God upon the world. In fact, the Seventh Seal IS the sequence of the Seven Trumpets:

REVELATION 8:1-2, 4-6 And when He [*the Lamb*] had opened **the seventh seal**, there was silence in heaven about the space of half an hour. 2 And I saw **the seven angels** which stood before God; and **to them were given seven trumpets**. ... 4 And the smoke of the incense, *which came* with the prayers of the saints, ascended up before God out of the angel's hand. 5 And the angel took the censer, and filled it with fire of the altar, and cast *it* into the earth: and there were voices, and thunderings, and lightnings, and an earthquake. 6 And the **seven angels which had the seven trumpets prepared themselves to sound**.

The Seventh Seal is unique from the first six. It begins with a half-hour pause in heaven (Rev. 8:1) after it is opened. Perhaps this pause is similar to *Selah* used in the Psalms—it is intended to distinguish the first six seals that were unleashed by Satan from those of the Seventh Seal, which is the beginning of God's vengeance upon the world. And just as the first six seals are unique from the seventh, the first six *trumpets* of the seventh seal are unique from the *Seventh Trumpet*. Notice the events of the first six trumpets:

- **Trumpet #1**: 1/3 of trees and all grass burned up (Rev. 8:7).
- **Trumpet #2**: 1/3 of sea life dies and 1/3 of ship destroyed (Rev. 8:8-9).

- **Trumpet #3:** 1/3 of rivers and springs poisoned causing many deaths (Rev. 8:10-11).
- **Trumpet #4:** 1/3 of the sun, moon, and stars darkened for 1/3 of the day and 1/3 of the night (Rev. 8:12).
- **Trumpet #5 (Woe #1):** The "Destroyer" (Abaddon, Apollyon) and his demons released from the bottomless pit to torment mankind for 5 months (Rev. 9:1-12).
- **Trumpet #6 (Woe #2):** Four angels (demons) with an army of 200 million released to kill 1/3 of mankind (Rev. 9:13-21). Also, Revelation 11:14 says that the following are included with the sixth trumpet:
 - The Seven Thunders are spoken but not recorded (Rev. 10:1-4).
 - The apostle John eats the Little Book (Rev. 10:8-11).
 - The Temple outer court and Jerusalem are trampled by gentiles 42 months (Rev. 11:1-2).
 - The Two Witnesses testify 1,260 days against the world and are killed by "Destroyer" (Abaddon, Apollyon) (Rev. 11:3-12).
 - A Great Earthquake destroys 1/10 of Jerusalem, kills 7,000 residents, causes islands disappear, and levels mountains (Rev. 11:13).

As you can see, up until the Sixth Trumpet they are mostly directed to destroying the environment of the earth, which makes it extremely hard for human life to support itself under any economic system. Even though more than 1/3 of mankind dies during these six trumpets, the worst is yet to come.

Trumpet #7 (Includes the Seven Vial Plagues)

When the Seventh Trumpet sounds, it initiates a changeover in the rulership of this world.

- God & Christ reign over the kingdoms of this world. (Rev. 11:15-18a.)

What happens next is a fulfillment of prophecy:

ISAIAH 63:4 For **the day of vengeance** is in Mine heart, and **the year of My redeemed** is come.

This is the realization of the hope of all the saints—a resurrection to eternal life:

- Resurrection of the saints and the mystery of 1 Cor. 15:51-57 is finished (Rev. 10:5-7; 11:18b-19; 14:1-5).

Having the resurrection at this time is necessary in order to fulfill the prophecies of God that He, and He alone, will exact vengeance on behalf of all the saints:

DEUTERONOMY 32:35, 41 **To Me belongeth vengeance, and recompence;** their foot shall slide in *due* time: for **the day of their calamity is at hand,** and the things that shall come upon them make haste. ... 41 If I whet My glittering sword, and Mine hand take hold on judgment; **I will render vengeance to Mine enemies, and will reward them that hate Me.**

This is not only to *take* vengeance on behalf of the saints but also so that they can *witness* it. Therefore, the saints must be resurrected before the fulfillment of the Seventh Trumpet:

DEUTERONOMY 32:10 **The righteous shall rejoice when he seeth the vengeance:** he shall wash his feet in the blood of the wicked.

Continuing, Scripture outlines the next events of the Seventh Trumpet:

- Declaration of the coming destruction of Babylon (Rev. 14:6-11).
- "Reaping" of the saints to eternal life (Rev. 14:12-16).
- "Reaping" of the wicked to the Lake of Fire (Rev. 14:17-20).
- Declaration of the seven Vial Plagues—the vengeance of God (Rev. 15:1-8; 16:1).

The remainder of the events are so destructive that the Seventh Trumpet is divided into seven Vial Plagues of which the wicked Babylonian system is the target:

JEREMIAH 51:6-8, 11 Flee out of the midst of **Babylon**, and deliver every man his soul: be not cut off in her iniquity; for **this is the time of the LORD'S vengeance;** He will render unto her a recompence. 7 *Babylon hath been a golden cup in the LORD'S hand, that made all the earth drunken: the nations have drunken of her wine; therefore the nations are mad.* 8 **Babylon is suddenly fallen and destroyed:** howl for her; take balm for her pain, if so be she may be healed. ... 11 Make bright the arrows; gather the shields: the LORD hath raised up the spirit of the kings of the Medes: for **His device is against Babylon, to destroy it; because it is the vengeance of the LORD,** the vengeance of His temple.

Once again, the first six Vial Plagues differ from the seventh. While all seven Vial Plagues are directed against Babylon, the Beast, and the False Prophet, the first five are God's vengeance that causes the wicked to greatly **suffer**:

- **Vial Plague #1:** Poured upon the earth (men) causing grievous sores upon those with the Mark of the Beast and those who worshipped his image (Rev. 16:2).
- **Vial Plague #2:** Poured upon the sea killing all sea life (Rev. 16:3).
- **Vial Plague #3:** Poured upon rivers and springs turning them to blood (Rev. 16:4-7).
- **Vial Plague #4:** Poured upon the sun to scorch men with fire and heat (Rev. 16:8-9).
- **Vial Plague #5:** Poured upon the kingdom of the Beast causing darkness and pain (Rev. 16:10-11).

As a result of these first five Vial Plagues, Satan, the Beast, and the False Prophet decide to battle against God Almighty. Preparation for this is the sixth Vial Plague:

- **Vial Plague #6:** Poured upon the river Euphrates and three demons come out of the dragon, the Beast, and the False Prophet who gather the nations to the battle of Armageddon against Jesus Christ (Rev. 16:12-16).

As Satan, the Beast, and False Prophet prepare for war, the seventh Vial Plague occurs:

- **Vial Plague #7:** Poured into the air causing an earthquake that divides Babylon into three parts and destroys the cities of the nations; causes islands and mountains to disappear; and hail (16" diameter, 50 pound) falls upon all mankind (Rev. 16:17-21).

What now follows is a description of the wickedness of Babylon (Rev. 17) and a description of the destruction of Babylon (Rev. 18; 19:1-3). Then the seventh Vial Plague finishes with:

- The final and utter **destruction of Babylon** (Rev. 19:11-21).

After this Satan is imprisoned in the abyss (Rev. 20:1-3). The seven Vial Plagues are so destructive that maybe only a TENTH of the world's population survives:

ISAIAH 6:11-13 Then said I [*Isaiah*], Lord, how long? And He answered, Until **the cities be wasted without inhabitant, and the houses without man, and the land be utterly desolate [the result of the destruction throughout the seventh Trumpet]**, 12 And the LORD have removed men far away, and *there be* a great forsaking in the midst of the land. 13 But yet in it *shall be* **a tenth, and it shall return**, and shall be eaten: as a teil tree, and as an oak, whose substance *is* in them, when they cast *their leaves*: so **the holy seed** *shall be* the substance thereof.

At the beginning I said that the Day of Trumpets is both a time of both dread and hope. Without a doubt, there will be unimaginable terrors and death against the wicked, but there is also great hope for all those who love God. This happens at the resurrection of the saints, which is then followed by the liberation of the world's remaining survivors from a scorched and dead earth. All of this is directed by Sun of Righteousness—Jesus Christ—who is the King Immanuel prophesied to return and bring:

MALACHI 4:1-3 For, behold, **the day cometh**, that shall burn as an oven; and all the proud, yea, and all that do wickedly, shall be stubble: and the day that cometh shall burn them up, saith the LORD of hosts, that it shall leave them neither root nor branch. 2 But **unto you that fear My name shall the Sun of Righteousness arise with healing in His wings; and ye shall go forth, and grow up as calves of the stall**. 3 And ye shall tread down the wicked; for they shall be ashes under the soles of your feet in the day that I shall do *this*, saith the LORD of hosts.

Our Savior—God the Father¹ and Jesus Christ—will bring HEALING and PEACE to the world for the first time. Ultimately, THAT is the purpose of the Day of Trumpets. It is so much more than suffering and destruction—it is a New Beginning!

May God's grace and peace be upon you!

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¹ Luke 1:47; 1 Tim. 1:1; 2:3; 4:10; Titus 1:3; 2:10; 3:4; Jude 1:25.

SABBATH THOUGHT 2023-09-23—CRY OUT TO GOD

May God bless you on His Sabbath day!

The Day of Atonement, like other holydays, begins with the sound of a trumpet. But this is a special and unique declaration when this trumpet is blown:

LEVITICUS 25:9 Then shalt thou cause **the trumpet of the jubile to sound on the tenth day of the seventh month, in the day of atonement** shall ye **make the trumpet sound** throughout all your land.

This trumpet announces the start of the Jubilee year which is a year of ‘returning’:

LEVITICUS 25:10 And ye shall hallow the fiftieth year, and proclaim liberty throughout *all* the land unto all the inhabitants thereof: it shall be a jubile unto you; and **ye shall return [H7725 = shuwb] every man unto his possession, and ye shall return every man unto his family.**

The Jubilee is a year when debts are forgiven and bondservants are released to return to their homes, lands, and families. Someone who could only repay a debt by indenturing himself as a bondservant must have looked forward to Atonement and the Jubilee as one of the most joyous events in their life. Oh, to be liberated from debt and servitude!

But there is coming the greatest Jubilee yet—the rescue and return of the captives out of the Tribulation and Day of the Lord:

EZEKIEL 20:33-34 As I live, saith the Lord GOD, surely with a mighty hand, and with a stretched out arm, and with fury poured out, will I rule over you: 34 And **I will bring you out from the people, and will gather you out of the countries wherein ye are scattered**, with a mighty hand, and with a stretched out arm, and with fury poured out.

ISAIAH 61:1-2 The Spirit of the Lord GOD *is* upon me; because the LORD hath anointed me to preach good tidings unto the meek; He hath sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, **to proclaim liberty to the captives, and the opening of the prison to them that are bound;** 2 **To proclaim the acceptable year of the LORD [the Atonement Jubilee],** and the day of vengeance of our God; to comfort all that mourn;

Having endured the most devastating conditions since the creation of mankind, the people that survive are crushed mentally, emotionally, and spiritually:

PSALMS 107:2-7, 10-14, 16-20, 23-28 ... Let **the redeemed [rescued captives] of the LORD** say so, whom **He hath redeemed from the hand of the enemy;** 3 And **gathered them out of the lands,** from the east, and from the west, from the north, and from the south. 4 **They wandered in the wilderness** in a solitary way

[desert]; they found no city to dwell in. 5 **Hungry and thirsty, their soul fainted** in them. 6 Then **they cried unto the LORD in their trouble, and He delivered them** out of their distresses. 7 And **He led them forth by the right way, that they might go to a city [Jerusalem]** of habitation. ... 10 Such as sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, *being* bound in affliction and iron; 11 Because they rebelled against the words of God, and contemned the counsel of the Most High: 12 Therefore He brought down their heart with labour; they fell down, and *there* was none to help. 13 Then **they cried unto the LORD in their trouble, and He saved them** out of their distresses. 14 He brought them out of darkness and the shadow of death, and brake their bands in sunder. ... 16 For He hath broken the gates of brass, and cut the bars of iron in sunder. 17 Fools because of their transgression, and because of their iniquities, are afflicted. 18 Their soul abhorreth all manner of meat; and they draw near unto the gates of death. 19 Then **they cried unto the LORD in their trouble, and He saveth them** out of their distresses. 20 He sent His word, and healed them, and delivered *them* from their destructions. ... 23 They that go down to the sea in ships, that do business in great waters; 24 These see the works of the LORD, and His wonders in the deep. 25 For He commandeth, and raiseth the stormy wind, which lifteth up the waves thereof. 26 They mount up to the heaven, they go down again to the depths: their soul is melted because of trouble. 27 They reel to and fro, and stagger like a drunken man, and are at their wits' end. 28 Then **they cry unto the LORD in their trouble, and He bringeth them out of their distresses.**

Even their will to live is gone (v. 18). So is it any wonder that they CRY OUT to God? In this state, God encourages them to turn back to Him:

JOEL 2:12 Therefore also now, saith the LORD, **turn [H7725 = shuwb] ye even to me with all your heart, and with fasting, and with weeping, and with mourning:** 13 And rend your heart, and not your garments, and **turn [H7725 = shuwb] unto the LORD** your God: for He *is* gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and of great kindness, and repenteth him of the evil.

The Hebrew word translated *turn* literally means to *turn back* or *return*. It is also used in Leviticus 25:10 (mentioned earlier) that describes the Jubilee of the Day of Atonement as a time of returning “every man unto his possession, and ye shall return every man unto his family”. So, Atonement and the Jubilee is when Jesus Christ rescues the remnant of the earth from death who are captives during the Tribulation and Day of the Lord’s vengeance. These people are so distraught that they **cry out** to God and are WEEPING, FASTING, and MOURNING! But God will hear them and save them:

ISAIAH 49:7-9 Thus saith the LORD [*God the Father*], the Redeemer of Israel, and His Holy One [*Jesus Christ*], to him [*the captives*] whom man despiseth, to him whom the nation abhorreth, to a servant of rulers, Kings shall see and arise, princes also shall worship, because of the LORD that is faithful, and the Holy One of Israel, and He shall choose thee. 8 Thus saith the LORD, **In an acceptable time have I heard thee, and in a day of salvation have I helped**

thee [the Atonement Jubilee]: and **I will preserve [rescue] thee,** and give thee for a covenant of the people, to establish the earth, to cause to inherit the desolate heritages; 9 That **thou mayest say to the prisoners, Go forth [out of captivity],** to them that *are* in darkness, Shew yourselves. They *[the captives]* shall feed in the ways, and their pastures *shall be* in all high places.

All those rescued by Jesus Christ are then brought to Jerusalem:

ISAIAH 27:13 And it shall come to pass in that day, **that the great trumpet [of the Jubilee] shall be blown, and they [the captives] shall come which were ready to perish** in the land of Assyria, and **the outcasts** in the land of Egypt, and **shall worship the LORD in the holy mount at Jerusalem.**

These people are the ‘seed’ of the Millennium. The 1,000 year rule of Christ begins with these surviving captives. One can barely imagine the devastation, hurt, distress, and grief of these people. They are saved because they cry out to God for deliverance because they are starving of hunger, have tears running down their faces, and grieve for all their family and friends who died. The end of the Tribulation and the Day of the Lord truly is with a people who are fasting, weeping, and mourning.

Atonement and the Jubilee can be hard to understand since the fulfillment of it is still something in the future. For most, life is still very peaceful even though we personally suffer all manner of afflictions. The majority of God’s children are not captives who are tormented and tortured by wicked men. So what does this day signify for us?

I believe Atonement can only truly be understood in terms of “crying out to God” whenever we are troubled by afflictions, persecutions, poverty, illness, and grief. Whether we of the Body of Christ have endured terrible sorrow or suffering or witnessed it in others, we can understand the depths of grief and sorrow that bring about an attitude of fasting, weeping, and mourning. If we are truly children of God, we certainly cry out to Him during these times. It is not something we can withhold from doing. It is a natural response because Jesus Christ truly knows our sorrows and sufferings—“He is despised and rejected of men; **a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief.**” (Isa. 53:3).

The Psalms reflect this more than any other books of the Bible. There are almost twice as many mentions of the Psalmists “crying out to God” including in Psalm 107 (above) where the captives cry out to God four times. Here are a few others:

[KJV+] PSALM 18:6 **In my distress** I called upon the LORD, and **cried unto my God:** He heard my voice out of His temple, and **my cry came before Him,** *even* into His ears.

[KJV+] PSALM 22:5, 24 **They cried unto Thee,** and **were delivered:** they trusted in Thee, and were not confounded. ... 24 For He hath not despised nor abhorred the affliction of the afflicted; neither hath He hid His face from him; but when **he cried unto Him, He heard.**

[KJV+] PSALM 30:2, 8 O LORD my God, **I cried unto Thee**, and **Thou hast healed me**. ... 8 **I cried to Thee**, O LORD; and unto the LORD I made supplication.

[KJV+] PSALM 34:6, 15, 17 This poor **man cried**, and the LORD heard *him*, and **saved him** out of all his troubles. ... 15 The eyes of the LORD *are* upon the righteous, and **His ears are open unto their cry**. ... 17 **The righteous cry**, and the LORD heareth, and **delivereth them** out of all their troubles.

[KJV+] PSALM 61:1-2 **Hear my cry, O God**; attend unto my prayer. 2 From the end of the earth will **I cry unto Thee**, when my heart is overwhelmed: lead me to the Rock [*Jesus Christ*] that is higher than I.

[KJV+] PSALM 88:1-2, 13 1 O LORD God of my salvation, **I have cried** day and night before Thee: 2 Let my prayer come before Thee: **incline Thine ear unto my cry**; ... 13 But **unto Thee have I cried**, O LORD; and in the morning shall my prayer prevent [*come before*] Thee.

[KJV+] PSALM 145:19 He will fulfil the desire of them that fear Him: He also will **hear their cry**, and will **save them**.

This life is sure to bring upon us times of great distress and grief. Those who survive the Tribulation and Day of the Lord will experience this to the core of their being. Crying out to God in the depths of fasting, weeping, and mourning absolutely gains the attention of our Father who promises to hear our prayers and attend to our needs. But sorrow, affliction, and grief will not continue forever because we can hold on to this promise:

REVELATION 21:4 And **God shall wipe away all tears** from their eyes; and **there shall be no more** death, neither sorrow, nor **crying [fasting, weeping, mourning]**, neither shall there be any more pain: for the former things are passed away.

Jesus Christ is called the Rock because He is an anchor for us to hold on to in the worst of life's storms. But Jesus also makes a promise that will make it all worthwhile:

JOHN 16:20, 22 Truly, truly, I say unto you, **ye shall weep and lament**, but the world shall rejoice: and ye shall be sorrowful, **but your sorrow shall be turned into joy**. ... 22 And ye now therefore have sorrow: but **I will see you again, and your heart shall rejoice, and your joy no man taketh from you**.

May God's grace and peace be upon you!

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SABBATH THOUGHT 2023-10-14—TWO WITNESSES

May God bless you on His Sabbath day!

It may not often cross our minds, but the Law of God is not just required of human beings. Even the heavenly angels obey it to the letter. We can see one example in the dispute between Michael the archangel and Satan:

JUDE 1:8-9 Likewise also these *filthy* dreamers defile the flesh, **despise dominion, and speak evil of dignities.** 9 Yet **Michael the archangel, when contending with the devil** he disputed about the body of Moses, **durst [dared] not bring against him a railing [evil speaking] accusation,** but said, The Lord rebuke thee.

Why would Michael withhold accusing Satan of evil? Because the Law of God forbids it:

EXODUS 22:28 **Thou shalt not revile the gods [human rulers or judges], nor curse the ruler of thy people.**

But the Law of God is even kept by the Lawgivers: God the Father and Jesus Christ. Remember the prophecy that foretold that Jesus Christ would remain silent during His trial?

ISAIAH 53:7 He was oppressed, and He was afflicted, **yet He opened not His mouth:** He is brought as a lamb to the slaughter, **and as a sheep before her shearers is dumb [silent], so He openeth not His mouth.**

But then that is not exactly what happened, was it? During the trial, Jesus actually spoke up before the high priest:

MATTHEW 26:60-65 But *they* did not find *any* [witnesses against Jesus]. Although many false witnesses came forward, they did not find *any evidence.* 61 Then at *the last*, two false witnesses came forward *and* said, “This *man* said, ‘I have the power to destroy the temple of God, and to rebuild it in three days.’” 62 And **the high priest** rose up *and* **said to Him, “Have You no answer for what these are testifying against You?”** 63 **But Jesus was silent. And the high priest answered and said to Him, “I adjure You by the living God that You tell us if You are the Christ, the Son of God.”** 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.” 65 Then the high priest ripped his *own* garments, saying, “He has blasphemed! Why do we need any more witnesses? Behold, **you [the Sanhedrin] have just now heard His blasphemy.**

Was prophecy wrong? No, but to understand why Jesus spoke up requires knowing a particular statute of the Law of God:

LEVITICUS 5:1 If **a person sins in hearing the utterance of an oath, and is a witness, whether he has seen or known of the matter—if he does not tell it, he bears guilt.**

While a little confusing, this statute states that it is a sin to withhold or refuse to provide testimony when under oath as a witness. When the high priest spoke to Jesus and said, “I ADJURE you by the living God” he was putting Jesus Christ under oath to testify whether or not He was the “Christ, the Son of God.” Per the statute in Leviticus 5:1, Jesus Christ had to respond; otherwise, He would have become guilty of sin. So, the Law of God applies even in heaven as well as on earth. God upholds it everywhere because He is the Lawgiver and the Great King¹.

One very important statute applies in all criminal trials because it requires multiple witnesses to testify to the truth of events:

DEUTERONOMY 19:15 One witness shall not rise up against a man for any iniquity, or for any sin, in any sin that he sinneth: **at the mouth of two witnesses, or at the mouth of three witnesses, shall the matter be established.**

Perhaps most important of all is that it applies to death penalty cases:

DEUTERONOMY 17:6 **At the mouth of two witnesses, or three witnesses, shall he that is worthy of death be put to death;** *but* at the mouth of one witness he shall not be put to death.

Obviously, this is why the high priest was so desperate to find TWO or more witnesses to testify against Jesus even if they were FALSE witnesses. Without two witnesses, the Sanhedrin council could not convict Him. But after the two false witnesses and Jesus admitting He was the Son of God, the high priest called for the Sanhedrin to vote for convicting Him:

MATTHEW 26:65-66 Then **the high priest** rent his clothes, saying, **He [Jesus Christ] hath spoken blasphemy; what further need have we of witnesses? behold, now ye [the Sanhedrin council] have heard His blasphemy. 66 What think ye? They answered and said, He is guilty of death.**

Witnesses are so important that they are even a part of modern judicial systems. This is why every witness is required to take an oath to tell the truth. While I am certain that many are false witnesses, they are only heaping punishment upon their heads because they do not understand that every oath is witnessed and judged by GOD.

Witnesses are so important that they are also required in the Day of Judgment when each and every person is brought before Jesus Christ:

MATTHEW 12:36-37 But I [Jesus] say unto you, That **every idle word that men shall speak, they shall give account thereof in the day of judgment.** 37 For by thy words thou shalt be justified, and by thy words thou shalt be condemned.

¹ Matt. 5:35.

Do not be confused by “idle word.” It is not limiting judgment to only some of our words. Jesus is saying that we are judged for everything we say, INCLUDING idle or meaningless chatter.

But who are the witnesses in OUR Day of Judgment? The parable of the talents in Matthew 12 has a corollary in Luke 19. His account includes a very important detail when the nobleman returned to take account of his servants:

LUKE 19:20-22 And another came, saying, Lord, behold, *here is thy pound*, which I have kept laid up in a napkin: 21 For I feared thee, because thou art an austere man: thou takest up that thou layedst not down, and reapest that thou didst not sow. 22 And he saith unto him, **Out of thine own mouth will I judge thee, thou wicked servant.** Thou knewest that I was an austere man, taking up that I laid not down, and reaping that I did not sow:

Unlike the modern judicial systems that allow people to plead the fifth amendment against self-incrimination, the Law of God REQUIRES testimony of the accused. We saw that in the trial of Jesus Christ. Therefore, each person is a WITNESS who is required to testify of their words and actions in the Day of Judgment. In that day, God will make it impossible to give false testimony. But that is only one witness and the Law requires two or more. Who is the second witness?

REVELATION 3:14 And unto the angel of the *ekklesia* of the Laodiceans write; These things saith the Amen, the faithful and **True Witness [Jesus Christ]**, the beginning of the creation of God;

As you probably guessed, Jesus Christ is the faithful TRUE Witness when everyone comes before God in their Day of Judgment.

So, all of this brings me to a question. Why will there be the Two Witnesses during the Tribulation and Day of the Lord mentioned in Revelation?

REVELATION 11:3-4, 7 And I [*Jesus Christ*] will give *power* unto My **two witnesses**, and **they shall prophesy a thousand two hundred and threescore days**, clothed in sackcloth. 4 These are the two olive trees, and the two candlesticks standing before the God of the earth. ... 7 And **when they shall have finished their testimony**, the beast that ascendeth out of the bottomless pit shall make war against them, and shall overcome them, and kill them.

The key is in verse 7, which says, “when they shall have finished their TESTIMONY.” Who are they testifying against and why? Revelation 11:14 confirms that the testimony of the Two Witnesses is the last thing that occurs in the Sixth Trumpet, also called the Second Woe. What happens next is the Seventh Trumpet, which is the Day of the Lord God’s vengeance upon the Beast, False Prophet, and all those with the mark of the Beast:

REVELATION 14:7, 9-11 [*An angel*] Saying with a loud voice, Fear **God**, and give glory to Him; for **the hour of His judgment is come**: and worship Him that made heaven, and earth, and the sea, and the fountains of waters. ... 9 And the third angel followed them, saying with a loud voice, **if any man worship the beast and his image, and receive his mark in his forehead, or in his hand,**

10 The same shall drink of the wine of the wrath of God, which is poured out without mixture into the cup of His indignation; and **he shall be tormented with fire and brimstone** in the presence of the holy angels, and in the presence of the Lamb: 11 And **the smoke of their torment ascendeth up for ever and ever [eternal death]**: and they have no rest day nor night, who worship the beast and his image, and whosoever receiveth the mark of his name.

REVELATION 19:20-21 And the **beast was taken, and with him the false prophet** that wrought miracles before him, with which he deceived them that had received the mark of the beast, and them that worshipped his image. **These both were cast alive into a lake of fire burning with brimstone.** 21 And **the remnant [rest of those who received the mark] were slain** with the sword of Him that sat upon the horse, which *sword* proceeded out of His mouth: and all the fowls were filled with their flesh.

The Two Witnesses testify against the Beast, False Prophet, and all those with the mark of the Beast. BY THEIR TESTIMONY Jesus Christ sentences them to eternal death in the Lake of Fire. This is why the Two Witnesses are on the scene well before the Day of the LORD and continue through the Sixth Trumpet (1,260 days total). The Seventh Trumpet is the vengeance and judgment of death upon the wicked of this world. Without the Two Witnesses, they could not be sentenced to death as required by the Law of God.

Thankfully, the Day of Judgment for the firstfruit saints is now. For those who are asleep in the grave, their judgment is finished. But even those who are alive at the end of the Sixth Trumpet, their judgment will be completed at the beginning of the Seventh Trumpet when it sounds. In other words, the judgment of the firstfruit saints occurs at the resurrection BEFORE the vengeance and judgment of death comes upon the wicked. This fulfills a promise of God that the saints will WITNESS God's vengeance against those who persecuted them:

PSALM 58:10-11 **The righteous shall rejoice when he seeth the vengeance:** he shall wash his feet in the blood of the wicked. 11 So that a man shall say, **Verily there is a reward for the righteous: verily He is a God that judgeth in the earth.**

God our Father and Jesus truly are our salvation. We can take great comfort that the fullness of God's desire is to bring His children into the Kingdom² and wipe away the tears³ of afflictions and persecutions we receive at the hands of the wicked.

May God's grace and peace be upon you!

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² John 3:16.

³ Rev. 21:4.

SABBATH THOUGHT 2023-10-21—WE LIVE BY FAITH

May God bless you on His Sabbath day!

For decades, churches have promoted the idea that God's people must be prepared for the coming Great Tribulation. Biblical prophecies surely describe that time as the worst in the history of the world. But the message from some churches is one of storing food and water; having cash, gold and silver; and even relocating to remote locations to avoid that time. While there is wisdom in having provisions to guard against short-term and unavoidable problems common to this world (usually weather related), it is just not practical or even possible that any amount of preparation will be adequate to avoid the coming Tribulation likely has not considered the realities involved.

For example, the average person eats about 2,000 pounds (900 kg) of food every year. While many dehydrated long-term food supplies weigh much less, the volume does not change significantly. A fair amount of storage space is required, especially if the idea is to 'prep' for 3-1/2 to 7 years. And that is PER person PER year.

Perhaps the solution is to grow food and raise animals. This sounds like a great idea but a garden would have to be about 200 square feet (19 sq. meters) to support one person per year. Is there space available? Is the ground suitable? Is it protected from wildlife? What about insects and drought? These are serious concerns especially given the uncertainties in the weather the last few years. Also, canning uses a lot of water that must be heated and boiled. It also requires at least an acre of land to support just a few animals not including the land required for the winter hay.

Even ranchers and farmers would be hard-pressed to live in isolation. Most purchase their hay for the winter months to supply their cattle. Without fuel, they would have to harvest the hay by hand, which limits the number of cattle they can have. Harvesting crops by hand is labor and time intensive. Few have the means to support more than their own family without help. Tools also require maintenance or repair. And drought can kill off a crop or animals inside of a few weeks. All these things and more require consideration and preparation.

Speaking of water, each person requires about 2.5 quarts (2.4 liters) of water per day—that is around 250 gallons (1,000 liters) per year not including that used for personal hygiene and dehydrated foods, which only increase that amount. Water also does not have a long shelf-life although there are additives that may preserve it for several years. Even if preservatives are used, fifty-gallon (189 liters) barrels of water take up a lot of space. Assuming 300 gallons (1,136 liters) per person per year requires keeping six barrels for each person somewhere.

Even so, storing food and water is possible and many have done this for years or even decades. But there are other concerns that cannot be ignored. For instance, how does one prepare against sickness, disease, and injuries? Simple things like knowledge of first aid and medical supplies can mean the difference between life and death. Some medications can be stockpiled but anyone who requires insulin has a problem—it must be kept in cold storage because it otherwise only lasts only about a month. Heart medications require a monthly prescription

from a physician and a pharmacy to fill it. Will people are not part of the Beast power have access to either?

What about injuries? In the case of a compound fracture, even if someone has the knowledge and skill to properly splint it, very few know how to first set the bone without severing an artery. Furthermore, can you imagine doing this without painkillers or anesthetics? There are many injuries that can result in serious infections that require antibiotics or antihistamines—poisonous snakes and plants, animal bites, bee stings, cuts and wounds, etc. These all require knowledge, experience, and ‘prepping’ of supplies.

In a survival situation, will young people remain celibate to avoid pregnancy? There are few things more agonizing than helplessly watching an infant die due to complications at birth or a subsequent disease to which they are susceptible in the beginning. There can also be serious risks to the mother.

What about dental problems? An abscessed tooth is not only excruciating, but the infection can spread especially if it is in an upper tooth, which is close to the sinus cavities and the brain. Many people experience issues with their teeth and 3-1/2 to 7 years is a long time to go without some form of professional dental hygiene or intervention.

Fire for heating and cooking is another consideration. Even with a fireplace or woodstove in a moderate climate, the average house requires about seven ricks (cords) of wood during the winter for heating. That is a pile stacked four feet (1.2 m) high, 8 feet (2.4 m) deep, and 28 feet (8.5 m) wide. But that just provides heat for the *winter*. What about cooking during the rest of the year? Doubling that amount of wood takes up about 500 square feet (46 sq. meters). That is a large area and is per year. Keeping wood for multiple years requires protecting it from weather and insects because it will rot and become useless in a few years. What if the chainsaw needs repair? I can tell you that cutting trees even with a chainsaw and splitting logs requires new chains every now and then and a LOT of manual labor, not to mention the fuel. It is also not without risk of injury. If you live in the city, will you have the means to get wood? Will there be a fuel shortage, roadblocks, or lockdowns?

Moreover, few can afford the cost of all this. Perhaps there is an organized undertaking for making such preparations. But when hard times come, people can change for the worse; so what assurance is there that you will be included? What if you have physical limitations that others would consider to be too much of a burden? Would those who are wealthy have priority over those in poverty? Regardless of these considerations, there is a *limit* to the number of people that can be supported so who decides who can enter and how do they base their decisions?

In all cases, how can someone protect those provisions? Who is willing to use lethal force against men, women, or children who are hungry, thirsty, cold, sick, or injured? What if they are brethren? What about those who are willing to take what they want by force? Who is willing to kill another human being who is made in the image of God? What about a family member—a spouse, child, brother, or sister? Jesus said, **“I came not to send peace, but a sword. ... And a man’s foes shall be they of his own household.”** (Matt. 10:34, 36).

I could go on and on about the realities of ‘prepping’ for the coming Tribulation. It might be possible for a few months, but beyond that it is not practical or possible for most. Even if it is possible for some, it is not possible for everyone. Will God only allow those who do not have the wealth, property, and supplies to endure the Tribulation? In other words, are those who are rich and resourceful the only ones that God will bless and protect from this world? Is God a “respector of persons¹?” I think not.

World events naturally elevate the specter of the end time events of the Great Tribulation in the minds of people. The war in Israel provoked by the Hamas terrorists is the most recent one. Events such as this usually result in more than a few claiming that one or more Seals have already been opened. Have they? The First Seal is the *conquering* (subjugation) of the world’s religions. The Second Seal is the *conquering* (subjugation) of the nations *through bloodshed*. **Both are the result of the Beast and False Prophet** under the authority and power of Satan. These Seals involve many deaths in order to subjugate the governments and religious organizations of the world. That most assuredly has not happened. It is even harder to imagine that the Beast and False Prophet are hiding in the background once these seals are opened. So, what should God’s children do? What does God and Jesus tell us about these times?

LUKE 12:22-23, 28-34 And He [*Jesus Christ*] said unto His disciples, Therefore I say unto you, **Take no thought for your life**, what ye shall eat; neither for the body, what ye shall put on. 23 The life is more than meat, and the body *is more* than raiment. ... 28 If then God so clothe the grass, which is to day in the field, and to morrow is cast into the oven; **how much more will he clothe you, O ye of little faith?** 29 And **seek not ye what ye shall eat, or what ye shall drink, neither be ye of doubtful mind.** 30 For all these things do the nations of the world seek after: and **your Father knoweth that ye have need of these things.** 31 But rather **seek ye the kingdom of God; and all these things shall be added** unto you. 32 **Fear not**, little flock; for it is your Father’s good pleasure to give you the kingdom. 33 **Sell that ye have, and give alms [to the poor];** provide yourselves bags which wax not old, a treasure in the heavens that faileth not, where no thief approacheth, neither moth corrupteth. 34 For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also.

The parable in Luke 12 is a story of a rich man who stored up a vast abundance of provisions but he died before he could enjoy them. Jesus concluded it by saying, “he that layeth up treasure for himself ... is not rich toward God.” (Luke 12:21). Might He also have said, “he that lays up provisions to escape the Tribulation is without FAITH toward God?” Instead of stockpiling food, water, money, medicine, etc., Jesus says to do the opposite: sell what you have, give to those in need, and **have FAITH** (Luke 12:28, 33) that God will provide. God’s people WILL suffer² both as a test of worthiness to receive the Kingdom but also to be perfected in agape love and to overcome sin³. But those that live through the Tribulation will never do it by their own means. “**[W]ithout faith it is impossible to please God:** for He that cometh to God **must believe that He is**, and *that* He is a rewarder of them that **diligently seek him.**” (Heb. 11:6). Given all this, the message to the children of God is:

¹ Acts 10:34.

² 1 Pet. 5:10.

³ 1 Pet. 2:20-24.

EPHESIANS 6:11-18 **Put on the whole armour of God, that ye may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil. 12 For we wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world, against spiritual wickedness in high places.** 13 Wherefore take unto you the whole armour of God, **that ye may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand.** 14 Stand therefore, having your loins girt about with truth, and having on the breastplate of righteousness; 15 And your feet shod with the preparation of the gospel of peace; 16 **Above all, taking the shield of faith,** wherewith ye shall be able to quench all the fiery darts of the wicked. 17 And take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God: 18 **Praying always** with all prayer and supplication in the Spirit, and watching thereunto with all perseverance and supplication for all saints.

Paul is CLEARLY referring to the time of the end (“in the evil day”). And did you notice that it is the shield of FAITH that is **above** all other things by which we stand against evil? Telling people to stockpile for the coming Tribulation is a message of fear, and fear is a lack of faith. No human preparation will stand against the evil of that day. Jesus said, **“Why are ye so fearful? how is it that ye have no faith?”** (Mark 4:40). We know that there “shall be great tribulation, such as was not since the beginning of the world to this time, no, nor ever shall be.” (Matt. 24:9) but it is through faith in God that we *stand*. What does it mean to stand? It means we have not fallen or collapsed. It means we are NOT defeated, NOT too weak to go on, NOT overcome by sufferings, and NOT without hope in God. A person who is able to stand still has strength and the ability to resist. Rest assured that “He that findeth his life shall lose it: and **he that loseth his life for My sake shall find it.**” (Matt. 10:39). The children of God must CRY OUT to Him in *faith*:

PSALM 56:4, 11 In God I will praise His word, **in God I have put my trust; I will not fear what flesh can do unto me.** ... 11 In God have I put my trust: **I will not be afraid what man can do unto me.**

PSALM 7:1 O LORD my God, **in Thee do I put my trust: save me from all them that persecute me, and deliver me:**

Another of the Psalmists wrote, **“Put not your trust in [men].”** (Ps. 146:3). Habbakuk wrote (and was quoted four times in the NT⁴), “The just shall live **by His faith.**” (Hab. 2:4). Whose faith? **“[T]he faith of the Son of God.”** (Gal. 2:20). Faith removes fear and “faith ... worketh by [*agape*] love.” (Gal. 5:6). Faith, above all, is the only real preparation for the Tribulation.

May God’s grace and peace be upon you!

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⁴ Rom. 1:17; Gal. 2:20; 3:11; Heb. 10:38.

SABBATH THOUGHT 2023-10-28—THE LAST VERSE

May God bless you on His Sabbath day!

It was because of a great tragedy that Horatio Spafford penned the beautiful hymn “It Is Well With My Soul.” He not only lost his entire financial concern in the Great Chicago Fire, but all four of his children died when their ship went down as they traveled to Britain. His final tragedy was the loss of a child born afterwards to scarlet fever. While he later succumbed to delusions that he was the Messiah, his enduring hymn is a reminder of the peace that comes through faith in God to carry us through the trials of life. It is worth a thoughtful reading of the lyrics:

“It Is Well With My Soul”
By Horatio G. Spafford, 1873

When peace, like a river, attendeth my way,
When sorrows like sea billows roll;
Whatever my lot, Thou hast taught me to say,
It is well, it is well with my soul.

Refrain:

It is well with my soul,
It is well, it is well with my soul.

Though Satan should buffet, though trials should come,
Let this blest assurance control,
That Christ hath regarded my helpless estate,
And hath shed His own blood for my soul.

My sin—oh, the bliss of this glorious thought!—
My sin, not in part but the whole,
Is nailed to the cross, and I bear it no more,
Praise the Lord, praise the Lord, O my soul!

For me, be it Christ, be it Christ hence to live:
If Jordan above me shall roll,
No pang shall be mine, for in death as in life
Thou wilt whisper Thy peace to my soul.

But, Lord, 'tis for Thee, for Thy coming we wait,
The sky, not the grave, is our goal;
Oh, trump of the angel! Oh, voice of the Lord!
Blessed hope, blessed rest of my soul!

And Lord, haste the day when the faith shall be sight,
The clouds be rolled back as a scroll;
The trump shall resound, and the Lord shall descend,
Even so, it is well with my soul.

All who seek the Kingdom of God know that suffering is required: “For even hereunto were ye called: because Christ also suffered for us, leaving us an example, that ye should follow His steps.” (1 Pet. 2:21). Hope for coming Kingdom of God increases as suffering increases or is prolonged. **Afflictions have a way of bestowing spiritual sight that cannot be seen with the human eye.** Horatio Spafford understood this deeply as He considered his own sufferings in the light of the sacrifice of Jesus Christ.

It is interesting that the Bible does not record any first-person prayers of Jesus own anguish. Even the brief prayers just prior to His suffering recorded in Matthew 26, Luke 22, and John 12 do not express His agony with any detail. While *descriptions* of what He endured are written in Isaiah 52 and 53, the Bible omits Jesus’ groanings and cries to God. Perhaps it is because He was **God** in the flesh so His afflictions were altogether a greater agony than any human can understand or put into words. After all, He died for the sins of ALL mankind. He also knew that His sacrifice would be rejected by many who will end up being destroyed in the Lake of Fire. Because He was the fullness of agape love—even in the flesh—that had to add to His torment.

On the other hand, the book of Psalms is a record of heartfelt outpourings of sorrows, pains, distresses, and griefs by people like you and me. While David was the main author of the Psalms, others include Moses, Heman and Asaph (appointed by David to have charge of the Temple singing), Ethan the Ezrahite (a wise counselor to David), Solomon, and the sons of Korah. If you recall, Korah led a revolt against Moses and was swallowed up by the earth¹, so the fact that his sons wrote eleven Psalms means that they watched their father die. Their heart for God is certainly revealed in the Psalms they authored.

Though there are many prophecies contained in the Psalms, the mention of this book stirs up thoughts of the prayers of those who suffered. Reading them also brings to mind the trials and afflictions of *others*, especially those who are dear friends. But when *I* am suffering, I find that words for my prayers sometimes escape me. At those times, somehow, the words of the Psalms come to mind. In fact, it seems that Psalms can provide the words for every imaginable suffering.

Many times, a person *bears* afflictions; however, they can also be something we *cause* others. That was the case in the life of John Newton. Most probably do not remember who he was, but everyone knows his hymn “Amazing Grace.” While on board his ship *The Greyhound* in 1748 transporting captured African slaves, a violent storm arose that nearly took his life. He survived, but the experience caused him to seek a God he never before knew. When he penned the famous hymn some 24 years later, it is obvious that it was a truly life-changing event. In the years that followed, he studied to be, and was ordained as, a minister. But his trial is captured in his song. Although the modern versions omit and add verses he never wrote, here are the original lyrics that reveal the long-lasting effects of that singular voyage:

¹ Num. 16.

“Amazing Grace”
By John Newton, 1772

Amazing grace! (how sweet the sound)
That saves² a wretch like me!
I once was lost, but now am found,
Was blind, but now I see.

'Twas grace that taught my heart to fear,
And grace my fears reliev'd;
How precious did that grace appear
The hour I first believ'd!

Thro' many dangers, toils, and snares,
I have already come;
'Tis grace hath brought me safe thus far,
And grace will lead me home.

The Lord has promis'd good to me,
His word my hope secures;
He will my shield and portion be
As long as life endures.

Yes, when this flesh and heart shall fail,
And mortal life shall cease;
I shall possess, within the veil,
A life of joy and peace.

The earth shall soon dissolve like snow,
The sun forbear to shine;
But God, who call'd me here below,
Will be forever mine.

John Newton not only wrote about his own sins, but recognized he had caused many to suffer through the brutality of slavery. This is notable in the first verse where, I imagine, he was thinking of the message to the Laodicean township that they were “... wretched, miserable, poor, blind, and naked ...” (Rev. 3:17).

What is common to both these hymns is that they finish with words describing the return of Jesus Christ and the New Heavens and New Earth. That is also a common theme in the Psalms—no matter what the suffering, God promises salvation and a time of never-ending peace and joy! I would guess that is often true of your own supplications when you beseech God for His mercy and compassion.

God made human beings capable of experiencing both great joy and terrible pain. Suffering helps us appreciate the good things that would otherwise be taken for granted.

² Contemporary versions now use the past tense *saved* in the second line, which reflects the modern Protestant belief of “once saved, always saved.” However, John Newton used the simple present indicative *saves*, which is something that is a continuing state.

All who suffer desire an end of it. But more than that—even if the current afflictions fade away, as long as we live we know that we will be subject to them. Suffering is very much something we experience in the moment. During those times, we do not worry and fret about the times of Tribulation and Day of the Lord. As Christ said, “... Take therefore no *[anxious]* thought for the morrow: for the morrow shall take *[anxious]* thought for the things of itself. Sufficient unto the day *is* the evil *[trouble]* thereof.” (Matt. 6:34).

Suffering keeps us focused on the coming Kingdom—the only permanent end to pain.

We also want an end to the remembrance of our sins, especially those transgressions that have hurt others. Regardless of the source of our pain, all of us can deeply relate to the woman of Luke 7 especially when she heard those comforting words of Jesus:

LUKE 7:37-38, 47-48 And behold, a woman in the city who was a sinner, when she knew that *Jesus* sat at the table in the Pharisee's house, brought an alabaster flask of fragrant oil, 38 and stood at His feet behind *Him* weeping; and she began to wash His feet with her tears, and wiped *them* with the hair of her head; and she kissed His feet and anointed *them* with the fragrant oil. ... 47 “Therefore I say to you, her sins, *which are* many, are forgiven, for she loved much. But to whom little is forgiven, *the same* loves little.” 48 Then He said to her, “**Your sins are forgiven.**”

For all our suffering and all our hurtful transgressions against others, there is a promise—and that promise is recorded three times in Isaiah 25:8, Revelation 7:17, and, finally in:

REVELATION 21:4 And **God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes; and there shall be no more death, neither sorrow, nor crying, neither shall there be any more pain:** for the former things are passed away.

Whether you find your own words in your supplications to God, borrow from the Psalms, or are they are reflected in a favorite hymn, they begin in anguish but end with great hope. One thing is certain, though, the last verse will always be:

REVELATION 22:1-5 And he shewed me a pure river of water of life, clear as crystal, proceeding out of the throne of God and of the Lamb. 2 In the midst of the street of it, and on either side of the river, *was there* the tree of life, which bare twelve *manner of* fruits, *and* yielded her fruit every month: and **the leaves of the tree were for the healing** of the nations. 3 And there shall be no more curse: but the throne of God and of the Lamb shall be in it; and His servants shall serve Him: 4 And **they shall see His face; and His name shall be in their foreheads.** 5 And there shall be no night there; and they need no candle, neither light of the sun; for the Lord God giveth them light: and **they shall reign for ever and ever [with God the Father and Jesus Christ].**

May God's grace and peace be upon you!

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SABBATH THOUGHT 2023-11-04—WHO ARE THE PALESTINIANS?

May God bless you on His Sabbath day!

Israel was established as a modern nation on May 14, 1948. From that day, Israel has fought numerous wars:

- 1) **1947-1949—War of Independence** (Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, Syria, Iraq).
- 2) **1950s-1960s—Palestinian Fedayeen Insurgency** (Egypt, Jordan, Syria, Iraq).
- 3) **1956—Suez War** (Israel, France, UK vs. Egypt).
- 4) **1967—Six-Day War** (Egypt, Jordan, Syria). Resulted in the capture of Sinai Peninsula, Gaza Strip, West Bank, East Jerusalem, and the Golan Heights.
- 5) **1967-1970—War of Attrition** (Egypt, USSR, Jordan, Syria, PLO).
- 6) **1973—Yom Kippur War** (Egypt, Syria).
- 7) **1971-1982—Palestinian Insurgency** (PLO).
- 8) **1982—First Lebanon War** (Lebanon). Eliminated the PLO but Israel's withdrawal in 2000 contributed to instability in Lebanon and the rise of Hezbollah.
- 9) **1985-2000—South Lebanon Conflict** (Lebanon, Hezbollah).
- 10) **1987-1993—First Intifada** (Palestinians).
- 11) **2000-2005—Second Intifada** (Palestinians).
- 12) **2006—First Lebanon War** (Hezbollah, Lebanon).
- 13) **2008-2009—Gaza Wars** (Hamas).
- 14) **2012—Gaza Wars** (Hamas).
- 15) **2014—Gaza Wars** (Hamas).

In the 75 years of its existence, Israel has only known 14 years without military engagements—at least according to official designations. Can you imagine living under constant war or the threat of it? Every protester outside of Israel has no concept or perspective of that reality. They live in luxury and peace so they are nothing more than ignorant hypocrites. Moreover, the list of wars does not include the terrorist bombings, shootings, and stabbings that frequently occur so has there been ANY time in the last 75 years that the Jews did not live under threat of harm or death? I doubt it.

But once more, beginning on October 7, 2023 (the holyday on the eighth day of Tabernacles or Shemini Atzeret), Hamas again attacked Israel and at the time of this writing it is one of the top four bloodiest wars in Israel. Not surprisingly, it has prompted hundreds of thousands of Jew-haters around the world to openly protest on behalf of Hamas. In too many cases, it brought threats, violence, and destruction of property for the Jews. But who, exactly, are Hamas? *Hamas* is an acronym for Harakat al-Muqawama al-Islamiya, or Islamic Resistance Movement, which was founded in 1987 during the first Palestinian uprising against Israel. Basically, Hamas are Palestinian terrorists.

But who are the Palestinians? Some claim they are descendants of the ancient Philistines, a people who lived along the coast of the land of Canaan or what is now known as the

land of Israel. Archaeological evidence indicates this people actually migrated as early as 2000 BC from Crete, an island near Greece in the Aegean Sea. A people called the Philistines certainly existed in the land of Canaan by 1200 BC, about 200 years prior to king David (Goliath was a Philistine). However, they were decimated by the Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar in 600 BC and, later, annihilated by the Greek king Alexander the Great around 500 BC. The result is that the ancient Philistines no longer exist.

Neither are the Palestinians descendants of Canaan (a son of Ham and grandson of Noah). Modern DNA testing indicates they are likely related to the Lebanese who mixed with Indo-Eurasian peoples to some extent. While there are a number of Arabs living in Lebanon, the real Lebanese are unique from both Arabs and Jews. Lebanon is the home of the terrorist organization Hezbollah, arising after the PLO.

So where does the term ‘Palestine’ originate? As a derivation of ‘Philistine’, *Palestina* or *Palestine* was the derogatory name used by the Roman Empire for the land of Judea after the Jewish revolt led by Shimon Bar Kokhba in 132 AD. From that time to the present, ‘Palestine’ has been a **geographical** reference rather than a national ethnic one. Over the centuries it has included Arabs, Jews, and a mixture of peoples relocated to the area by the Assyrian Empire in the 8th century BC (including the Samaritans in the Bible). In other words, ‘Palestine’ is similar to ‘Europe’—it defines the region where many different nationalities reside. The French and Italians are Europeans but the French and Italians are very diverse and distinct nations and ethnicities. Like ‘Palestinian’, there is no such thing as a unique European ethnicity. The Hebrew word translated ‘Palestina’ in the KJV Bible refers to the Philistines who no longer exist.

Today, ‘Palestine’ refers to the land of Israel and ‘Palestinians’ are those who reside there. In an interview, Golda Meir (the Israeli Prime Minister from 1969-1974) said, “**I’m a Palestinian.** From [19]21 until 48 I carried a Palestinian passport. There was no such thing in this area as Jews and Arabs AND Palestinians. **There were [only] Jews and Arabs.**” (emphasis mine throughout). This was true at least until the last decade or so when the terms now refer to non-Jews living in Israel.

In every regard, there is no such thing as a Palestinian nation, ethnicity, or people. Since the second century, Palestinians were mostly Arabs and Jews but with a significant number of people of mixed heritages who are neither Arab nor Jew but of Indo-European descent. Every so-called ‘Palestinian’ Arab is either from Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Jordan, etc. In terms of ethnicity, there is no such thing as a ‘Palestinian’ Arab. Arabs are descendants of Ishmael, the son of Abraham by Sara’s handmaid Hagar. Unsurprisingly, DNA testing has proven that the Arabs and Jews have a common ancestor. If Hamas were actually Arabs, the ‘Palestinian’ pogrom behind the cries for *jihād* would be nothing less than familicide (murder of family members).

Moreover, any assertions Palestinians make upon the land of Israel are only historically legitimate for a few several centuries starting at the time the Jews were expelled in the second century. On the other hand, the Jews have had legitimate claims for more than 3,000 years. Both archaeological evidence and the Bible prove the residency of the Jews

(Israelites) since the time of Abraham. In fact, there have always been Jews in Palestine even when the land was ruled or controlled by others.

The view of land heritage for Jews, Arabs, and Palestinians (including Hamas) by Saudi Arabs may be surprising to those in the western world. In a very interesting blog that was recently posted by Saudi Arabian author and media personality Rawaf al-Saeen, he rebuked the Palestinians and reminded them that they WERE given a land for a national state back during the presidency of Ronald Reagan in the 1980s. However, Arafat, leader of the Palestinians at the time, rejected it. Furthermore, he says, “None of you [*Palestinians*] want a Palestinian state. Since you have no case, no country, and no land, **this land belongs to Israel**. According to the Quran you are a displaced people scattered from all over—Mongols, Turkmens, Circassians, Armenians, Gypsies. You have nothing in Palestine. **Palestine is the State of Israel for the people of Israel.**” In fact, this was not the first time the Palestinians were offered land for a Palestinian state. The original UN Partition Plan in 1947 divided the land up by assigning 55% to Israel and 45% to Palestinians. While the Palestinians may claim they are fighting to establish a country, their actions prove they only seek the extermination of the Jews.

Rawaf al-Saeen goes on to say, “And just so you know, the people of Israel are the sons of Isaac and we Arabs are the sons of Ismail. Isaac and Ismail were brothers and their father was Abraham. That makes them [*Israel*] our cousins. But where did YOU come from? How are you a part of all this? You were scattered, originally Gypsies, Mongols, Turkmens, Circassians, Romans—leftovers of other peoples. How are you a part of all this? ... Don't try to fool us. ... You Palestinians, **you are not Arabs**.” While there are certainly Arabs living in Palestine, there are many non-Arabs, as previously discussed, and Rawaf al-Saeen substantiates it.

However, the big question is whether or not Hamas is an organization of Arabs or non-Arabs (obviously excluding Jews)? If Hamas are the non-Arabs of Indo-European descent that were forcibly settled there in the eighth century BC, that would make them **gentiles**—foreigners to Arabs and Jews! Do they have a part in fulfilling prophecy for Jerusalem and the Temple? Who knows? But Rawaf al-Saeen does not waver in saying that they are not Arabs; instead he calls them descendants of various Indo-Europeans. I believe what he says is correct because no Arab country of the Arabian Peninsula or northwest Africa will allow Palestinians as a nationality inside their borders. Even Egypt during this current war has refused to allow Hamas to cross the border. At one time, Jordan gave the Palestinians land for settlements but they were expelled around 1970 when the PLO tried to take over the country. In all regards, Arab countries want nothing to do with the Palestinians, which could be why their calls for an Arab uprising to join their jihad have gone largely unanswered (notwithstanding Iran's threats). Notably, only Lebanon and Turkey have responded and neither one is an Arab country. While Iran funds Hamas and other terrorists, they rarely get directly involved—their focus is the destruction of the U.S.A.

But there is one more very intriguing point made by Rawaf al-Saeen: “And about the Al-Aqsa [*the mosque on the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem*]. Just so you know, **there's**

no such thing as ‘Al-Aqsa’ [in Jerusalem]. There is only Al-Quds [city of Jerusalem]. **The Al-Aqsa Mosque mentioned in the Quran is located in Ju’arana, 29km [17 miles] from the city of Taif [city in Saudi Arabia near Mecca].** There were 2 mosques there: Al-Aqsa which means ‘the further’ and Al-Adna which means ‘the closer’. Your Al-Aqsa Mosque was built by [caliph Abd] Hisham in the 682 AD. How could Muhammad visit a structure which was built in the year 682, sixty years after Muhammad has died?” While the Al-Aqsa Mosque in Jerusalem is purported to be the ‘third most holy’ place for Muslims, Rawaf al-Saeen claims it is essentially a fraud and the true Al-Aqsa of the Quran is located near Mecca, Saudi Arabia!

Today, there is evidence that the Al-Aqsa Mosque is actually located on Fort Antonia, which places Herod’s Temple to south of it. It usually takes a generation or more to change perceptions, but it would be interesting if the Dome of the Rock suddenly became less important to either the Jews or Muslims (or both) because they come to realize that the Al-Aqsa Mosque located there is a fraud. One thing is certain—the perceptions of western nations are quite different from people of the Middle East. If Herod’s Temple was south of Fort Antonia, that is something not generally acknowledged by Jews or Arabs. On the other hand, perhaps the Arabs will eventually reject the Al-Aqsa Mosque in Jerusalem as legitimate. The point is that either view could be the catalyst to the building of the third temple in Jerusalem.

World events and prophecies are next to impossible to connect while they are occurring because many times fulfillment is the result of incremental events building to a climax. Or, critical events can be obscured by ‘larger’ geopolitical concerns that overwhelm the publicity or reporting.

Many unspeakable atrocities have been committed by Hamas who are likely neither Arabs nor Jews. Behind them are many nations of the world who only support but encourage them. So, if Hamas are gentiles, then they are a terrible example of the evil that the gentile world will be capable of doing in the actual fulfillment of prophecy.

Adam was the beginning of the 6,000 years of flesh and blood so we are well into the end times, but it is uncertain that world events are near at hand in terms of months and years. Of greatest importance is the necessity to be able to withstand the evil of OUR day (Eph. 6:11), whether or not it stems from the fulfillment of prophecy. The public display of pure malice and hatred in the hearts of so many people is staggering, but it should only cause us to cry out to God to fill our vessels with His agape love. It is hard enough to love and forgive a brother who offends but we must be able to do the same for enemies—including those who are so filled with the mind of Satan.

May God’s grace and peace be upon you!

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SABBATH THOUGHT 2023-11-11—SECOND CROSSING

May God bless you on His Sabbath day!

One of the great Bible stories is that of the Israelite's Exodus from Egypt. At one time, it was taught to every school boy and girl from a very early age. What impressed me was seeing the Ten Commandments starring Charlton Heston, which featured the incredible crossing of the Red Sea. The biblical story, though, never prepared me for the reality of the height of the walls of water that flanked the Israelites as they passed through. In quite an understatement, all that the Bible really says is "the waters were a wall":

EXODUS 14:21-23, 26-31 Then Moses stretched out his hand over the sea; and **the LORD caused the sea to go back** by a strong east wind all that night, and made the sea into dry *land*, and the waters were divided. 22 So the children of **Israel went into the midst of the sea on the dry ground**, and **the waters were a wall to them on their right hand and on their left**. 23 And the Egyptians pursued and went after them into the midst of the sea, all Pharaoh's horses, his chariots, and his horsemen. ... 26 Then the LORD said to Moses, "Stretch out your hand over the sea, that the waters may come back upon the Egyptians, on their chariots, and on their horsemen." 27 And Moses stretched out his hand over the sea; and when the morning appeared, the sea returned to its full depth, while the Egyptians were fleeing into it. So the LORD overthrew the Egyptians in the midst of the sea. 28 Then the waters returned and covered the chariots, the horsemen, *and* all the army of Pharaoh that came into the sea after them. Not so much as one of them remained. 29 But the children of **Israel had walked on dry land** in the midst of the sea, and **the waters were a wall** to them on their right hand and on their left. 30 So the LORD saved Israel that day out of the hand of the Egyptians, and Israel saw the Egyptians dead on the seashore. 31 Thus **Israel saw the great work which the LORD had done** in Egypt; so **the people feared the LORD, and believed the LORD and His servant Moses**.

Of all the routes theorized for the Exodus, one likely possibility would have made the wall of water over 1/2 mile (850 m) high. This even dwarfs the walls of water depicted in the movie. Regardless of where they crossed, I do not believe it was through the shallow swamps near Egypt so the height of the wall of water must have been staggering. In the song of Moses, he described the waters and sang that they "stood upright like a heap":

EXODUS 15:8 And with the blast of Your nostrils The waters were gathered together; **The floods stood upright like a heap**; The depths congealed [*settled*] in the heart of the sea.

In fact, 'heap' is used to describe it elsewhere such as Psalms 33:7 and 78:13. So the 'heap' of water is describing something phenomenal. But keep that word in mind because it is used to describe another momentous event that likely has escaped your attention—it did mine.

After crossing the Red Sea, many of the Israelites rebelled against going into the Promised Land. As a result, God determined that none of those above the age of 20 years would ever go into it:

NUMBERS 14:29-35 Your carcasses shall fall in this wilderness; and all that were numbered of you, according to your whole number, **from twenty years old and upward**, which have murmured against Me, 30 Doubtless **ye shall not come into the land**, concerning which I swear to make you dwell therein, **save Caleb the son of Jephunneh, and Joshua the son of Nun**. 31 But **your little ones**, which ye said should be a prey, **them will I bring in, and they shall know the land** which ye have despised. 32 But *as for you*, **your carcasses, they shall fall in this wilderness**. 33 And **your children shall** wander in the wilderness forty years, and **bear your whoredoms [infidelities]**, until your carcasses be wasted in the wilderness. 34 After the number of the days in which ye searched the land, *even* forty days, each day for a year, shall ye bear your iniquities, *even* forty years, and ye shall know My breach of promise. 35 I the LORD have said, I will surely do it unto all this evil congregation, that are gathered together against Me: in this wilderness they shall be consumed, and there they shall die.

As a result of their rebellion, God refused the Israelites entry into the land of Canaan. But did you notice what God said? Their CHILDREN had to ‘bear’ the punishment of 40 years of wandering because of THEIR sins. Can you imagine a parent and finding out that *your* sins caused your children to suffer for 40 years?

During their escape from Egypt, God did something that I doubt any of the people recognized at the time—they were baptized under the cloud AND by their transit through the Red Sea. Most interesting of all, they were not baptized unto God, but unto MOSES:

1 CORINTHIANS 10:1-2 Moreover, brethren, I do not want you to be unaware that all our fathers were under the cloud, all passed through the sea, 2 **all were baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea**,

Paul does not say whether this was one baptism or two separate ones but he goes on to say:

1 CORINTHIANS 10:3-5 And did all **eat the same spiritual meat; 4 And did all drink the same spiritual drink: for they drank of that spiritual Rock that followed them: and that Rock was Christ**. 5 But with many of them God was not well pleased: for they were overthrown in the wilderness.

Clearly, this is not the Passover bread and wine of Christ’s body but the manna and water that came from the rock¹ struck by Moses. I suspect that they were “baptized into Moses” because God used Moses to lead the Israelites out of Egypt and then gave them water and manna through His servant Moses. In other words, Moses was the physical stand-in for the true Savior Jesus Christ who was yet to come.

But back to the other part of the Exodus story. Since the Israelites rebelled and were sentenced to die in the wilderness, the land of Canaan would be populated by their children. But something interesting happens when they enter. Read the account of their entry and remember that the original children were 39 to 59 years old (and likely had children of their own):

¹ Exod. 17:5-7; Num. 20:8-11.

JOSHUA 3:2-11, 13, 15-17 So it was, after three days, that the officers went through the camp; 3 and they commanded the people, saying, “When you see the ark of the covenant of the LORD your God, and the priests, the Levites, bearing it, then you shall set out from your place and go after it. 4 “Yet there shall be a space between you and it, about two thousand cubits [0.6 miles or 1km] by measure. Do not come near it, that you may know the way by which you must go, for you have not passed *this way* before.” 5 And Joshua said to the people, “**Sanctify [cleanse spiritually] yourselves**, for tomorrow the LORD will do wonders among you.” 6 Then Joshua spoke to the priests, saying, “Take up the ark of the covenant and cross over before the people.” So they took up the ark of the covenant and went before the people. 7 And the LORD said to Joshua, “This day I will begin to exalt you in the sight of all Israel, that they may know that, **as I was with Moses, so I will be with you**. 8 “You shall command the priests who bear the ark of the covenant, saying, ‘When you have come to the edge of the water of the Jordan, you shall stand in the Jordan.’ ” 9 So Joshua said to the children of Israel, “Come here, and hear the words of the LORD your God.” 10 And Joshua said, “**By this you shall know that the living God is among you**, and *that* He will without fail drive out from before you the Canaanites and the Hittites and the Hivites and the Perizzites and the Girgashites and the Amorites and the Jebusites: 11 “Behold, the ark of the covenant of the Lord of all the earth is crossing over before you into the Jordan. ... 13 “And it shall come to pass, as soon as the soles of the feet of the priests who bear the ark of the LORD, the Lord of all the earth, shall rest in the waters of the Jordan, **that the waters of the Jordan shall be cut off**, the waters that come down from upstream, and **they shall stand as a heap**.” ... 15 and as those who bore the ark came to the Jordan, and the feet of the priests who bore the ark dipped in the edge of the water (for the Jordan overflows all its banks during the whole time of harvest), 16 that **the waters which came down from upstream stood still, and rose in a heap** very far away at Adam, the city that *is* beside Zaretan. So the waters that went down into the Sea of the Arabah, the Salt Sea, failed, *and* were cut off; and the people crossed over opposite Jericho. 17 Then the priests who bore the ark of the covenant of the LORD stood firm on dry ground in the midst of the Jordan; and **all Israel crossed over on dry ground**, until all the people had crossed completely over the Jordan.

Notice that it says the waters “rose in a heap.” This is the same description as the Red Sea waters. In other words, this was not just a small stream that God dried up—the blockage of the Jordan river produced a wall of water that could also have destroyed the Egyptian army. This escaped me for a long time mainly because the Jordan was a substantial river in those times.

Notice what it says in verse 16: the waters of the river Jordan backed up from the city of Adam to the place where they crossed. That is a distance of about 20 miles (32km). The valley above the crossing point could hold a flood 2 miles (3.2km) wide and 120 ft. (37m) deep². While it is not the height of the wall of waters at the Red Sea, it would still be a stunning sight. You may recall that God planned to bring the Israelites into Canaan by a different route; one that did not involve crossing a river. This was because they had already witnessed the power of God at the

² <https://www.holylandsite.com/jordan-river-crossing>.

Red Sea. So, why did God do this miraculous work for the children of the original Israelites who escaped from Egypt?

JOSHUA 3:10 And Joshua said, "**By this you shall know that the living God is among you**, and *that* He will without fail drive out from before you the Canaanites and the Hittites and the Hivites and the Perizzites and the Girgashites and the Amorites and the Jebusites:

The original Israelites failed to believe that God would fulfill His promises and give their enemies over to them even after all the miracles. Now, with all of them dead, He did the same thing for their children so that they might believe in God! Compare Exodus 14:31 and Joshua 3:10. While those who were approaching the age of 20 years saw the original miracles of the Red Sea, the manna, and water from the rock, many were too young to remember and eating manna was not a miracle but just a fact of normal life.

The rest of the book of Joshua is a record of their successes (and failures) in the battles to take over the land of Canaan. Perhaps God's miracles had more impact on them since they were not raised in Egypt. They seemed to have more faith than their fathers, at least for awhile.

How about us? Is the miracle of our calling, repentance, baptism, forgiveness, and God living in us miracles that sustain us? They were for Abraham. You see, we are the spiritual seed of Abraham³ **the Hebrew** (Gen. 14:13). The Hebrews are children of Eber whose name means "**to cross over**." As descendants of Abraham, our destiny is to cross over into a new Promised Land where we will eat new things and drink pure water:

REVELATION 22:1-2 And He shewed me **a pure river of water of life**, clear as crystal, proceeding out of the throne of God and of the Lamb. 2 In the midst of the street of it, and on either side of the river, **was there the tree of life**, which **bare twelve manner of fruits**, and yielded her fruit every month: and the **leaves of the tree were for the healing** of the nations.

After crossing over into the coming Promised Land, we will drink from the River of Life that proceeds from the throne of God and Jesus Christ and eat from the Tree of Life! They are the eternal manna and water from the Rock Jesus Christ! Our wanderings are difficult, and the 'sea' may seem impassable, but never forget the miracles of God that prove His promises that He will make that crossing possible!

May God's grace and peace be upon you!

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³ Gal. 3:29.

SABBATH THOUGHT 2023-11-18—THE YHVH WORD

May God bless you on His Sabbath day!

A new ‘doctrine’ is spreading globally that is very disturbing. It is the idea that the only Deity that has truly existed for all eternity is the God Most High because He *created* the Word¹ (prior to becoming Jesus Christ and before all other living beings). In other words, Jesus Christ did not always exist. While I could attribute it to an intellectual exercise, I believe it can have serious consequences for the *ekklesia* (called out ones).

I want to preface this article by saying that this is not a topic I will debate because the premise of this new ‘doctrine’ requires a completely different perspective or understanding of very important Scriptures that I am unwilling to accept. Any topic in which the foundational principles are so completely divergent between opponents cannot be debated because the opposing views requires a significant change to the essential meaning of Scripture that form the foundation of beliefs. So, please do not send ‘evidence’ or arguments to try to convince me otherwise. I accept that others have beliefs that differ from mine. While I am willing to respectfully consider other viewpoints, I will not always agree with them. If that makes me ignorant or foolish in the eyes of others, then so be it. God will correct me if necessary.

In a purely academic sense, this new ‘doctrine’ may not seem to be a salvational issue. However, it is a dangerous path, in my opinion, because it changes HOW we think of Jesus Christ as God. As you read on, please keep in mind that this is not an exegesis or rebuttal to every argument of the new ‘doctrine’. This is MY ‘belief system’.

To explain my concerns, I first need to define what I believe constitutes a Deity; in other words, who or what is the Supreme God? The most important point is that a Deity is **SELF-existing**; that is, a Deity is a Living Being with inherent life that was not given by, or received from, another living being and that is the basis for an eternal life that has no beginning or end. Those promoting the new ‘doctrine’ agree that the Most High is self-existent so the question is whether the Word was also self-existent? The simple answer for me is ‘yes’, because I believe Scripture applies the *title* YHVH, commonly called the Tetragrammaton, to BOTH the Most High and the Word. YHVH is variously pronounced as Yehovah, Jehovah, etc. and simply means *SELF-existing*. What does that mean? Inherent life that was not given by, or received from, another being. It is eternal life without beginning or end. If the Most High is YHVH (self-existing), then the Word is also self-existing because He has the same YHVH title. Here is one of many examples:

EXODUS 33:18-23 And he [Moses] said, I beseech Thee, shew me Thy glory. 19 And He said, I will make all my goodness pass before thee, and **I [the Word] will proclaim the name of the LORD [YHVH = God the Father]** before thee; and will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and will shew mercy on whom I will shew mercy. 20 And He [the Word] said, Thou canst not see my face: for there shall no man see Me, and live. 21 And **the LORD [YHVH = the Word]** said [to Moses], Behold, there is a place by

¹ John 1:1.

Me, and thou shalt stand upon a rock: 22 And it shall come to pass, while My glory passeth by, that I will put thee in a clift of the rock, and will cover thee with My hand while I pass by: 23 And I will take away Mine hand, and thou shalt see My back parts: but My face shall not be seen.

While it is clear there are two separate YHVH Beings mentioned here, remember that John 1:18 states in no uncertain terms that “**No man hath seen God [the Father] at any time**; the only begotten Son, which is in the bosom of the Father, He hath declared *Him*.” The one who was seen and heard by Moses was not God the Father (the Most High) so it had to be the Word, who is also referred to as YHVH. In fact, the first YHVH (the Word) proclaimed the second YHVH (the Most High). One of the fundamental messages of Jesus Christ was to reveal God the Father². So, this Scripture says that the Word proclaimed the Most High to Moses. Both the Most High and the Word have the title YHVH or *self-existing*. They are the *Elohim*; i.e., the Supreme Ones (plural). They are the only true Gods. Here is another example:

ISAIAH 44:6 Thus saith **the LORD [YHVH] the King of Israel, and His Redeemer the LORD [YHVH] of hosts**; I *am* the first, and I *am* the last; and beside me *there is* no God [*Elohim = Supreme Ones = Gods*].

Surely this is clear—the *Elohim* each have the title YHVH (self-existing). Moreover, they are both First and Last (they are both speaking). Then there is also this verse:

JOHN 1:1-4, “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. 2 The same was in the beginning with God. 3 All things were made by Him; and without Him was not any thing made that was made. 4 **In Him [the Word] was life**; and the life was the light of men.”

The Word (BEFORE He became Jesus Christ) had inherent LIFE; that is, He was YHVH or self-existing! Then there is Melchizedek, the High Priest³ of God. The Most High swore:

PSALMS 110:1-4 A Psalm of David. **The LORD [YHVH = the Most High] said unto my [David's] Lord [the Word]**, Sit thou at My right hand, until I make Thine enemies Thy footstool. 2 The LORD [*the Most High*] shall send the Rod [*the Word*] of Thy strength out of Zion: rule Thou [*the Word*] in the midst of Thine enemies. 3 Thy people *shall be* willing in the day of Thy power, in the beauties of holiness from the womb of the morning: Thou hast the dew of Thy youth. 4 **The LORD [YHVH = the Most High] hath sworn**, and will not repent, **Thou [the Word] art a Priest for ever after the order of Melchizedek**.

Melchizedek means King of Righteousness. Who is that? The Word, as Scripture confirms in Isa. 32:1; 62:2; Jer 23:5; and Heb. 7:2. Who is and always has been the **High Priest of God?** The Word. Remember, the Most High swore this oath to the Word BEFORE He became Jesus Christ. Of Jesus Christ, Paul absolutely proclaims:

² Matt. 11:27.

³ Heb. 5:10.

HEBREWS 6:20, 7:1-3 Whither the forerunner is for us entered, even Jesus, made an High Priest for ever after the order of Melchisedec. 1 For this Melchisedec, King of Salem, Priest of the Most High God, who met Abraham returning from the slaughter of the kings, and blessed him; 2 To Whom also Abraham gave a tenth part of all; first being by interpretation King of Righteousness, and after that also King of Salem, which is, King of peace; 3 Without father, without mother, without descent, having neither beginning of days, nor end of life; but [as Melchisedec, He was later] made like unto the Son of God; abideth a Priest continually.

After the resurrection of Jesus Christ, the Father restored Him to His previous position as the High Priest of God after the “order of Melchizedek;” that is, He is of the “order of,” or His *estate* is, the King of Righteousness. Clearly, this is NOT referring to the Most High because Melchizedek is the “High Priest of God.” (Gen. 14:18). In speaking of Jesus Christ as Melchizedek, Paul declares that the Word had no beginning of days.

In my belief system both the Most High and the Word are equally *self-existent* God-Beings who are *Elohim* (Supreme Ones) and without beginning or end of days. Why is this important? Because it comes down to WHO I worship and WHO I try to love and obey with all my heart, mind, soul, and strength.

The first three of the Ten Commandments forbid those things that are NOT love and worship of God. But some claim that the Most High spoke the Ten Commandments, not the Word. If that is true, the Ten Commandments demand worship of the Most High, which excludes the Word because the first commandment says, “You shall have no other gods before Me” (Exod. 20:3). If the Most High spoke the first three commandments, He clearly *excluded* the Word as God even though they are both *Elohim* and both YHVH. If, on the other hand, the Word spoke the Ten Commandments, then the first three commandments INCLUDE both the Most High AND the Word.

Worship of God applies to the Two who are YHVH. Just to avoid confusion that can arise about whether YHVH refers to the Most High or the Word in certain scriptures, recall that Jesus Christ was worshipped in the *flesh*—He was worshipped as an infant (Matt. 2:1-2) as well as an adult (John 5:23). As such, He certainly was worshipped prior to being a man. He was also glorified AGAIN at His resurrection (John 17:5). Glory is a quality or sign of *greatness* that is worthy of worship. This is confirmed by an angel who says, “Fear God, and give glory to Him; for the hour of His judgment is come: and worship Him [Jesus Christ] that made heaven, and earth, and the sea, and the fountains of waters.” (Rev. 14:7) It is plain that worship of the Word is not excluded by the first three of the Ten Commandments so it had to be the Word who spoke them to Moses.

Holiness, like glory, is also quality worthy of worship. The Most High is holy but so also is Jesus Christ (the Word). Jesus is called the Holy Child of God (Acts 4:27) and the Holy One of God (Mark 1:24). So, in my belief system, both the Most High (God our Father) and the Word (Jesus Christ) are the two Deities of the *Elohim* (Supreme Ones) and both have the title YHVH of self-existence and these two are the BOTH worthy of all worship, honor, praise, glorify, love, and obedience.

When it comes to the Old and New Testaments of the Bible, the messages of each serve different purposes. At the time of Jesus Christ, only the Old Testament Scripture existed. One of the major subjects contained within the old scriptures was the Law. But most importantly it REVEALED GOD—both the Most High AND the Word! Throughout the Old Testament, They are described as Creators, the *Elohim* (Supreme Ones), YHVH (self-existing), and God Most High and God the Word. Without the Old Testament, mankind would not have knowledge of the True God.

The New Testament, on the other hand, elevates the Law to a spiritual level of agape love and reveals the NEW roles of the Most High as the Father and the Word as the Lamb sacrificed for the sins of mankind. In other words, the main purpose of the Old Testament is to reveal the Two who are *Elohim* YHVH God whereas the New Testament reveals their roles in the salvation of mankind. The New Testament should not be used to redefine God who was revealed in the Old Testament—it should enhance but not change God.

But what happens in the heart and mind of someone who believes that the Word was a created being? Does that not *lessen* the stature and respect of Him, especially as Jesus Christ? Does that not cause us, even subconsciously, to think of Jesus Christ as a lesser God-Being if He was created? And what about “babes in Christ?”⁴ Will the new ‘doctrine’ diminish their worship, reverence, respect, and honor due unto Jesus Christ? Even if the claims that Jesus Christ was created were true (and I do NOT believe that), what is the PURPOSE of this new ‘doctrine’? At best, it is an intellectual exercise and at the worst, it can cause some to forsake their calling. There are already too many who disregard the eternal divinity of Jesus Christ, which DEFINES what is called Christianity! For example, the Jehovah’s Witnesses say that Jesus is not God; there are groups who say He was simply a prophet (and even inferior to Muhammad); while others claim He was only an enlightened man.

Some might counter by saying the new ‘doctrine’ makes God the Father all the greater but how can it since He is already YHVH (self-existing eternally)? The new ‘doctrine’ only denigrates Jesus Christ to the status of a lesser Being. **The Word—Jesus Christ—WAS and IS God; He WAS and IS *Elohim*; He WAS and IS YHVH (self-existing); He WAS and IS the High Priest of God; and He WAS and IS without beginning or end of days.** Scripture is very clear in my belief system.

If I thought or taught anything like this new ‘doctrine’, I greatly fear the verdict I would bring upon myself in the Day of Judgment. Anything that denigrates or diminishes the worship, glory, holiness, or sacrifice of either of the *Elohim* Supreme Self-Existing Creator Gods is not something I can contemplate and the thought of doing so makes me tremble.

May God’s grace and peace be upon you!

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⁴ 1 Cor. 3:1.

SABBATH THOUGHT 2023-11-25—FOLLOW CHRIST

May God bless you on His Sabbath day!

There are a few Scriptures that almost roll off the tongue. Here is one such verse:

JOHN 6:44 “No one can come to Me [*Jesus Christ*] unless **the Father who sent Me draws him**; and I will raise him up at the last day.

The Greek word translated *draw* literally means to *drag*. When something is dragged, it is **forcibly moved**. To draw someone is the act of moving them from one place to another either because they cannot or will not on their own. To emphasize the power of God that is involved when He calls someone, notice the record of Peter, Andrew, James, and John:

LUKE 5:1-11 So it was, as the multitude pressed about Him [*Jesus Christ*] to hear the word of God, that He stood by the Lake of Gennesaret, 2 and saw two boats standing by the lake; but the fishermen had gone from them and were washing *their* nets. 3 Then He got into one of the boats, which was Simon’s, and asked him to put out a little from the land. And He sat down and taught the multitudes from the boat. 4 When He had stopped speaking, He said to Simon, “Launch out into the deep and let down your nets for a catch.” 5 But Simon answered and said to Him, “Master, we have toiled all night and caught nothing; nevertheless at Your word I will let down the net.” 6 And when they had done this, they caught a great number of fish, and their net was breaking. 7 So they signaled to *their* partners in the other boat to come and help them. And they came and filled both the boats, so that they began to sink. 8 When Simon Peter saw *it*, he fell down at Jesus’ knees, saying, “Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord!” 9 For he and all who were with him were astonished at the catch of fish which they had taken; 10 and so also *were* James and John, the sons of Zebedee, who were partners with Simon. And Jesus said to Simon, “Do not be afraid. From now on you will catch men.” 11 So when they had brought their boats to land, **they forsook all and followed Him**.

Jesus also approached Matthew in a similar manner:

MATTHEW 9:9 As Jesus passed on from there, He saw a man named Matthew sitting at the tax office. And He said to him, “**Follow Me**.” So **he arose and followed Him**.

Imagine being at work, perhaps in an office with other people, when a man no one has ever seen before walks over to someone’s desk and simply says, “Follow me.” You watch as the person stops typing or puts down the phone and simply follows him out of the office. When this is put into a modern context, it sounds crazy but those words from Jesus, “Follow Me,” have such power in them that people literally walked away from

their lives—including family. It is irresistible. So, what happens in the mind of someone who comes under the power of God as He draws them?

MATTHEW 16:24 Then said Jesus unto his disciples, If any *man* will come after Me, **let him deny himself**, and take up his cross, and **follow Me**.

When God draws a person, they “deny” themselves. God’s draw is so powerful that a person will disavow, reject, renounce, or disown his or her SELF! That requires overcoming all primitive instincts including love for a spouse, family, and friends as well as personal needs of food, clothes, and shelter. There is GREAT power when God draws or ‘drags’ someone to follow Christ.

In fact, what God requires of those whom He calls is much more than renouncing human love and physical needs. God calls us do what is humanly impossible:

JOHN 12:25-26 “He who loves his life will lose it, and **he who hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life**. 26 “If anyone serves Me [*Jesus Christ*], let him **follow Me**; and where I am, there My servant will be also. If anyone serves Me, him *My* Father will honor.

To hate our own life is only possible by the power of God. It is reflected in Paul’s words, “O wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this **body of death**?” (Rom. 7:24). Was he distraught because of pain and suffering or was dragged by the power God out of his ignorance into the understanding that God gave His Son for his sins? I think the answer is obvious.

No one can resist the power of being drawn by God. When Jesus told the disciples to follow Him, they simply dropped everything and walked away from their present lives. There is also apparently great power against anyone He does NOT draw because John 6:44 says NO one can come to Christ UNLESS God draws him. The next verses are about the Pharaoh during the time of Moses but they point to the power of God when He selects someone to fulfill His purposes:

ROMANS 9:16-19 So then *it is* not of him who wills, nor of him who runs, but of God who shows mercy. 17 For the Scripture says to the Pharaoh, “For this very purpose I have raised you up, **that I [God] may show My power in you**, and that My name may be declared in all the earth.” 18 Therefore He has mercy on whom He wills, and whom He wills He hardens. 19 You will say to me then, “Why does He still find fault? **For who has resisted His will?**”

A calling from God begins with Him ‘dragging’ someone out of their previous lives. What happens next is Jesus leads the person where they need to go. Simply put, He tells them to “follow Me.” That phrase is mentioned over and over in Scripture. When we are ‘dragged’ by God and walk away, we are leaving everything behind to follow Christ. But how does someone do that?

MATTHEW 7:7-11 “Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. 8 “For everyone who asks receives, and he who seeks finds, and to him who knocks it will be opened. 9 “Or what man is there among you who, if his son asks for bread, will give him a stone? 10 “Or if he asks for a fish, will he give him a serpent? 11 “If you then, being evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father who is in heaven give good things to those who ask Him!

No one even knows the questions to ask until their ignorance is exposed when God draws them. It is only then that we can seek the answers from Him. God not only has to give us the answers, but He even has to provide us with the questions!

A calling from God begins by being ‘dragged’ but that actually implies a person does not have a choice. In some (or many) ways that is true. Ignorance cannot be overcome unless we KNOW we are ignorant. Children are sent to school (sometimes against their will) by parents because they know their children are ignorant. The solution is to teach them. God begins a calling by ‘dragging’ someone because no one even knows what they are missing. In other words, none of us even knew there was another path to follow much less where the trailhead was located.

But once God draws a person, he or she is called to follow Christ with all the wonders that come with it and through all the sufferings that must be endured. This is when God ‘lets go’—He only ‘drags’ someone to the trailhead. Each must choose according to their own will and desire to follow that path. God the Father is always with us because “He [*God the Father*] hath said, **I will never leave thee, nor forsake thee.**” (Heb. 13:5). God even reveals the path to us: “A man’s heart plans his way, But **the LORD directs his steps.**” (Prov. 16:9). And Jesus Christ is there as well—how could we “follow Him” otherwise? In fact, He is living in us:

GALATIANS 2:20 “I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but **Christ lives in me;** and the *life* which I now live in the flesh **I live by faith in the Son of God,** who loved me and gave Himself for me.

But we have to choose to take that path after God brings us there. Following Christ, therefore, is truly a life of faith—faith that the sacrifice of Jesus Christ allowed God the Father to draw us and faith that God leads us down that narrow path. As Paul said, “**I live by faith in the Son of God.**”

All have heard that we must “count the cost.” However, some say that is not entirely possible when first called because no one knows all the trials that will befall us in the future. However, counting the cost is not about all the temptations and sufferings that come upon us later in life. Read the full text of this:

LUKE 14:26-28 “If anyone comes to Me [*Jesus Christ*] and does not hate his father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and his own life

also, he cannot be My disciple. 27 “And whoever does not bear his cross and come after Me cannot be My disciple. 28 “For **which of you, intending to build a tower, does not sit down first and count the cost**, whether he has *enough* to finish *it*—

“Counting the cost” happens BEFORE starting to build. This is before a shovel is even stuck in the ground. Counting the cost means recognizing and considering that, in order to follow Christ, a person must “deny [*utterly*]” (the full meaning of the Greek word) our own self. That is why we are ‘dragged’ by God—only by His power can we renounce ourselves and walk away from everything to follow Christ.

What occurs AFTER we leave everything behind and begin to follow Christ is past counting the cost. The trials and sufferings that come upon us later cannot be a part of that cost because they were not included in the original ‘plans’. Those things that come upon us later are endured by faith because we know that:

ROMANS 8:28 And we know that **all things work together for good** to those who love God, **to those who are the called** according to *His* purpose.

When God draws us, He shows us the plans He has for us. That is when we count the cost. AFTER that is when the building of the tower begins. All the setbacks and mistakes that happen during construction require modifications to the ‘plans’ and God helps us fix the structural problems we encounter. With the sure foundation of Rock, God helps us lay each brick so the tower will withstand every storm:

PHILIPPIANS 1:6 being confident of this very thing, that **He [God the Father] who has begun a good work in you will complete it** until the day of Jesus Christ;

We need to be willing to let God direct us in building the tower. All of that requires faith. So, construction of the ‘self’ does not begin until we are dragged out of ignorance, counting the cost of utterly denying the self, and then choosing to follow Christ in faith. And when the day comes to ‘cut the ribbon’ for the completed tower, that *calling* changes and we become **the called**, that *choosing* changes and we become **the chosen**, and that *faith* changes and we become **the faithful**:

REVELATION 17:14 “... He [*Jesus Christ*] is Lord of lords and King of kings; and **those who are with Him are called, chosen, and faithful.**”

May God’s grace and peace be upon you!

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SABBATH THOUGHT 2023-12-02—LAMENTATIONS

May God bless you on His Sabbath day!

Jeremiah wrote Lamentations to express his despair over Jerusalem and her people following their destruction in 587 BC. He was a prophet of God who witnessed the wickedness, malice, and cruelty of the Babylonians against his people and the Bible records many terrible things that happened to Judah at that time. For example:

EZEKIEL 5:9-10 'And **I [God] will do among you what I have never done, and the like of which I will never do again**, because of all your abominations. 10 'Therefore **fathers shall eat their sons in your midst, and sons shall eat their fathers**; and I will execute judgments among you, and all of you who remain I will scatter to all the winds.

The world has perpetrated evils that are too horrific for us to grasp. History records mankind's inhumanity to mankind knows no bounds. Just read about the Egyptians, Assyrians, Greeks, Romans, Huns, Africans, Japanese, Germans, Italians, Russians, Chinese, Cambodians, Vietnamese, etc. Even the Anglo nations are guilty. But books cannot really convey the depths of the evil done. But then videos and pictures came along and brought the cruel details of it beginning mainly with WW2. Even so, Vietnam (and Korea to some extent) was really the first time that the public saw mankind's uncensored wickedness, malice, and cruelty almost in real time and it has only gotten worse.

But books and videos are still entirely different from actually witnessing it. I cannot imagine the mind of the perpetrators and the impact to the billions of victims over the millennia. Now there are many almost uncensored videos of the horrors perpetrated upon the Jews during the surprise attack on October 7 this year by Hamas and many of the so-called Palestinians¹. What set this apart for me was the brutality against babies, children, women, and elderly. I know this is not unique in history; but nothing compares to seeing such things (even in videos) and I was not prepared for the impact of such barbarity toward the innocent and defenseless.

After witnessing the horrors of the Babylonians, Jeremiah put his tears into words. As I was reading it, I was struck by how much of what he wrote described what is happening in Israel:

LAMENTATIONS 1:3 Judah has gone into captivity, **Under affliction and hard servitude: She dwells among the [foreign] nations. She finds no rest; All her persecutors overtake her in dire straits.**

Did you know that the Nova music festival during which Hamas and the Palestinians murdered and kidnapped people was a **trance** concert? Have you even heard of that? This

¹ Sabbath Thought article on 2023-11-04 "[Who Are the Palestinians?](#)"

type of music arose in Germany in the 1980s and is characterized by electronic music with 125-150 beats per minute. It is designed to put people into a *trance*. A trance is a state of semi-consciousness in which a person is not self-aware and is susceptible to external stimuli. Does this sound satanic? The next verse squares with the ways of many of the Jews today who have forsaken God, especially the younger generations:

LAMENTATIONS 1:4 The roads to Zion mourn Because **no one comes to the set feasts**. All her gates are desolate; Her priests sigh, Her virgins are afflicted, And she *is* in bitterness.

Then Jeremiah almost describes the attack itself:

LAMENTATIONS 1:5, 7, 9-12 Her adversaries have become the master, **Her enemies prosper; For the LORD has afflicted her Because of the multitude of her transgressions**. Her children have gone into captivity before the enemy. ... 7 In the days of her affliction and roaming, Jerusalem remembers all her pleasant things That she had in the days of old. **When her people fell into the hand of the enemy, With no one to help her, The adversaries saw her And mocked at her downfall**. ... 9 **Her uncleanness is in her skirts**; She did not consider her destiny; Therefore her collapse was awesome; She had no comforter. **“O LORD, behold my affliction, For the enemy is exalted!”** 10 The adversary has spread his hand Over all her pleasant things; **For she has seen the [foreign] nations enter her sanctuary, Those whom You commanded Not to enter Your assembly**. 11 **All her people sigh**, ... 12 **“Is it nothing to you, all you who pass by? Behold and see if there is any sorrow like my sorrow, Which has been brought on me**, Which the LORD has inflicted In the day of His fierce anger. ... 16 “For these *things* I weep; My eye, my eye overflows with water; Because the comforter, who should restore my life, Is far from me. **My children are desolate Because the enemy prevailed.**”

The response around the world has been mixed but what should *shock* everyone is how many people who are NOT Palestinian or Arab aligned so quickly with the terrorists and even rejoiced in horrors of beheaded children and brutally raped women. Whole countries even in Europe and the Americas have celebrated. Jeremiah, too, witnessed something eerily similar:

LAMENTATIONS 1:17-20 **Zion spreads out her hands, But no one comforts her; The LORD has commanded concerning Jacob That those around him [think of Yemen and Lebanon] become his adversaries; Jerusalem has become an unclean thing among them [think of Qatar, Iraq, Iran, etc.]**. 18 “The LORD is righteous, For I rebelled against His commandment. Hear now, all peoples, And behold my sorrow; **My virgins and my young men Have gone into captivity**. 19 **“I called for my lovers [think of the USA, Britain, Australia, Canada], But they deceived me;** 20 “See, O LORD, that I *am* in distress; My soul is troubled; My heart is overturned within me, For I have been very rebellious. Outside the sword bereaves, **At home it is like death**. 21 “They have heard that I sigh, **But no one comforts me. All my enemies have heard of my trouble; They are glad** ...

Have you ever wondered why Satan has fixated on causing war throughout mankind's existence? History proves that from the beginning there has been continuous fighting among nations. If war is just about a nation trying to conquer another nation, all that is required is to defeat their army. But every war also brings unimaginable barbarity and cruelty against both soldiers and defenseless people. Satan causes war not because he favors one nation over another. Wars usually start because of malice and hatred toward another nation. But Satan's main reason is that it instills malice and hatred in the hearts of both soldiers and non-combatants.

When two soldiers engage and one kills the other, it is considered to be a legitimate and honorable outcome of patriotism and courage while defending ones nation and family. **But when atrocities and cruelties are committed, sorrow becomes outrage and mercy becomes malice and hatred against the enemy. This is what Satan wants—people who are incapable of love.** War is Satan's tool to cause that kind of emotional destruction to as many people as possible. And those who hate then teach their children to hate. You can see this in the hearts of Palestinian children who are taught to hate Jews. One video records a young Palestinian girl about eight or nine saying that she wanted to become a police officer like her uncle so that she could kill Jews. What is really bizarre is that the Palestinians cannot even say WHY they hate the Jews so much. They have taught their children to hate Jews for so long that they do not remember the original offense.

Wars produce nothing but malice and hatred. Soldiers of WW2 that witnessed various horrors—as well as their families—could not reconcile their feelings toward the Germans or Japanese—or both. My grandfather was a doctor in WW2 and stationed at the front line during D-day. He never spoke about that time and it took me many years to recognize that not only had he seen the horrors but he was likely ashamed because he was of pure German lineage. For him, it might have been worse because he saw the cruelties perpetrated by his own people. All I truly know is that he had a lot of suppressed and unreconciled anger and it never went away. This happens in every war.

Just like darkness is the absence of light, hatred is the absence of love and Satan wants to destroy all of mankind from their potential as eternal sons and daughters of God by making them incapable of feeling love. This is exactly why the sacrifice of Jesus Christ by God the Father is so astounding. It was the means by which mankind could become children of God but it was done for the world while it was the *enemy* of God.

When our heavenly King returns to rule over this world, two very notable things will change. First, the people of the millennial reign of Christ will never be allowed to make weapons or train for war—there will be no more war:

ISAIAH 2:4 He [*Jesus Christ*] shall judge between the nations, And rebuke many people; **They shall beat their swords into plowshares, And their spears into pruning hooks; Nation shall not lift up sword against nation, Neither shall they learn [*literally, teach*] war anymore.**

PSALM 46:8-9 Come, behold the works of the LORD, Who has made desolations in the earth [*Day of the LORD*]. 9 **He makes wars cease to the end of the earth**; He breaks the bow and cuts the spear in two; He burns the chariot in the fire.

During the Millennium there will be rebels that survive the Day of the Lord (Joel 2:20; Ezek. 20:33-38), but the people living under the King will be completely defenseless. In fact, Ezekiel prophesied that the rebels will arise once again thinking that they will easily conquer and destroy the “land of unwalled villages; ... a peaceful people, who dwell safely” (Ezek. 38:8-22). But the King will not need an army to protect His defenseless and peaceful people because He will utterly destroy them (also Mic. 4:3):

EZEKIEL 38:22 “And I [*God*] will bring him [*the enemy*] to judgment **with pestilence and bloodshed; I will rain down on him, on his troops, and on the many peoples who are with him, flooding rain, great hailstones, fire, and brimstone.**

Even during the Millennium there will be war because of malice and hatred. But have you ever noticed the *hearts* of the people living under the King? When Jesus returns, Scripture says that He will separate the rebels from the other captives when they are rescued—they will “pass under the rod” (Ezek. 20:37). Did you ever wonder what the criteria is for those He brings out of captivity versus those He rejects and scatters? Those He rejects are “the peoples *who* delight in war” (Ps. 68:30) whereas those He saves will:

JOEL 2:12-13 “Now, therefore,” says the LORD, “**Turn to Me with all your heart, With fasting, with weeping, and with mourning.**” 13 So **rend your heart**, and not your garments; Return to the LORD your God, For He *is* gracious and merciful, Slow to anger, and of great kindness; And He relents from doing harm.

God is seeking people whose hearts are humble, kind, merciful, and loving. He utterly rejects those who are filled with malice and hatred. They will be destroyed, which is why war is a tool of Satan—it causes many to have cruel and malevolent hearts. The resume of all God’s children is they are *becoming* agape love.

Wars like the one in Israel reveal the hearts of people—for good or evil. God’s people are becoming agape love, even toward their enemies. Malice and hatred are not in them even after being victims of or witnessing the worst horrors of mankind. Instead, they receive the gift of salvation because they “**sigh and cry** [*lament*] over all the abominations” (Ezek. 9:4). And war is an abomination.

May God’s grace and peace be upon you!

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SABBATH THOUGHT 2023-12-09—VENGEANCE OF GOD

May God bless you on His Sabbath day!

What happens to the incorrigibly wicked when they are judged? The world is filled with terrible injustices and horrible evils, but the firstfruits are not called to avenge those things. We are to love our enemies¹ and that is difficult. What does that mean anyway?

LUKE 6:27-31 “But I say to you who hear: **Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you,** 28 “bless those who curse you, and pray for those who spitefully use you. 29 “To him who strikes you on the *one* cheek, offer the other also. And from him who takes away your cloak, do not withhold *your* tunic either. 30 “Give to everyone who asks of you. And from him who takes away your goods do not ask *them* back. 31 “And just as you want men to do to you, you also do to them likewise.

Loving an enemy is NOT responding with hatred and malice. Quite the opposite—we bless them, pray for them, and do not respond in kind to their hatred and malice. If we cannot love an enemy, how can we expect God to apply the blood of Jesus to our own sins? If we love our enemies, then God gives us a promise:

ROMANS 12:17-20 **Repay no one evil for evil.** Have regard for good things in the sight of all men. 18 If it is possible, as much as depends on you, live peaceably with all men. 19 Beloved, **do not avenge yourselves, but rather give place to wrath;** for it is written, **“Vengeance is Mine, I will repay,” says the Lord.** 20 Therefore “If your enemy is hungry, feed him; If he is thirsty, give him a drink; For **in so doing you will heap coals of fire on his head.**”

In the end, God will execute justice and judgment. But people, when injustice occurs and judgment is withheld, have a desire for vengeance. It is a natural response to injustice. While we are to love our enemies, it does not mean that the saints do not desire righteous vengeance:

LUKE 18:7-8 “And shall God not avenge His own elect **who cry out day and night to Him,** ...

REVELATION 6:10 [saying,] “How long, O Lord, holy and true, **until You judge and avenge** our blood on those who dwell on the earth?”

LUKE 18:7-8 ... though He bears long with them? 8 “I tell you that He will avenge them speedily. Nevertheless, when the Son of Man comes, will He really find faith on the earth?”

While this may seem contradictory to blessing and praying for our enemies, that is required of us in this life while there is hope that the wicked will repent so they can be forgiven and receive the gift of eternal life. God is abundant in mercy and grace for all to overcome their sins, which is why the last thing that occurs before the New Heavens and New Earth is the

¹ Matt. 5:44.

eternal death of the wicked—“anyone not found written in the Book of Life was cast into the lake of fire.” (Rev. 20:13).

But what about justice, righteous judgment, and vengeance? What is the difference between *justice* that renders a righteous judgment and *vengeance*? Righteous judgment punishes the perpetrator AND **compensates** the victim. If righteous judgment is executed, then there is no need for vengeance. In this world, vengeance is *punishment* rendered against a criminal because the judicial process was deemed to fall short of judgment. When carried out, God’s Law produces righteous judgments. In fact, the Law of God even *compensates* victims beyond their losses. Many times it is double as for theft². Still, justice in this world is rare.

That is where God’s vengeance comes into the picture—it is solely **punishment** of the wicked who reject the sacrifice of Jesus Christ. When God judges the wicked, there is no possible compensation for the victims because His judgment occurs *after* the final resurrection to eternal life. Spirit beings cannot be compensated by physical beings.

So, what does God’s vengeance involve? Is it just a quick death in the lake of fire? This might be the impression we get from the parable of Lazarus and the rich man:

LUKE 16:19-25 Now there was a certain rich man, and he was clothed in purple and fine linen, and daily indulged himself in luxury. 20 And there was a certain poor man named Lazarus, who was laid at his porch, full of sores. 21 And he longed to be nourished with the crumbs that fell from the rich man’s table; and the dogs even came and licked his sores. 22 Now it came to pass *that* the poor man died, and he was carried away by the angels into Abraham’s bosom. And the rich man also died and was buried. 23 And in the grave he lifted up his eyes and was in torment, *for* he saw Abraham afar off, and Lazarus in his bosom. 24 And he cried out *and* said, ‘Father Abraham, have compassion on me and **send Lazarus, so that he may dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue; for I am suffering** because of this flame.’ 25 Then Abraham said, ‘Child, remember that in your lifetime you received good things to the full, and likewise Lazarus evil things. But now he is comforted, and you are suffering.

The suffering endured by the rich man seems to be only severe thirst. But is that reality? As I have stated before, the Bible is usually an understatement of the reality. Just read about the sufferings of Jesus Christ. So, too, I believe is the case with the vengeance of God. Another account says that the wicked will weep and gnash their teeth during their punishment³:

LUKE 13:27-28 “... Depart from Me [*Jesus Christ*], all you workers of iniquity [*injustice*].’ 28 **There will be weeping and gnashing of teeth**, when you see Abraham and Isaac and Jacob and all the prophets in the kingdom of God, and yourselves thrust out.

It is not hard to imagine that some will lament their suffering for selfish reasons (“What did I do to deserve this!”) and some will be angry when they are punished. Their attitude, however, still does not reflect the terrible vengeance reserved for them. Notice this:

² Exod. 22:1-4.

³ Also Matt. 8:12; 22:13; 25:30.

PSALM 119:120 **My flesh trembles for fear of You, And I am afraid of Your judgments.**

Trembling is uncontrolled shaking that occurs under *extreme* apprehension for something that is about to happen. If a **righteous man** shakes uncontrollably when considering the vengeance of God, there is obviously more to it than just weeping and gnashing of teeth or being thirsty. What did the Psalmist know or what visions had he seen? Even Paul said:

HEBREWS 10:31 **It is a fearful thing [phobos] to fall into the hands of the living God.**

Paul describes a fear equivalent to phobia (*phobos*), which is extreme and irrational, regarding God's vengeance. Now notice the reaction of demons⁴!

MARK 5:2-9; LUKE 8:31 And when He [*Jesus Christ*] had come out of the boat, immediately there met Him out of the tombs a man with an unclean spirit, 3 who had *his dwelling among the tombs*; and no one could bind him, not even with chains, 4 because he had often been bound with shackles and chains. And the chains had been pulled apart by him, and the shackles broken in pieces; neither could anyone tame him. 5 And always, night and day, he was in the mountains and in the tombs, crying out and cutting himself with stones. 6 When he saw Jesus from afar, he ran and worshiped Him. 7 And he cried out with a loud voice and said, "What have I to do with You, Jesus, Son of the Most High God? **I implore [BEG] You [Jesus Christ] by God that You do not torment me.**" 8 For He said to him, "Come out of the man, unclean spirit!" 9 Then He asked him, "What *is* your name?" And he answered, saying, "My name *is* Legion; for we are many." ... Luke 8:31 And **they begged Him** that He would not command them to go out into the abyss.

Whatever the extent of their coming punishment, the demons shudder and tremble⁵ at the thought because they KNOW what is coming. Mankind cannot even imagine it. What is even more unimaginable is that some will receive a DOUBLE punishment:

REVELATION 18:6-10 "Render to her [*Babylon*] just as she rendered to you, and **repay her double according to her works**; in the cup which she has mixed, **mix double for her**. 7 "In the measure that she glorified herself and lived luxuriously, in the same measure give her **torment** and sorrow; for she says in her heart, 'I sit as queen, and am no widow, and will not see sorrow.' 8 "Therefore her plagues will come in one day—death and mourning and famine. And she will be utterly burned with fire, for strong *is* the Lord God who judges her. 9 "The kings of the earth who committed fornication and lived luxuriously with her will weep and lament for her, when they see the smoke of her burning, 10 "standing at a distance **for fear of her torment**, saying, 'Alas, alas, that great city Babylon, that mighty city! For in one hour your judgment has come.'

Merchants will *fear* the **torment** of the vengeance of God. The Greek word for *torment* means severe suffering due to TORTURE. Are you getting a sense of the severity of the

⁴ Also Matt. 8:28-29; Rev. 20:10.

⁵ Jas. 2:19.

vengeance of God? (This should give us a new emphasis to reconcile offenses mentioned in Matthew 18:21-25. Those who refuse to do so are “delivered ... to the **torturers.**”)

Even with this perspective, we cannot imagine the torture of God’s vengeance. The wicked will be tormented *at least* according to their evil works. Some doubly so. I do not believe God’s vengeance will be a quick death—I would guess it has degrees of pain and duration all according to the level of wickedness. An angel describes the torment of God’s wrath:

REVELATION 14:9-11 Then a third angel followed them, saying with a loud voice, “If anyone worships the beast and his image, and receives *his* mark on his forehead or on his hand, 10 “he himself shall also drink of the wine of the wrath of God, which is poured out full strength into the cup of His indignation. **He shall be tormented with fire and brimstone** in the presence of the holy angels and in the presence of the Lamb. 11 “And **the smoke of their torment ascends** forever and ever; and they have no rest day or night, who worship the beast and his image, and whoever receives the mark of his name.”

The wording suggests the smoke occurs WHILE they are being tormented and it may seem like ‘forever’ to the wicked⁶. Perhaps you are thinking of smoke from a small fireplace or campfire, but I think it will be more like a raging forest fire. That produces a thick smoke that envelopes everything around with utter darkness and makes the air unbreathable. Their torment will be fearsome. Whatever the torment, it causes uncontrolled fear and trembling in the biblical authors who have glimpsed it.

In this life, it is comforting to know that God will prevail—but vengeance belongs to Him alone. Only He can righteously punish the wicked for their works. However, there is perhaps another reason that God alone will execute vengeance. In the day when all the righteous are spirit beings, they will be PERFECT agape love. Will we even be capable of having feelings of anger and thoughts of vengeance? As John said, “There is no fear in love; but **perfect love casts out fear, because fear involves torment.** But he who fears has not been made perfect in love.” (1 John 4:18). At that time, we might even weep as the wicked are tormented unto death for rejecting the gift of God. Could these be the tears that God wipes away that is mentioned AFTER the final resurrection?

REVELATION 21:4 “And **God will wipe away every tear** from their eyes; there shall be no more death, **nor sorrow, nor crying [for those who rejected eternal life?]**. There shall be **no more pain,** for the former things have passed away.”

May God’s grace and peace be upon you!

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⁶ Rom. 6:23 clearly establishes that the punishment for sin is eternal death.

SABBATH THOUGHT 2023-12-16—ARK OF COVENANTS & TESTIMONIES

May God bless you on His Sabbath day!

The central piece of the Tabernacle, and later the Temple, was the Ark of the Covenant, sometimes referred to as the Ark of the Testimony. God commanded its construction when He gave instructions for building the Tabernacle:

EXODUS 25:10 “And they shall **make an ark of acacia wood [Heb. shittah (from its scourging thorns)]**; two and a half cubits *shall be* its length, a cubit and a half its width, and a cubit and a half its height.

This was dimensionally about 4.3 x 2.5 x 2.5 feet (1.3 x 0.8 x 0.8 meters) and entirely covered in gold. Acacia trees are full of thorns but the wood has some interesting characteristics including being very durable as well as water and scratch resistant. Originally, Ark was a repository for three items. The first was a sample of manna:

EXODUS 16:26, 29-34 “**Six days you shall gather it [the manna], but on the seventh day, the Sabbath, there will be none.**” ... 29 “See! For **the LORD has given you the Sabbath; therefore He gives you on the sixth day bread for two days.** Let every man remain in his place; let no man go out of his place on the seventh day.” 30 So the people rested on the seventh day. 31 And the house of Israel called its name **Manna**. And it was like white coriander seed, and the taste of it was like wafers *made* with honey. 32 Then Moses said, “This *is* the thing which the LORD has commanded: ‘**Fill an omer with it, to be kept for your generations, that they may see the bread with which I fed you in the wilderness, when I brought you out of the land of Egypt.**’ “ 33 And Moses said to Aaron, “Take a pot and put an omer of manna in it, and lay it up before the LORD, to be kept for your generations.” 34 As the LORD commanded Moses, so **Aaron laid it up before the [Ark of the] Testimony**, to be kept.

The second item in the Ark was of equal importance:

EXODUS 25:16, 21-22 “And **you shall put into the ark the Testimony which I will give you.** ... 21 “You shall put the mercy seat on top of the ark, and **in the ark you shall put the Testimony that I will give you.** 22 “And there I will meet with you, and I will speak with you from above the mercy seat, from between the two cherubim which *are* on **the ark of the Testimony, about everything which I will give you in commandment** to the children of Israel.

When God had the Israelites construct the Ark, He intended it to contain, along with the manna, The Testimony. What exactly was The Testimony?

EXODUS 31:18 And when He [*the LORD*] had made an end of speaking with him on Mount Sinai, He gave Moses **two tablets of the Testimony, tablets of stone**, written with the finger of God.

Obviously, the two tablets are the stones upon which God wrote the Ten Commandments:

EXODUS 34:27-28 Then the LORD said to Moses, **“Write these words, for according to the tenor of these words I have made a covenant with you and with Israel.”** 28 So he was there with the LORD forty days and forty nights; he neither ate bread nor drank water. And **He [the LORD] wrote on the tablets the words of the covenant, the Ten Commandments.**

The two tablets represented the COVENANT God established with the Israelites:

DEUTERONOMY 9:9-11 “When I [Moses] went up into the mountain to receive the tablets of stone, **the tablets of the covenant** which the LORD made with you, then I stayed on the mountain forty days and forty nights. I neither ate bread nor drank water. 10 “Then the LORD delivered to me two tablets of stone **written with the finger of God**, and on them *were* all the words which the LORD had spoken to you on the mountain from the midst of the fire in the day of the assembly. 11 “And it came to pass, at the end of forty days and forty nights, **that the LORD gave me the two tablets of stone, the tablets of the covenant.**

While the manna reminded the Israelites that God fed them in the wilderness, it was much more than that:

EXODUS 31:12-17 And the LORD spoke to Moses, saying, 13 “Speak also to the children of Israel, saying: ‘Surely **My Sabbaths you shall keep, for it is a sign between Me and you** throughout your generations, **that you may know that I am the LORD who sanctifies you.** 14 ‘You shall keep **the Sabbath**, therefore, for *it is* holy to you. Everyone who profanes it shall surely be put to death; for whoever does *any* work on it, that person shall be cut off from among his people. 15 ‘Work shall be done for six days, but the seventh *is* the Sabbath of rest, holy to the LORD. Whoever does *any* work on the Sabbath day, he shall surely be put to death. 16 ‘Therefore **the children of Israel shall keep the Sabbath**, to observe **the Sabbath** throughout their generations **as a perpetual covenant.** 17 **‘It is a sign [rowth = evidence] between Me and the children of Israel** forever; for *in* six days the LORD made the heavens and the earth, and on the seventh day He rested and was refreshed.’ ”

The manna established the seventh day of the week (God had not yet discussed His holydays). Clearly, manna was a reminder of several of things, but of primary importance was the KEEPING of Sabbaths. That is why verse 13 says, “My **Sabbaths [plural]** you shall keep, for **it [singular]** is a sign” The ‘it’ is referring to the *keeping of Sabbaths*, not the word Sabbaths. Keeping the Sabbath was a **covenant** between God and the Israelites (v16) but it was also the sign or **evidence** of that covenant.

The manna and tablets are symbols of two covenants and why it was called the Ark of the **Covenant**. But it is also called the Ark of the Testimony. From a legal perspective, testimony is a solemn attestation or declaration of the truth of an event or matter given under oath by a witness. Even though we consider a witness to be a person, physical *evidence* is also a ‘testimony’. For example, a fingerprint ‘testifies’ that someone touched an object. God even said that heaven and earth are a witness (lit. *testimony*) (Deut. 4:26).

The manna was evidence of the first six days of each week. It did not come on the seventh day because there was twice as much on the sixth day. Manna was literally

evidence or testimony for the seventh-day Sabbath because no manna appeared on that day of the week.

In similar fashion, the tablets with the Ten Commandments were called the Tablets of the Testimony (Exod. 31:18). They were evidence or a testimony of the covenant because it was WRITTEN on the stones by God Himself. But there was third item:

HEBREWS 9:4 which had the golden censer and **the ark of the covenant** overlaid on all sides with gold, in which *were* the golden pot that had the manna, **Aaron's rod that budded**, and the tablets of the covenant;

Aaron's rod that budded was not something originally intended to be in the Ark. It was a proof that God chose Aaron and his sons for the priesthood but why was it in the Ark?

NUMBERS 17:8, 10 Now it came to pass on the next day that Moses went into the tabernacle of witness, and behold, **the rod of Aaron, of the house of Levi, had sprouted and put forth buds, had produced blossoms and yielded ripe almonds.** ... 10 And the LORD said to Moses, **"Bring Aaron's rod back before the Testimony, to be kept as a sign [rowth = evidence] against the rebels,** that you may put their complaints away from Me, lest they die."

As in Exodus 31:17, the word *sign* can mean *evidence*. So, Aaron's rod was evidence or 'testimony' after Korah's rebellion that God chose Aaron and his sons for the priesthood. But was the selection of the priesthood also a covenant? Notice the Levitical covenant:

MALACHI 2:4-5 Then you shall know that I have sent this commandment to you, That **My covenant with Levi** may continue," Says the LORD of hosts. 5 **"My covenant was with him [Levi],** one of life and peace, And I gave them to him *that he might fear Me; So he feared Me And was reverent before My name.*

God had made a covenant with the whole tribe of Levi to minister to His tabernacle, but specifically chose Aaron and his sons from among that tribe to be priests. Believing they were just as worthy, Korah (also of the tribe of Levi) led a rebellion out of envy against Aaron and Moses. After the rebellion was put down, God proved His decision:

NUMBERS 17:5 "And it shall be *that* **the rod of the man whom I choose will blossom; thus I will rid Myself of the complaints of the children of Israel,** which they make against you."

God's choice was manifested by causing Aaron's rod to blossom. He later permanently gave the priesthood to Aaron's descendants through a covenant with his son Phinehas:

NUMBERS 25:11-13 **"Phinehas the son of Eleazar, the son of Aaron the priest,** has turned back My wrath from the children of Israel, because he was zealous with My zeal among them, so that I did not consume the children of Israel in My zeal. 12 "Therefore say, 'Behold, I give to him My covenant of peace; 13 'and **it shall be to him and his descendants after him a covenant of an everlasting priesthood,** because he was zealous for his God, and made atonement for the children of Israel.' "

So, even Aaron's rod that budded was a testimony to a covenant. But there was a fourth item with the Ark that usually goes unnoticed. It was called the Book of the Law:

DEUTERONOMY 31:9-11 So **Moses wrote this law and delivered it to the priests**, the sons of Levi, who bore the ark of the covenant of the LORD, and to all the elders of Israel. 10 And Moses commanded them, saying: "**At the end of every seven years**, at the appointed time in the year of release, at the Feast of Tabernacles, 11 "when all Israel comes to appear before the LORD your God in the place which He chooses, **you shall read this law before all Israel** in their hearing.

This was the book that Moses wrote of which all the Israelites swore obedience:

EXODUS 24:7 Then he [Moses] took **the Book of the Covenant and read in the hearing of the people. And they said, "All that the LORD has said we will do, and be obedient."**

The Book of the Law or Book of the Covenant contained all the laws, statutes, precepts, and judgments spoken by God and it was kept in an interesting place:

DEUTERONOMY 31:24-26 And it came to pass, **when Moses had made an end of writing the words of this law in a book**, until they were finished, 25 That **Moses commanded the Levites**, which bare the ark of the covenant of the LORD, saying, 26 **Take this book of the law, and put it in the side of the ark of the covenant** of the LORD your God, **that it may be there for a witness [ed = testimony]** against thee.

It was kept on the side of the Ark so it was accessible for teaching the people. It was also evidence or testimony of the covenant. So, the Ark contained items that testified of covenants with God. But what about the New Covenant? Is there a testimony of it?

HEBREWS 10:15-16 *Whereof* **the Holy Spirit also is a witness [martureo = testifies]** to us: for after that he had said before, 16 **This is the covenant that I will make** with them after those days, saith the Lord, **I will put my laws into their hearts, and in their minds will I write them;**

The Holy Spirit is a witness or testimony of the New Covenant. But as a spiritual covenant, it is kept in a New Ark: "*you are* an epistle of Christ ... **written not with ink but by the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of flesh, that is, of the heart.**" (2 Cor. 3:3). The Old Ark was made from the thorny acacia tree but the New Ark contains the covenant written on hearts of flesh with the testimony of the Holy Spirit. The Old Ark was replaced with the New Ark—the saints of God—by a singular act of mercy under a crown of **thorns** and upon a cross of **wood!**

May God's grace and peace be upon you!

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May God bless you on His Sabbath day!

Christmas is one of the most revered celebrations of modern Christians. Along with Easter, in many ways it defines their beliefs. Most sincerely think they are honoring and worshipping God and Jesus Christ by keeping these days.

On the other hand, those who are opposed to this holiday usually note that, among other things, the birth of Jesus Christ was not in the winter and the Bible nowhere states that His birth is to be celebrated but, rather, His death.

However, the real reason that Christmas, and by extension all other 'religious' holidays, is wrong is much more primitive than the many intellectual arguments. Over the millennia, there have existed countless pagan religions, gods, and 'holidays'. A few are mentioned in some detail in the Bible, but in most cases God simply and vehemently condemns the gods of the pagan nations. Instead of addressing the evil of each pagan religious system, there is one specific incident in the Bible that is a stark example of why Christmas and other man-made 'feasts' are an abomination to God. That story is of the golden calf, which is seen by many as when the Israelites rejected God and turned back to worshipping pagan gods. Surprising as it might be, that is not what the Israelites did nor is it the reason God was so angry with them. Understanding what led to the golden calf is crucial because it almost led to the destruction of the whole Israelite nation (Exo. 32:10). It also is a warning against all days that men set aside to worship God. Read the main story of the golden calf:

EXODUS 32:1, 4-6 Now when the people saw that Moses delayed coming down from the mountain, the people gathered together to Aaron, and said to him, "Come, make us **gods [Heb. Elohim]** that shall go before us; for **as for this Moses, the man who brought us up out of the land of Egypt, we do not know what has become of him.**" ... 4 And he [Aaron] received *the gold* from their hand, and he fashioned it with an engraving tool, and **made a molded calf**. Then they said, "**This is your god [Heb. Elohim]**, O Israel, that brought you out of the land of Egypt!" 5 So when Aaron saw *it*, he built an altar before it. And Aaron made a proclamation and said, "**Tomorrow is a feast to the LORD.**" 6 Then they rose early on the next day, offered burnt offerings, and brought peace offerings; and the people sat down to eat and drink, and rose up to play.

When reading these verses, people usually assume that the Israelites were making an image of an Egyptian god. While there were Egyptian influences going on, there is much more to the story. First of all, notice that the whole matter hinged on the fact that they were worried something had happened to Moses. Why would they be concerned about him? Because he was their MEDIATOR with God. They were so dependent upon him that, in their minds, it was actually MOSES who brought them out of Egypt (v1). They feared that Moses was dead and that was a serious matter because they utterly relied upon him for all communication with God. Recall that God had spoken to ALL the Israelites when they were at Mount Sinai. They were so filled with fear and terror that they said to Moses, "**You speak with us**, and we will hear; but **let not God speak with us**, lest we die." (Exod. 20:19).

By the time of the golden calf incident, the Israelites had heard God and witnessed many powerful miracles even though they repeatedly showed little faith that He would continue to provide for them. So, it would be surprising if the Israelites had forgotten about God a mere 40 days later.

If Moses had died on the mountain, the Israelites had a serious problem—how could know what God wanted them to do? So, they needed some other way to communicate with God. This is where they fell victim to their Egyptian influence and decided to make an image. However, it was not an image of a pagan god—verse 1 clearly says they wanted an image of ELOHIM, which most texts translate as “gods”. The Israelites obviously knew the names of the Egyptian gods but Elohim is NOT the name of an Egyptian god, it was the name of THEIR God!

Unconvinced? Then note what the Israelites said: “make us **[Elohim]**” (v1). They did not use the name of any Egyptian god; they said ELOHIM, the name of their God. Notice also what Aaron said after making the image: “**This is your god (singular) [Heb. Elohim], O Israel, that brought you out of the land of Egypt!**” (Exod. 32:4). Again, Aaron named God. The Israelites were clearly NOT making an image of a pagan god.

Because the golden calf was an image of their God—Elohim—Aaron then dedicated it by having “a feast to the **LORD**” (v5). The word ‘LORD’ (all caps) in many translations comes from the Hebrew Tetragrammaton YHVH (Yehovah). Who was YHVH? Speaking to Moses, God said:

EXODUS 3:13-15 Then Moses said to God, “Indeed, *when* I come to the children of Israel and say to them, ‘The God of your fathers has sent me to you,’ and they say to me, ‘What *is* His name?’ what shall I say to them?” 14 And God said to Moses, “I AM WHO I AM.” And He said, “Thus you shall say to the children of Israel, ‘I AM has sent me to you.’ “ 15 Moreover God said to Moses, “Thus **you shall say to the children of Israel: ‘The LORD [YHVH] God [Elohim]** of your fathers, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, has sent me to you. **This is My name forever**, and this *is* My memorial to all generations.’

The “LORD God” is YHVH Elohim in Hebrew and it is the name God told Moses to tell the Israelites! So, the Israelites KNEW the name of their God and their golden calf was an image of THEIR God.

But why a calf? The word for *calf* (Heb. *ʿegel*) can also mean a young male ox, especially one that has not yet been tamed with a yoke¹. It is doubtful that the Israelites made an image of a helpless newborn calf to represent their God who was mighty and powerful. Instead, the image was of a young male ox in the prime of its strength that had never been tamed or put under a yoke. If you have ever seen pictures of oxen, they are large and powerful beasts. When provoked, a young and wild ox can be a frightful animal. The Israelites saw with their own eyes the power of God and, in their minds, He could not be tamed or defeated. A young wild ox is even how GOD described Himself²:

¹ Jer. 31:18.

² Also Num. 23:22.

NUMBERS 24:8 “God brings him [*Israel*] out of Egypt; **He has strength like a wild ox**; He shall consume the nations, His enemies; He shall break their bones And pierce *them* with His arrows.

Now the story of the golden ‘calf’ makes more sense. The Israelites needed to communicate with their God—YHVH Elohim—but Moses, their Mediator, was missing going on 40 days. In their minds, the solution was to make an image of Him. This was the method commonly used by the Egyptians and other nations to communicate with their gods. That God would communicate directly with them was something they still struggled to understand. Under the circumstances, they needed an image of YHVH Elohim and what better one than an all powerful and unbreakable young ox, just as God described Himself; the same One who brought them out of Egypt!

In all this, the Israelites had good motives or intentions, but making that image was a very serious mistake that cost the lives of 3,000 men³. They had not, at least in their minds, broken the first commandment (“have no other gods before Me”) but they obviously violated the second commandment:

EXODUS 20:4-5 “**You shall not make for yourself a carved image**—any likeness of *anything* that *is* in heaven above, or that *is* in the earth beneath, or that *is* in the water under the earth; 5 you shall not bow down to them nor serve them. ...

Even though they made an image to YHVH Elohim and had dedicated it by declaring a feast day that included burnt and peace offerings (Exod. 32: 5-6), God was furious. From the beginning, He had wanted a direct relationship with the Israelites. They were ALL to be His priests to the other nations:

EXODUS 19:6 ‘And you [*the children of Israel*] **shall be to Me a kingdom of priests** and a holy nation.’ These *are* the words which you shall speak to the children of Israel.”

But the Israelites were too fearful of God so they demanded that Moses be their mediator and lost that direct relationship. Moreover, as a result of the golden calf, all the tribes except Levi were disqualified from being priests. The Israelites failed from the start to be—and do—what God commanded them.

With this understanding of the golden calf, it is easy to understand the real reason that Christmas is wrong. First of all, note that the primary centerpiece of Christmas is the evergreen tree. While there are mangers, etc., the universal symbol is the tree itself. What does it signify? While most who keep Christmas cannot answer that question, God actually describes Himself like an evergreen tree!

HOSEA 14:8 “Ephraim *shall say*, ‘What have I to do anymore with idols [*images*]?’ I [*the LORD*] have heard and observed him [*Ephraim*]. **I [*the LORD*] am like a green cypress tree; your fruit is found in Me.**”

³ Exod. 32:25-28.

The Christmas tree reflects God likening Himself to a cypress tree, just as the young ox portrayed YHVH Elohim. So, a Christmas tree is exactly the same as the golden calf—it is a violation of the second commandment.

Christmas is also a day that PEOPLE have made into a 'feast' to God—just as the Israelites did. In both cases God did not authorize those days to honor and worship Him. It does not matter that God characterizes Himself as an ox or an evergreen tree nor does it change anything if these days are dedicated by people in a feast with burnt and peace offerings. When God says NOT to make an image of anything in the entire universe or bow down to it, He means it! When He says to keep His Sabbaths and holydays, He means it! THIS is why Christmas is wrong—remember what God wanted to do to the Israelites! To ensure it never happened again, God later commanded:

DEUTERONOMY 12:29-32 “When the LORD your God cuts off from before you the nations which you go to dispossess, and you displace them and dwell in their land, 30 “take heed to yourself that you are not ensnared to follow them, after they are destroyed from before you, and that you do not inquire after their gods, saying, ‘How did these nations serve their gods? I also will do likewise.’ 31 **“You shall not worship the LORD your God in that way; for every abomination to the LORD which He hates they have done to their gods; for they burn even their sons and daughters in the fire to their gods. 32 “Whatever I command you, be careful [take heed] to observe it; you shall not add to it nor take away from it.”**

God warns to precisely observe ALL His commands regarding how He is to be worshipped and served. No one is to add to or take away from them, no matter how good their intentions! God is NOT pleased with Christmas or any other manmade 'religious' holiday. He has commanded His people to worship Him on the weekly Sabbaths and holydays and NO OTHER DAYS! And that still applies to today:

JOHN 4:23-24 “But the hour is coming, and now is, when the true worshipers will **worship the Father in spirit and truth; for the Father is seeking such to worship Him.** 24 “God is Spirit, and **those who worship Him must worship in spirit and truth.**”

GOD tells us how to please Him, worship Him, and honor Him. No one is to add to what He has commanded or take away from it. To obey God REQUIRES a humble and contrite spirit:

ISAIAH 57:15 For thus says the High and Lofty One Who inhabits eternity, whose name is Holy: “I dwell in the high and holy place, With him **who has a contrite and humble spirit**, To revive the spirit of the humble, And to revive the heart of the contrite ones.

May God's grace and peace be upon you!

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SABBATH THOUGHT 2023-12-30—WHY SUNDAY?

May God bless you on His Sabbath day!

When the United States was being formed, the writing of the constitution was a grueling process for the founding fathers. Why was it so difficult? This country was certainly founded by people who were grounded in firm beliefs of an Almighty God and a Savior Jesus Christ. Much of their writings not only refer to Them, but they quoted the Bible often enough. It is surprising, then, that the constitution and Bill of Rights did not contain the Law given to their ancestors the ancient Israelites. This would, of course, be the Ten Commandments that were expanded with all of the statutes, precepts, judgments, and testimonies that Moses wrote down in the Book of the Law¹. But strange as it is, the Ten Commandments are not included in the national constitution.

Assuming the Anglo and Celtic origins of nations including Britain, North America, Western Europe, and the Oceania regions are descendants of the Ten Tribes of Israel, another oddity is that their national religious day of worship is almost universally Sunday, the first day of the week. Since their history goes back to the time that the Israelites came out of Egypt and God proved the seventh-day Sabbath for forty years, one would expect these nations to have a solid foundation for worship on the seventh day instead of Sunday. Even during the time after the Assyrian captivity when the Ten Tribes resided in the regions around the Black Sea, they at least knew about the Sabbath and holydays as evidenced in their paying homage to the baby Jesus². But history shows that the Sabbath was supplanted by Sunday from the early centuries after the Apostles.

Why is it that Sunday is so deeply rooted in their religion? Understanding this is important for several reasons. First of all, this will change in the future per the prophecies of the Bible. Second, it shows that trying to force a national change to the Sabbath is not possible—at least for now. To begin, notice these writings of the prophet Jeremiah:

JEREMIAH 3:1, 6-8, 14, 20 “They say, ‘**If a man divorces his wife, And she goes from him And becomes another man’s, May he return to her again?**’ Would not that land be greatly polluted? But you have played the harlot with many lovers; Yet return to Me,” says the LORD. ... 6 The LORD said also to me in the days of Josiah the king: “Have you seen what backsliding Israel has done? She has gone up on every high mountain and under every green tree, and there played the harlot. 7 “And I said, after she had done all these *things*, ‘Return to Me.’ But she did not return. And her treacherous sister Judah saw it. 8 “Then I saw that for all the causes for which **backsliding Israel had committed adultery, I had put her away and given her a certificate of divorce**; yet her treacherous sister Judah did not fear, but went and played the harlot also. ... 14 “Return, O backsliding children,” says the LORD; “for **I am married [JPS, YLT,**

¹ Exod. 24:7; Deut. 31:24-26.

² Matt. 2.

et al = your Lord or Master (Hos. 2:16)] to you. I will take you, one from a city and two from a family, and I will bring you to Zion. ... 20 Surely, as **a wife treacherously departs from her husband, So have you dealt treacherously with Me, O house of Israel,**” says the LORD.

NOTE: The Law (Deut. 24:1-4) forbids a man to re-marry the same woman he divorced if she was subsequently married to another man after the divorce. Yet here, the LORD is merciful to take her back if she returns (v7).

While several Bibles translate verse 14 as ‘married,’ that is absolutely incorrect. It is properly translated “I am a Master (or Lord) to you.” This is obvious by context as well as in the Hebrew. In particular, though, these verses state that God DIVORCED Israel (the Ten Tribes). This is also portrayed by Hosea’s harlot wife and children:

HOSEA 1:2-9 When the LORD began to speak by Hosea, the LORD said to Hosea: “Go, **take yourself a wife of harlotry And children of harlotry,** For the land has committed great harlotry *By departing* from the LORD.” 3 So he went and took Gomer the daughter of Diblaim, and she conceived and bore him a son. 4 Then the LORD said to him: “Call his name **Jezreel,** For in a little *while* I will avenge the bloodshed of Jezreel on the house of Jehu, **And bring an end to the kingdom of the house of Israel [a result of divorcing them].** 5 It shall come to pass in that day That I will break the bow of Israel in the Valley of Jezreel.” 6 And she conceived again and bore a daughter. Then *God* said to him: “Call her name **Lo-Ruhamah [No Mercy], For I will no longer have mercy on the house of Israel,** But I will utterly take them away. 7 **Yet I will have mercy on the house of Judah [by NOT divorcing them],** ... 8 Now when she had weaned Lo-Ruhamah, she conceived and bore a son. 9 Then *God* said: “Call his name **Lo-Ammi [Not My People], For you are not My people, And I will not be your God.** 10 “Yet the number of the children of Israel Shall be as the sand of the sea, Which cannot be measured or numbered *[a promise to Abraham]*. And it shall come to pass In the place where it was said to them, **‘You are not My people,’** *There* it shall be said to them, *‘You are sons of the living God.’*

Notice that God did NOT divorce Judah even though she was more ‘treacherous.’ It says that God has no more mercy for Israel but will continue to be merciful to Judah because He promised Abraham he would have many descendants and Solomon that He would not completely forsake all of the twelve tribes. Continuing, Hosea says something very interesting to the Ten Tribes regarding the keeping of the Sabbath and holydays:

HOSEA 2:2, 7, 11 “Bring charges against your mother, bring charges; For **she [Ten Tribes of Israel] is not My [the LORD] wife, nor am I her Husband!** Let her put away her harlotries from her sight, And her adulteries from between her breasts; ... 7 She will chase her lovers, But not overtake them; Yes, she will seek them, but not find *them*. **Then she will say, ‘I will go and return to my first husband,** For then *it was* better for me than now.’ ... 11 **I will also cause all her mirth [delight] to cease [for] Her feast days, Her New Moons, Her Sabbaths– All her appointed feasts.**

Because God divorced the Ten Tribes, He caused their “delight [*in the Sabbaths and appointed feasts*] to cease.” This phrase in the Hebrew is *masows* (delight) *shabath* (to cease). Interestingly, *shabath* also means to “keep Sabbath.” When God divorced the Ten Tribes, He literally took away the Sabbath and holydays and their delight and desire for them. Why did He do this? Because the Sabbath is THE sign or evidence of those who KNOW GOD:

EXODUS 31:12-13, 17 And the LORD spoke to Moses, saying, 13 “Speak also to the children of Israel, saying: ‘Surely **My Sabbaths you shall keep, for it is a sign between Me and you** throughout your generations, **that you may know that I am the LORD who sanctifies you.** ... 17 **‘It is a sign /’owth = evidence/ between Me and the children of Israel** forever; ...

EZEKIEL 20:12 “Moreover **I also gave them My Sabbaths, to be a sign /’owth = evidence/ between them and Me, that they might know that I am the LORD** who sanctifies them.

Without the Sabbath, the descendants of the Ten Tribes do NOT know they are descendants of Abraham who had been brought out of Egypt by God. The manna was a reminder of exactly that (Exod. 16:26, 29-34). They also CANNOT ‘keep Sabbath’ or holydays. This all happened when God divorced them. It is why they call Him ‘Master’ instead of ‘Husband’ (Jer. 3:14). In fact, Jesus said, “... **a servant does not know what his master is doing**; but I [*Jesus Christ*] have called you friends, for **all things that I heard from My Father I have made known to you.**” (John 15:15). On the other hand, Judah still retains a knowledge of God although this does not mean they obey Him. Scripture confirms that they were even worse than the Ten Tribes but God had mercy upon them for the sake of Abraham, David, and Solomon.

Besides keeping Sunday, another example of the Ten Tribes not knowing God is in their prayers. I have heard many Protestants pray to the “Lord” and end with “in **your** name.” Praying to Jesus Christ and in His name makes no sense. To petition a deity and then ask those things be done in the same deity’s name is redundant if you are already speaking to the deity. That is in contrast to what Jesus said:

JOHN 14:13 “And whatever you **ask in My [Jesus Christ’s] name, that I will do**, that **the Father** may be glorified in the Son.

JOHN 16:23, 25-26 And in that day **you shall ask Me [Jesus Christ] nothing.** Truly, truly I tell you, whatever you shall **ask the Father in My name, He will give you [through Me].** ... 25 These things I have spoken to you in allegories; but the time is coming when I will no longer speak to you in allegories, but **I will plainly disclose to you the things of the Father.** 26 In that day [*when Jesus speaks “plainly about the Father”*], you shall ask in My name; and **I do not tell you that I will beseech the Father for you,**

By praying to Jesus Christ, Protestants demonstrate they do not know God the Father whom Jesus Christ revealed. Those that know and obey Him pray to God the Father and

ask that their petitions be done in the name and by Jesus Christ who has all authority and power in heaven and on earth³. The Ten Tribes do not know God nor can they keep Sabbath or holydays. But this will change by God's hand of power and MERCY:

HOSEA 2:13-14, 16, 19-20, 23 I will punish her [*Ten Tribes of Israel*] For the days of the Baals to which she burned incense. She decked herself with her earrings and jewelry, And went after her lovers; But Me she forgot," says the LORD. 14 "Therefore, behold, I will lure her, Will bring her into the wilderness, And speak comfort to her. ... 16 "And it shall be, **in that day,**" Says the LORD, "**That you [Israel] will [future tense] call Me 'My Husband,' And no longer call Me 'My Master [(Jer. 3:14)],**" ... 19 "**I will betroth you to Me forever;** Yes, I will betroth you to Me In righteousness and justice, In lovingkindness and mercy; 20 I will betroth you to Me in faithfulness, And you shall know the LORD. ... 23 Then I will sow her for Myself in the earth, And **I will have mercy on her who had not obtained mercy; Then I will say to those who were not My people, 'You are My people!'** And they shall say, 'You are my God!'"

ISAIAH 54:1-8 "Sing, O barren, You *who* have not borne! Break forth into singing, and cry aloud, You *who* have not labored with child! For **more are the children of the desolate [Israel] Than the children of the married woman [Judah],**" says the LORD. ... 3 For you shall expand to the right and to the left, And your descendants will inherit the nations, And make the desolate cities inhabited. 4 "Do not fear, for you will not be ashamed; Neither be disgraced, for you will not be put to shame; For you will forget the shame of your youth, And will **not remember the reproach of your widowhood [divorced woman] anymore.** 5 For **your Maker is your husband,** The LORD of hosts *is* His name; And your Redeemer *is* the Holy One of Israel; He is called the God of the whole earth. 6 For the LORD has called you Like **a woman forsaken** and grieved in spirit, Like **a youthful wife when you were refused,**" Says your God. 7 "**For a mere moment I have forsaken you,** But with great mercies I will gather you. 8 With a little wrath I hid My face from you for a moment; But **with everlasting kindness I will have mercy on you,**" Says the LORD, your Redeemer.

Rather than criticize and condemn the nations of Israel today (including Judah), we should have mercy toward them. The remnant will be rescued from captivity and once again be His chosen people. They will not longer call Jesus Christ 'Master' but will call Him 'Husband' and He will restore their 'delight' in keeping Sabbath and holydays!

May God's grace and peace be upon you!

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³ Matt. 28:18.