

*Words
to
Live
By*

VOLUME I

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This volume contains a collection of illustrations and commentary used in various sermons given by the Eternal Church of God. They are published with the hope that they continue to equip, edify, and inspire those who strive to live by every word of God.

1 Corinthians 4:2

It is required in stewards that one be found faithful.

Elizabeth Dole made a famous statement saying, “Life is not just a few years to spend on self-indulgence and career advancement. It is a privilege, a responsibility, and a stewardship to be lived according to a much higher calling.”

Our spirituality would be better off if we understood and lived by this truth. Nothing in this physical life is more valuable than God’s higher calling. Consider the physical possessions we have. They are not really ours. Our jobs, homes, cars, furniture, food, pets, and electronic gadgets do not belong to us. Even our spouses, children, and the invisible gifts we receive of God are not ours. Everything that exists in the entire universe belongs to the Eternal. We are simply stewards of His belongings, and He has given them to us for our temporary use. All that we have is on loan to serve a divine purpose.

Moreover, the way in which we treat God’s belongings shows the Almighty something of enormous importance. It is evidence of how we will take care of those things God will give His people in His Kingdom. Realizing this truth, we should take care of all that we have by treating it as a heavenly gift that is simply on loan to us.

Many are forgetting this fact as we grow ever closer to the end of the age. As the Savior warned, “Who then is a faithful and wise servant, whom his master made ruler over his household, to give them food in due season? Blessed is that servant whom his master, when he comes, will find so doing. Assuredly, I say to you that he will make him ruler over all his goods. But if that evil servant says in his heart, ‘My master is delaying his coming,’ and begins to beat *his* fellow servants, and to eat and drink with the drunkards, the master of that servant will come on a day when he is not looking for *him* and at an hour that he is not aware of, and will cut him in two and appoint *him* his portion with the hypocrites. There shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth” (Mat. 24:45-51).

We simply must learn to treat our family, friends, responsibilities, physical possessions, and the bodies we have in

a way that Christ would approve of. We never want to take anything for granted, but rather strive to maintain and improve upon the gifts God gives to us. As Paul wrote of Christ, “He died for all, that those who live should live no longer for themselves, but for Him who died for them and rose again” (2Cor. 5:15). Let’s strive to live for Christ by outwardly expressing care, concern, and love as faithful stewards of those gifts He has given to us.

1 Corinthians 9:24

Do you not know that those who run in a race all run, but one receives the prize? Run in such a way that you may obtain it.

Beth Anne DeCiantis’ passion for running led her to attempt competing in the Olympics. In order to qualify for the Olympic trials, she would have to complete a grueling 26-mile race in less than two hours and 45 minutes. She started out strong but began to have trouble in the 23rd mile. Beth’s determination brought her to the final straightaway with just 200 meters to go and only two minutes left to qualify. Suddenly, she stumbled and fell.

Beth was dazed and stayed down for a full twenty seconds. The crowd began to exhort her by yelling, “Get up!” She managed to stand up and began walking with less than a minute to go. Beth was now only five yards short of the finish line with ten seconds left and suddenly she fell again. The crowd continued to cheer her on as Beth began to crawl. She would not stop, but crawled on her hands and knees across the finish line and completed the marathon in two hours 44 minutes and 55 seconds. She made it!

The amazing part of this story is that Beth Anne refused to give up. Falling down did not stop her. It seemed that nothing would stop her from reaching her goal. She qualified by giving it all she had—that is what caused her to succeed.

It is this kind of attitude and behavior that Christians need to have in our race for the Kingdom. Only those who are zealous will qualify. If we truly love God, we will seek His Kingdom with all our heart, all our life, all our strength, and we will let nothing

stop us. Even at those times when we stumble and become dazed by what has happened, we will get back up and continue the race.

By earnestly devoting ourselves to this transcendent quest, those who have this kind of passion for God will cross the finish line and receive the imperishable crown of life.

1 Corinthians 6:19-20

Or do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, whom you have from God? You are not your own, for you were bought with a price. So glorify God in your body (ESV).

Mankind is widely driven by the lust of our eyes and flesh. Consequently, we have created a multitude of devices and methods to tantalize our carnal senses. For example, the entertainment industry has expanded widely over the last 60 years to include deviancy beyond measure. Portrayal of violence, sex, and ungodly behaviors dominate television, movies, and theatrical arts. Extracurricular activities have also become more violent and include behaviors that violate the enduring moral principles of the Bible.

When Christians partake of games, outings, watch movies, or television; we need to ask ourselves an important question. Would we include Christ in our activities? Do we only participate in activities that He would approve of, or do we temporarily suspend biblical ethics in order to enjoy inappropriate entertainment?

There is an old story that illustrates this tendency. A desert nomad awakened hungry in the middle of the night. He lit a candle and began eating dates from a bowl beside his bed. He took a bite from one and saw a worm in it so he threw it out of the tent. He bit into the second date and found another worm and discarded it also. Reasoning that he wouldn't have any dates left to eat if he continued, he blew out the candle and took from the bowl and ate.

Are we sometimes like this nomad? Do we find ourselves blinding our eyes to the perverse ways of this world so that we

can partake of immoral activities? Do we suspend our values in order to enjoy some form of entertainment? When we watch a movie, is it a film that we would take Christ to see or do we sometimes seek darkness so that our sin may be hidden?

We need to ask ourselves—where is God in our lives outside of Church functions? Would we bring Him with us wherever we go? Do we question whether or not Christ would step into our activities?

From this day forward, let's be critical in our entertainment choices. Let's evaluate the activities we enjoy and be sure they are ones that God would approve of. Consider that, through the Holy Spirit, Christ is with us wherever we go. We must be sure that we only participate in those activities He would approve of.

1 Corinthians 4:3-6

But with me it is a very small thing that I should be judged by you or by a human court. In fact, I do not even judge myself. For I know of nothing against myself, yet I am not justified by this; but He who judges me is the Lord. Therefore judge nothing before the time, until the Lord comes, who will both bring to light the hidden things of darkness and reveal the counsels of the hearts. Then each one's praise will come from God... that none of you may be puffed up on behalf of one against the other.

Former Dallas Cowboys quarterback David Simmons' father was extremely demanding. As a child, David's dad rarely said a kind word, but rather used harsh criticism to push his son to do better. David's father constantly reminded him that there were always new goals ahead and refused to allow his son any satisfaction from his accomplishments.

On one occasion, David's dad gave him an unassembled bicycle. He commanded his son to put it together. With the many parts and difficult instructions David struggled to the point of

tears. His father then said to him, “I knew you couldn’t do it,” and finished assembling the bicycle for him.

Later, when David played football in high school, his father was unrelenting in his criticism. After each game he would go over every play and point out his son’s errors. In retrospect David said, “Most boys got butterflies in their stomach before the game; I got them afterwards. Facing my father was more stressful than any opposing team.”

When it was time to go to college David chose the University of Georgia because it was the farthest campus from the home where he had come to hate his father’s constant disapproval. After college, he was the second-round draft pick of the St. Louis Cardinals. He excitedly telephoned his father to tell him the good news. David’s dad responded by saying, “How does it feel to be second?”

If you have ever felt rejected, welcome to the club. We all feel singled out and alone at times. Our emotions confront us with a need for acceptance from an early age that continues well into adulthood. Rejection can come from various places—family, friends, neighbors, and coworkers. In the Church, acceptance may depend on who we attend with and how big our congregation is. Even among Christians rejection can be based upon how we look, dress, and what personal views we have.

When most seem to be judging what is right and wrong for themselves, we need to remember that we do not have the ability to measure our value or the worth of others. The apostle Paul knew that people do not naturally evaluate themselves and others from a proper perspective. Our personal values are frequently flawed and seldom in sync with the standards of Almighty God.

Thus, Christ was rejected by most men and women and even forsaken by His disciples when they fled in fear. He felt rejection in the extreme but was comforted in the fact that the Father was with Him. God the Father’s love is what really mattered to Him and it should be what matters most to us.

What others think of us is not of much importance. Even what we think of ourselves does not count for much. It is what God thinks that is important. He loves us and will never reject us—if we do not reject Him.

1 Chronicles 13:2-11

And David said to all the assembly of Israel, "... let us bring the ark of our God back to us, for we have not inquired at it since the days of Saul." Then all the assembly said that they would do so. And when they came to Chidon's threshing floor, Uzza put out his hand to hold the ark, for the oxen stumbled. Then the anger of the LORD was aroused against Uzza, and He struck him because he put his hand to the ark; and he died there before God. And David became angry because of the LORD's outbreak against Uzza.

King David consulted with leaders of the people rather than consulting God and Scripture regarding how the Ark of the Covenant was to be transported. It was not to be carried on a cart, and nobody was allowed to touch it. When the ox pulling the cart stumbled, Uzza ignorantly attempted to stabilize the Ark. This man died as a result of mishandling the holy things of God.

Many take a similar approach with the written Word of God. Some simply assume that their beliefs and practices are accepted by God without knowing the Scriptures. In their own way, they are trying to balance the holy things of God with their personal opinions or desires.

Are we adding our own twist to the Scriptures, making assumptions, or inferring what we want the Bible to say? Do we take scriptures out of context in an attempt to justify our behavior? This is occurring in churches all around the world, and such behavior is mishandling the holy things of God.

Consider an example. According to Peter Kendall of the Chicago Tribune, 61-year-old Reuben Brown was known on the south and west sides of Chicago as the friendly neighborhood cockroach exterminator with the "Mississippi stuff." The Mississippi stuff was a pesticide that Brown had purchased hundreds of gallons of, and it really did the trick on roaches. Brown went from door to door with his hand sprayer and his business grew as satisfied customers recommended this remarkably effective exterminator to others.

However, Brown single-handedly created an environmental catastrophe. The can-do pesticide was methyl parathion; a chemical outlawed by the EPA for use in homes. Southern farmers use it on boll weevils in their cotton fields, and within days the pesticide chemically breaks down into harmless elements. Not so in the home. There, the pesticide persists as a toxic chemical that can harm the human neurological system with effects similar to lead poisoning.

The Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) was called in for the cleanup of more than 1,100 homes. Drywall, carpeting, and furniture that had been sprayed with the pesticide had to be torn out and hauled to a hazardous materials dump. The EPA estimated that the total cost of the cleanup amounted to approximately \$20 million.

Reuben Brown pled guilty to misdemeanor charges. He apparently didn't know much about the pesticide he had sprayed so liberally. Brown's attorney stated, "It's a tragedy. It is one of those situations where he did a lot of harm, but his intention in no way matches the damage he has done."

Like the act of Uzza, Reuben Brown caused enormous damage because he did not take the time to understand exactly what he was dealing with. Today the same kind approach is occurring in Christianity. Many feel that they are righteous simply because they attend a church service and claim to believe in Christ, but many are not studying the Bible in order to know what it actually says. They do not fully understand how God would have them live. Ultimately this will bring great harm to many people.

The lesson of Uzza's mishandling of the Ark relates that we cannot justify personal beliefs or feelings that are unconfirmed by Scripture. Uzza perished because neither he nor King David showed the proper respect for God's instructions regarding the Ark. If we do not respect the things of God and implement Biblical principles as the Almighty sees fit, we may also suffer. We must sincerely seek to understand this truth. The Eternal expects us to live by His written Word and not by what we feel is right or wrong.

1 Corinthians 9:24-25

Do you not know that those who run in a race all run, but one receives the prize? Run in such a way that you may obtain it. And everyone who competes for the prize is temperate in all things. Now they do it to obtain a perishable crown, but we for an imperishable crown.

Parents lined the stands of a middle-school track meet as their children edged up to the starting line. Each contestant was filled with the hope of being the first to cross the finish line, but little Billy was confident that he had what it takes to win.

The starter's gun fired, and the boys sprung forward with a burst of energy. Billy bolted to the front runners. The others began to bunch up at the first turn when Billy's foot accidentally struck that of another runner. He tumbled to the ground as the rest of the competitors passed him by. Undiscouraged, Billy quickly got back on his feet and pressed on. He ran with all his strength and began to catch up. However, his mind was going faster than his legs. He lost his balance and fell a second time. Billy laid there feeling devastated thinking that he should have quit the first time he fell and avoided this disgrace. He realized that winning was now hopeless. As he looked toward the stands, he caught a glimpse of his dad's face. The expression he saw was that of a hopeful father that seemed to say, "You can do it—get up and finish the race!"

Billy jumped up and began to run again. In no time, he was within ten feet of the last runner. He began to think that there might still be a chance that he could win. He reached deep inside and pulled every ounce of strength in his body.

Nevertheless, distracted by his failures, fatigue began to set in and the worst possible thing happened. He fell a third time. A tear dropped from his eye as the agony of defeat entered his mind. What's the use? He thought. Three strikes and you're out. There seemed to be no sense in running anymore. Hope had fled, and he decided to simply walk off the track and live with humiliation.

Then he imagined facing his father. It was almost as if he could hear his dad's voice telling him to get up! "You were not

meant to give up, Billy. Run and finish this race!” This anticipated response inspired Billy to rise up. This time he didn’t care if he won or lost. It had become an issue of finishing. He refused to give up and quit.

Billy was far behind the others, but he ran and gave it his all. As he got closer to the finish line, he could hear the audience cheering for the boys who had won. All of the other runners had already finished and eventually Billy crossed the finish line too—he was in last place.

With his head lowered, Billy began to walk back to the gym. What happened next shocked him. The audience began to cheer, and it was even louder than for the winners! When he talked to his dad later, Billy said, “I didn’t do too well. I am sorry that I let you down, Dad.” His father replied, “You did not let me down. In fact, you have made me very happy. You got back up every time you fell. You did not quit. To me you are a winner!”

This story is like the Christian race Paul spoke of. There may be afflictions and from time to time we may fall down and even suffer injury. Nevertheless, God said that as long as we do our personal best, and remain committed to Him, He will not leave or forsake us (Jos. 1:5).

Our concern should not be who comes in first or who might be ahead of us. As Christians, to win means that we never quit. When difficult times come, when we make mistakes or seemingly fail in one way or another, consider the experience of Billy and the words of Paul. Never give up. Run and finish our race to the Kingdom of God!

Luke 16:10

He who is faithful in what is least is faithful also in much; and he who is unjust in what is least is unjust also in much.

American sprinter Michael Johnson is a great athlete who set records and won four gold medals in the 1996 Olympic Games. He trained for years just to enable him to cut a mere second or two from his time. In his biography, he wrote, “Success

is found in much smaller portions than most people realize. A hundredth of a second here, sometimes a tenth there, this can determine the fastest man in the world. At times we live our lives on a paper-thin edge that barely separates greatness from mediocrity and success from failure. Life is often compared to a marathon, but I think it is more like being a sprinter; long stretches of hard work punctuated by brief moments in which we are given the opportunity to perform at our best.”

The Christian life also resembles that of a sprinter. There are long stretches of obedience and spiritual discipline punctuated by tests in which we are given the opportunity to perform at our very best. During these stretches of time many God-given tests seem of little significance. The majority are usually not colossal undertakings, but rather small tests of faith and devotion. Everything counts no matter how inconsequential it may seem, and success can depend upon the seemingly small choices we make.

The slight flaws in our character, the rash accusations, the loose words of anger and frustration—these seemingly insignificant details could be the determining factors between success and failure.

Always remember that whatever we do, whether it is work, play, hobbies, conversation, entertainment, or helping others, make everything count. Bring into subjection our entire life with a deep sense of love and humility; understanding that the seemingly small things reflect our level of faithfulness.

Luke 13:24

Strive to enter through the narrow gate, for many, I say to you, will seek to enter and will not be able.

Admiral Hyman Rickover was the head of the United States Nuclear Navy. To many who knew him, he was stern and demanding—as if he asked too much from his crews. For many years, every officer aboard a nuclear submarine was personally interviewed and approved by the admiral. Jimmy Carter, who

would later become president of the United States, wrote the following regarding his interview with the famous admiral:

“I had applied for the nuclear submarine program, and Admiral Rickover was interviewing me for the job. It was the first time I met the Admiral, and we sat in a large room by ourselves for more than two hours. During the session, he let me choose any subjects I wished to discuss. Very carefully, I chose those about which I knew most at the time—current events, seamanship, music, literature, naval tactics, electronics, and gunnery. After I finished, he began to ask me a series of questions of increasing difficulty. In each instance, he soon proved that I knew relatively little about nuclear submarines.”

“He always looked right into my eyes, and he never smiled. I was saturated with cold sweat. Finally, he asked a question and I thought I could redeem myself. He said, ‘How did you stand in your class at the Naval Academy?’ Since I had completed my sophomore year at Georgia Tech before entering Annapolis, I had done very well. My chest swelled with pride as I answered, ‘Sir, I stood 59th in a class of 820!’”

“Then, I sat back to wait for the congratulations which never came. Instead, his next question was: ‘Did you always do your best?’ I started to say, ‘Yes, sir,’ but I remembered who I was talking to, and recalled the many times at the Academy when I could have learned more about our allies, our enemies, weapons, strategy, and so forth. I was just human. I finally gulped and said, ‘No, sir, I didn’t always do my best.’”

“He looked at me for a long time, and then turned his chair around to end the interview. He asked one final question, which I have never been able to forget—or to answer. He said, ‘Why not?’ I sat there for a while, shaken, and then slowly left the room.”

Consider this story in the light of the Christian calling. God is assembling a people to become Kings and Priests in His Kingdom. Of the many who are called, Christ stated that only a few will be chosen (Mat. 22:14). Only the faithful will qualify.

In that context, are we looking at God as the officers viewed Admiral Rickover? Do we feel the Almighty is asking too much of us by requiring that we do our very best while striving

to live His way? Or, do we make excuses for ourselves that we may later regret?

When we come before God, and He asks us if we did our best, what would our response be? Would we say a mere mental exercise of belief was enough? Is it possible to believe in Christ and still fail? The Savior answers that question, stating, “Not everyone who says to Me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ shall enter the Kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father in heaven ...depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness!” (Mat. 7:21-23).

Not doing our best to keep God’s commandments is lawlessness. Holding traditions or personal beliefs above Scripture is wrong. Claiming to believe in God and not obeying Him becomes nothing more than unfaithful lip service. We must never become self-satisfied and think that we are righteous simply for professing to believe. We cannot allow knowledge to puff us up. We must strive for the mastery of understanding that we must be temperate in all things (1Cor. 9:25). Anything worthwhile in life requires tangible effort, and ours is the opportunity of a lifetime. Let’s give God’s calling our very best knowing that through Christ we can succeed!

1 Corinthians 10:13

No temptation has overtaken you except such as is common to man; but God is faithful, who will not allow you to be tempted beyond what you are able, but with the temptation will also make the way of escape, that you may be able to bear it.

For many years farmers in Alabama planted a single crop—cotton. Year after year they earned a living from that cotton. One year the boll weevil devastated the whole area. The next year the farmers braced themselves and planted cotton again. As soon as the crop began to grow, the dreaded insects invaded again and destroyed the entire crop.

A few farmers who managed to survive those two years decided to experiment the third year. They mortgaged their farms, took the money, and invested it by planting a different

crop. It was one they had never planted before—peanuts. The new crop was so hardy, and the market for them so good, the farmers earned enough to pay off all of their debts.

From that time forward, they only planted peanuts and they prospered greatly. Out of gratitude the farmers took up a collection and built a monument to the boll weevil right in the town square. If it had not been for this initially loathsome insect, they would never have discovered peanuts.

There is an invaluable lesson that can be learned from these farmers. We sometimes find ourselves in a trial. We resent the trial, but often continue to apply the same solutions with no success. Have you ever thought that the trial we experience is a message from God telling us to plant seeds of a different kind of behavior? Have we considered that the difficulties we experience may be a lesson preparing us for the future?

With every trial God allows, He gives us a way out. This often means that we must make a change in our lives. However, with that change will be blessings we never envisioned, and the ultimate end will be one of great reward.

When we experience a trial, we should ask ourselves, what are we planting and what might we need to change? Instead of planting anger, replace it with joy. Instead of selfishness, plant caring and giving. Replace pride with meekness and change the seeds of resentment to those of love.

1 Corinthians 10:11

Now all these things happened to them as examples, and they were written for our admonition, upon whom the ends of the ages have come.

Americans eat, drink, and shoot off fireworks every year on the 4th of July. Multiple millions of dollars are spent on this day as masses gather to gaze at the spectacles of color and light. If you ask participants what they are celebrating, they will likely tell you liberty and freedom! What many forget is that freedom requires responsibility. The noted Austrian Neurologist, and Holocaust survivor, Viktor Frankl, said that “Americans need a

Statue of Responsibility on the west coast to balance the Statue of Liberty on the east coast.”

The ancient Israelites were freed from oppression and given liberty. They were given freedom, but they did not consistently take responsibility in maintaining that liberty. They stopped obeying God, worshipped other gods, became proud, and in the end, they lost the freedom God had given them.

Is it possible that America is following the same path as ancient Israel? Has liberty been turned into license? Are teeming masses rejecting God today? Has the freedom Americans have so heartily endorsed allowed people to go too far in seeking pleasure? Each day the news makes the answer clear. Like ancient Israel, if America does not turn around, millions will ultimately lose their freedom.

We must take the responsibility to honor the God upon which this great nation was founded. When the 4th of July comes around each year, remember that our freedom comes with a price. That price is the kind of gratitude that engenders a responsibility to live the way that God intended an honorable nation live!

1 Corinthians 12:21-22

The eye cannot say to the hand, “I have no need of you”; nor again the head to the feet, “I have no need of you.” No, much rather, those members of the body which seem to be weaker are necessary.

In March of 1981, President Ronald Reagan was shot by John Hinckley Jr. in a failed assassination attempt. The President was hospitalized for several weeks. Although Mr. Reagan was the nation’s chief executive, his hospitalization had little impact on the nation’s activity.

But what if America’s garbage collectors went on strike as they once did in Philadelphia. That city not only found itself in a literal mess, the pile of decaying trash quickly became a health hazard. From that historic experience, it is estimated that a three-week nationwide strike of this country’s waste collectors would likely paralyze the nation.

This scenario brings up an important question. Who was more important in these two circumstances? Was it the president or the garbage collectors? This comparison makes it clear. Every member has an important role to play in any organization. Each one of us is important and this principle is even more apparent when it comes to the body of Christ.

Sometimes members of the Church think that they are unimportant because they are not an ordained deacon, elder, evangelist, or pastor. But—each one of us is important to God, and each performs tasks that are essential to the health of the Church. The widow’s prayers that support the work are just as important as the work itself. The varied responsibilities are inseparable!

Do not think that what we do is trivial. Even the small things we do in this life show God how faithful we will be with larger responsibilities to come. Do our best, be our best, and live the best we can no matter what position we might have. Realize that each one of us is of enormous value to God and that He put us in the body exactly where it pleases Him.

1 John 2:1

My little children, these things I write to you, so that you may not sin. And if anyone sins, we have an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous.

The generosity of God can be seen everywhere we look in life. From the air we breathe, to the beautiful flowers, the landscapes, and taste of food. Everything we enjoy in life is a gift from our Creator. Perhaps the most misunderstood gift from God is His divine influence upon the minds and hearts of those who are called. This is perhaps the greatest display of God’s grace. He allowed the sacrifice of His beloved Son so that we might be saved and receive the gift of His Holy Spirit (John 16:7).

However, some have falsely been taught that grace is only the unmerited pardon of our sins, and we are no longer obligated to keep God’s law. This is a great deception. God’s law and His grace go hand in hand. The Holy Spirit, made available through God’s grace, inspires both thoughts and behavior toward doing

what is right—including keeping God’s law (John 16:13). Juan Ortiz explained this truth in the following way.

“Christians are a little bit like a trapeze show. It is breathtaking as we see the dexterity and timing. We gasp at near-misses even though in most cases, there is a net underneath. When they fall, they jump up, and bounce back to the trapeze.”

Christians live on a similar trapeze. Grace prods us to live differently. Those around us should be able to watch and say, “Look how they live, how they love one another. Look how well the husbands treat their wives. Aren’t they the best workers in the factories, offices, and fields? Aren’t they the best neighbors, and the best students?”

True Christians are supposed to be a show to the world, and what happens when we stumble and fall? The net is there for us. The blood of Christ has provided forgiveness for us. He provides the inspiration to gracefully keep our balance in life, and He is the net that will save us and lift us up should we fall.

1 Peter 1:6-7

In this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while, if need be, you have been grieved by various trials, that the genuineness of your faith, being much more precious than gold that perishes, though it is tested by fire, may be found to praise, honor, and glory at the revelation of Jesus Christ.

On the prairies of the Midwest, a grass fire can be a good thing. Naturalist Cindy Schreuder wrote, “To ask whether a prairie needs fire is to wonder whether it needs water. The burning stimulates the growth of grasses and causes the wildflowers to return nutrients to the soil. This process exposes seed beds to the sun and suppresses invading trees and shrubs.”

Schreuder continued to describe one such fire. “Pushed forward by the wind, the flames raced across the prairie. Thick dead grass stalks wavered for just a moment before buckling and falling into flames... A prairie burning is something like a great thunderstorm. You experience the raw power of nature. After

you've burned it off, nothing is left. It's so pure. Every leaf that emerges is new and shiny and wet. Every flower petal is perfect."

According to the Scriptures, we should be striving to obtain the character needed to become a born-again child of God. Such character can be gained through the fiery trials of life—a type of purification likened to purging dross (1Pet. 4:12-13; Isa. 1:25). Righteous character must be obtained by enduring and overcoming various temptations so that God can know whether or not we will follow Him in every situation.

The heated trials of life are there to burn off the deadwood—to remove the fat. They are crucial to purify us and leave behind a fertile bed of soil in which spiritual growth can occur. Through these hardships, we are strengthened and even renewed as holy development takes place.

Remember the prairies of the Midwest when difficult times are upon us. The fires are essential and we are required to overcome if we are going to be changed—emerging as a new creation in Christ (2Cor. 5:17).

2 Timothy 2:15

Be diligent to present yourself approved to God, a worker who does not need to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth.

Albert Einstein fled Nazi Germany and took up residence in Princeton, New Jersey. He purchased an older two-story home in a small neighborhood. In this residence, he entertained some of the greatest minds in the world. Professors, scholars, and scientists came to discuss mathematics, politics, science, and human rights. However, there is one guest Einstein entertained that few know about.

Emmy was an elementary school student who lived in the neighborhood. She was struggling with her fifth-grade math and heard that there was a very smart man who lived down the street. She decided to knock on his door. She told Albert her plight and asked for his help. He said that he would be glad to assist her. They sat together, and Albert explained how to work the

problems in a way that Emmy could understand. He told her that she could come and visit anytime.

Later, her mother was horrified to learn that her daughter had visited Albert Einstein. She told Emmy that Einstein was a very important man, and her daughter should never interrupt him again. Emmy's mother then went to Einstein's house and apologized for her daughter. The world-renown scientist explained that Emmy was not a bother. He told her mother, "When a child finds such joy in learning, then it is my joy to help her learn. Don't stop Emmy from coming to me with her school problems. She is welcome in this house anytime."

The humble and helpful attitude of Albert Einstein is a small example of how God feels about us. Sometimes we forget how much God cares, and that we are more important to Him than most realize (Luke 12:7). We overlook how much He desires for us to seek His counsel in prayer and our study of His Word. As a loving Father, He wants us to come to Him with our questions and difficulties.

We all suffer problems in life, but we must remember this truth. God is bigger than any of our problems, and we are always welcome to come to Him with any difficulty we might have. No matter how big or small, God is always there to help us understand.

1 Corinthians 11:1

Imitate me, just as I also imitate Christ.

A married couple decided to rent a small plane for the afternoon. The woman's husband had 13 years of experience as a pilot, and they set off for a lunch date 60 miles away. During the flight, the husband said that he felt a little faint and suddenly collapsed in his seat. His wife did not have the slightest idea how to fly an airplane. She pressed the transmitter button on the microphone and cried out, "Someone help me, help me I can't fly this airplane!"

The radio was tuned to a frequency used by many pilots and her frantic message was heard by dozens of people. Suddenly

many voices were offering advice. Some were saying to follow a highway, turn towards the sun, and switch on the landing light.

A local flight instructor was listening to this confusion on the airwaves. He ran to his small Cessna and took off to try the impossible; to find the voice in the sky asking for help. He waited for a lull in the transmission and then asked all the other transmitters to remain quiet so he could contact the woman. “Madam, what is your name?” he asked as he began to establish a rapport while scanning the skies for the aircraft. He saw a plane with its landing light on in the distance. “Can you turn off your landing light?” the instructor asked. The light went off—it was her.

He flew his plane in front of her to let her know he was there and then he maneuvered his plane just a little behind and to the side of her. He explained that he was an experienced flight instructor. Calmly he taught her the basics of flying. As they neared the airfield, the instructor gave more details regarding how to land. They flew over the airstrip once and then made the final approach. With the flight instructor as a guide, the woman was able to safely land the plane.

In a world that is filled with examples of bad leadership, this flight instructor provides a wonderful example of how a leader should teach others. To lead by example with care and patience is an attribute essential to those whom God has called.

Like this distraught lady following the lead of an experienced pilot, we must remember that we have a perfect example to follow in Christ. He teaches us how to navigate through life in this complicated world. He went to great lengths to instruct His people and gave His life as an example for us. He showed us that we are to imitate Him.

Christ stated that of the many who have been called only a few will be chosen to become leaders in the Kingdom of God (Mat. 22:14). In that context, if we hope to become a king and a priest in the government of God, we should be walking proof that He is leading us right now!

As we follow Him, our friends, family members, neighbors, and co-workers will have tangible evidence of how they too should live. By witnessing our conduct, others may also learn how to one day obtain eternal life in the Kingdom of God.

1 Timothy 6:6

Godliness with contentment is great gain

It is the Christmas season again—a time for full blown materialism. The parking lots at most shopping centers are packed. The local mall is filled with extravagant displays of self-indulgence. Americans are again setting new records in spending.

The attitude of the Christmas holiday spirit leads people to believe that not giving a gift is equated to not caring. Many parents feel that it would be absurd not to attempt to fulfill a child's wish list, and so purchasing those "just right" items for friends and family becomes the focal point of millions during this time of year.

One enterprising group has developed a unique alternative. They call it the *Buy Nothing Christmas* and are attempting to make it a national initiative. Their website lists important reasons to avoid the spending frenzy and how people can deal with not spending money on this holiday. It gives examples of wonderful things to do for people and asks them to consider all of the things we should already have like friendship, love, health, and good times.

This organization has a legitimate idea. They have focused on a vital truth that we should already know. Most of us already have our important needs taken care of, and yet the advertising industry works to make us feel like we never have enough. Far too many have become influenced by the materialism this society spreads.

We must not allow the spirit of materialism to influence our perspective of what truly brings happiness. As the Apostle Paul wrote to Timothy, "Having food and clothing, with these we shall be content" (1Tim. 6:8). His words have enormous value.

As the world becomes more and more materialistic, we must remember that we have been given something far more valuable than anything money could buy. We have been called to become a part of God's Kingdom! We seek to attain eternal life! We need to keep this perspective in mind as we live and work in a world filled with materialism.

Ephesians 4:30

Do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God.

Harry bought a brand-new car. It had all the latest innovations, including a microprocessor that sported a vocal warning system. At first Harry was amused to hear the pleasant female voice gently reminding him that his seat belt wasn't fastened. He frequently and affectionately called the voice, "the little woman."

It wasn't long until Harry learned that "the little woman" was programmed to warn him about his level of gasoline. "Your fuel level is low," the voice sweetly said to him one day. Harry nodded his head and begrudgingly replied, "Thank you." He could read the gauge and like many times in the past Harry figured that he still had enough gas to go another fifty miles, and so Harry kept on driving.

A few minutes later, the soft voice interrupted his reverie again. It was the same warning. This continued, over and over. Although Harry knew it was the same recording each time, it seemed like the voice became harsher at every warning.

Finally, he couldn't stand it any longer. Harry stopped the car, crawled under the dash board, found the appropriate wire going to the speakers, and defiantly gave it a good yank. "So much for the little woman," Harry proudly said to himself as he got in the car and drove away.

Just a few miles later the vehicle suddenly began to sputter and die. Harry had run out of gas! Frustrated, on the side of the road, Harry felt that somewhere inside the dashboard he could almost hear the little woman laughing.

Every Christian has a small voice inside them called the conscience. The human conscience needs to be programmed by the Holy Spirit to warn us—to show us exactly what morally correct behavior should be. Sometimes we try to disconnect from the guidance of the Holy Spirit. And when we do, we always fail spiritually and experience some sort of undesirable consequence. If this kind of behavior continues, we could ultimately run out of the spiritual fuel necessary to make it to our destination—the Kingdom of God.

Let's take a few moments every day to meditate on the importance of listening to the still-small voice that is our conscience led by the Holy Spirit. God designed us to have this spiritual warning system, and we need to follow its lead.

1 Thessalonians 5:19

Do not quench the Spirit.

One dark night outside a small town, a fire started inside the room of a chemical plant. In a matter of minutes, the fire exploded into massive flames. The local fire department quickly arrived and fought the blaze for over an hour, but they seemed to be getting nowhere. The conflagration was simply too intense for their single engine to put out.

The fire chief was forced to call for back-up. Several fire departments rushed in from surrounding counties and fought the blaze with all their might. It took all night, but by the next morning the billowy flames were quenched. There were enough trucks, men, and water to finally extinguish the torrent.

The efforts of these firemen provide an interesting lesson for Christians. God has started a fire in the hearts and minds of those who are called. The intensity of the internal flame increases with our passion for His truth. However, there are many forces that work to extinguish the spiritual fire within us.

For example, Jesus explained that the cares of this world can choke out God's Word that has been sown in us (Mark 4:18-19). Pride, envy, lusts, and resentments assault us daily. The taint of human nature consistently attempts to dampen our zeal for God. We cannot let this happen. Let's always be on alert, guarding against the many pulls, temptations, and distractions that can quench the fire God's Spirit has started in us.

1 Corinthians 12:12

For as the body is one and has many members, but all the members of that one body, being many, are one body, so also is Christ.

A *Reader's Digest* narrative explained that when the roots of trees touch one another there is a fungus that grows over time. This fungus tends to reduce competition between different trees. In fact, it helps to link the roots of different trees together—even those of dissimilar species. As a result of this phenomenon, an entire forest can sometimes be connected by their roots facilitating groves to help one another throughout their existence.

Consider the value of this example to God's people. By this unique connection, if one tree has access to water, another to nutrients, and a third to sunlight, trees have a means to share God's gifts with one another.

God designed His Church in such a way that it should function like such a forest. The Scriptures call it one body. While there may be many different members, they are all to be connected to one another through the love and Spirit of God. What one member lacks, another can supply by the gifts God has given to each one of us.

Contemplate our unique place in the body of Christ and how we are to be connected to one another. We should serve one another's needs as we strive for the Kingdom of Heaven.

1 Timothy 6:10

For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil, for which some have strayed from the faith in their greediness, and pierced themselves through with many sorrows.

With all of the corporate scandals, excessive CEO bonuses and salaries, multi-million dollar lobbying of government officials, and a national deficit spinning out of control, it is clear that the United States of America has become a nation captivated by covetousness. What most fail to realize is that, by pursuing this course, we will ultimately lose everything! A short story illustrates this truth.

Dee was a beautiful dog whose owner once gave her an entire rib eye steak. As most canines do, she took the meat and ran off to find a safe place to consume it. Dee crossed over a

bridge on a small lake. Looking down at the glassy water, she saw another dog. This other dog seemed smaller than her, but the steak she was carrying looked bigger. Dee felt certain she could take the steak from the other dog, so she lunged into the water. When Dee opened her mouth to grab the other dog's steak, hers dropped to the bottom of the lake. She lost everything for what was only an illusion.

This is the way life will end up when we are covetous. Riches, wealth, and material possessions only provide an illusion of happiness. They won't satisfy anyone for very long, and by seeking those alone we can lose what we have in God's calling.

For this reason, Jesus warns the last era of His Church: "Because you say, 'I am rich, have become wealthy, and have need of nothing'—and do not know that you are wretched, miserable, poor, blind, and naked—I counsel you to buy from Me gold refined in the fire, that you may be rich; and white garments, that you may be clothed, *that* the shame of your nakedness may not be revealed; and anoint your eyes with eye salve, that you may see" (Rev. 3:17-18).

Let us strive to keep our desires on target. If we do, all that we truly need will be provided for us (Mat. 6:33).

2 Timothy 3:1-2

But know this, that in the last days perilous times will come: For men will be lovers of themselves...

Shirley MacLaine's philosophy articulates the view of one's self in relation to others. She wrote, "The most pleasurable journey you ever will take is through yourself. The only real sustaining love involvement is with yourself... When you look back on your life and try to figure out where you've been, and where you're going, when you look at your work, your love affairs, your marriages, your children, your pain, your happiness, when you examine all that closely, what you really find out is that the only person you really go to bed with is yourself... the only thing you have is working to the consummation of your own identity. And that's what I've been trying to do all my life."

Many relate to this philosophy. In fact, the self-esteem movement has spilled over into nearly every aspect of western society. Selfless love has grown cold, and the vast majority of people today feel that all that matters is me and my life.

True Christians must not let this trend affect us. As the Apostle Paul wrote, “fulfill my joy by being like-minded, having the same love, *being* of one accord, of one mind. *Let nothing be done* through selfish ambition or conceit, but in lowliness of mind let each esteem others better than himself. Let each of you look out not only for his own interests, but also for the interests of others” (Php. 2:2-4).

In seeking Christ’s righteousness, we learn to live as He did. We are to be self-sacrificing instead of self-serving. As the Savior commanded us, we are to love our neighbor as ourselves (Mark 12:31). We are here to learn how to become a family who gives to others rather than striving for what we can get for ourselves. Let’s never forget this magnificent truth.

Colossians 3:15

Let the peace of God rule in your hearts, to which also you were called in one body; and be thankful.

A group of young men were renting a house together during college, when an old man showed up at the back door. Opening the door only a few inches, they saw his glassy eyes and a furrowed face glistening with silver stubble. The old man was clutching a wicker basket containing a few unappealing vegetables. He bid them good morning and offered some of his produce for sale. The students were uneasy with this man’s presence and quickly purchased a couple of vegetables to alleviate both their pity and fear.

To their disappointment, the old man returned the next week, this time introducing himself as Mr. Roth—the man who lived in the shack down the road. As their fears subsided, they got close enough to realize that it wasn’t alcohol that marbled his eyes. It was cataracts.

In subsequent visits, Mr. Roth would shuffle in wearing his regular ragged clothes and mismatched shoes. Sometimes he would pull out a harmonica, and with glazed eyes set on a future glory, he would puff out some old church songs in between conversation about vegetables and Jesus.

The young men all agreed to pitch in and help the old man. They purchased some clothes and shoes and took them to the shack. They placed them at his door and left. His next visit was during the week of Thanksgiving. The young men opened the door expecting Mr. Roth to proclaim his appreciation for the new clothes. Instead, he exclaimed, “God is so good! I came out of my shack this morning and found a bag full of shoes and clothing on my porch.” “That’s wonderful, Mr. Roth!” replied the students. “We are so happy for you.” The old man replied, “You know what is even more wonderful? Just yesterday I met some people that could really use them.” It is truly better to give than receive.

1 Timothy 6:17-19

Command those who are rich in this present age not to be haughty, nor to trust in uncertain riches but in the living God, who gives us richly all things to enjoy. Let them do good, that they be rich in good works, ready to give, willing to share, storing up for themselves a good foundation for the time to come, that they may lay hold on eternal life.

While excavating the ancient city of Pompeii, archeologists came upon the body of a woman that had been embalmed by the volcanic eruption of Mt. Vesuvius. What excavators found was that this woman’s feet were turned toward seeking safety outside the city gate. However, her face was turned toward something else lying just beyond her grasp. She was reaching for a small bag filled with pearls. Perhaps they were hers or a satchel of gems left by another. But as the mountain was virtually exploding, with the gates of the city beckoning her to flee towards the sea and live, the pearls captivated her thoughts.

In a vain attempt to retain riches, the searing heat of Vesuvius locked her into a charred statue of death.

There is a great lesson in this story. Our world is volatile, and our lives could erupt in tragedy at any moment. Nevertheless, many continue to reach for riches and carnal pleasures. Do not let the standards of this world affect us so that we are molded in its image. We must not focus on material possessions. Instead, set our sights on the true riches of life—love, faith, kindness, and the Kingdom of Heaven. The values and principles of God’s Kingdom, and the pleasures Christ promises, are of greater value than anything in this world (Psa. 16:11).

2 Timothy 3:16

All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness.

A retired Marine tells a story of docking in a harbor at the northeastern corner of Formosa Taipei. He wrote, “We stopped at the mouth of the harbor and awaited the arrival of the harbor pilot. He came out to us, took the wheel of the ship and began to weave us through the pathless waters that led to the dock. At first glance, it seemed unnecessary. We could see the dock less than a mile ahead. But the closer we looked and the longer we looked into the crystal-clear waters, we could tell why. There were mines located randomly beneath the surface of the water. If the hull of our ship nudged one of those mines just enough, disaster would have occurred. But the pilot knew where every mine was located.”

Every Christian faces a similar circumstance. We have set our sights on the Kingdom of God. As we sail through the waters of life, there are many dangers and we cannot navigate on our own. We need a harbor pilot to guide us along the way. Christ has gone before us and He promised to show us the way.

For this reason, we have a map—the Bible—as a guide. God’s printed Word is essential to plotting the course if we hope to safely make our way. It can literally channel us around disasters.

As we near the end of the age, can we see the dock ahead? Do we envision the Kingdom of God? Are we closely examining the map showing us how to get there? Today, let's make a commitment to open the Bible and ask God to lead us through the perils of life. If we get off course, and accidentally bump into a mine, remember that all things will ultimately work for good to those who love God and are called for His purpose (Rom. 8:28). Confidently look to Him and His Word for guidance through the troubled waters we might face.

Colossians 3:18-21

Wives, submit to your own husbands, as is fitting in the Lord. Husbands, love your wives and do not be bitter toward them. Children, obey your parents in all things, for this is well pleasing to the Lord. Fathers, do not provoke your children, lest they become discouraged.

In June 1995, the space shuttle Discovery was grounded—not because of engine failure or a lack of government funding, but by woodpeckers. Yellow-shafted flickers found the insulation foam on the shuttle's external fuel tank irresistible material for pecking. "The little birds got the better of the big birds," NASA spokesman Bruce Buckingham said.

Seemingly a small thing, the foam is critical to the shuttle's performance. Without it, ice forms on the tank when it's filled with the super-cooled fuel. That ice could break free during liftoff and critically damage the spacecraft resulting in disaster.

In like manner, it is sometimes the small things that can do great damage to our relationships. Families are frequently damaged by insults, criticism, lack of respect, and taking each other for granted. Continual disparagement can peck away at the relationship. In addition, a lack of demonstrating love through kindness, encouragement, and courteous behavior can create an environment for disaster.

The reverse is also true. We can build our family relationships with repeated acts of love both large and small. We

should never forget to tell our loved ones how much we care and appreciate them. We should also take every opportunity to show them our love by doing what we can for them. No matter how small the act may be, it can make a world of difference.

Let's be aware of how we treat the ones we love and strive to do the things that will make our relationships soar. Likewise, let's refrain from the comments and behaviors that will keep us from reaching the heights of brotherly love that God intended.

Acts 14:22

*We must through many tribulations
enter the kingdom of God.*

When an individual does a heroic deed, it is often contagious. When we do a good work, it can encourage others to do likewise. When we show faith, it spurs others to exhibit conviction. When we prevail over persecution, others gain courage. When it is evident that we have overcome a sin, others tend to work harder to defeat their own. Each of us can be an example that can encourage others. This enormously important truth is illustrated by a true story about a young man named Daniel “Rudy” Ruettiger.

Rudy wanted to play football for Notre Dame, but he was too small to make the “A” team. However, Coach Ara Parseghian allowed Rudy to play on the scout team.

During practice, the larger and stronger players overwhelmed the smaller, less skilled, scout team. In time, Rudy earned a reputation. Every time he was knocked down Rudy would jump back up and go back for more. Every single practice he would take a beating. Finally, one of the seniors told him to get off the team. He no longer wanted to see Rudy get mauled so badly. Rudy looked the man in the eyes and said, “That is my job—to get beat up.” It was his job to make certain the “A” team became the best they could be. He ended the conversation by challenging the huge man, “You better hit me with all you’ve got!”

Over time, Rudy’s tenacity became an inspiration to the other players. They began to fully give of themselves on the field

like Rudy did. Yet, in all this time Rudy never got to play in a single game. Finally, during the last game of his senior year, Rudy's teammates forced the coach to let him dress for the game. Then, at game's end, they allowed Rudy to make one play. In that one play, he tackled the opposing team's quarterback, and ended the game. Notre Dame won, and the entire team carried Rudy off the field in glory—something that was not done again for 17 years.

Many of us have faced a variety of trials in our lives. However, the Apostle Paul encouraged us not to fret over such things. James even went so far as to say that we should rejoice in tough situations (Jam. 1:2-4). There are legitimate reasons for this—perhaps some that many of us have not considered.

We all get beat up in some way; physically, emotionally, or spiritually by our trials in life. But these very situations create people of character. They actually work to shape our destiny.

Therefore, we should take God's advice. Expect trials to come, and when we experience them remember this important truth. The injury does not matter. It is not the fact we are knocked down that is important. What is of value is that we get back up and continue to move toward our transcendent goal. Remember, trials are what give us the experience necessary to build the kind of character needed to one day be carried off the field of this earth as a resurrected saint of God.

Deuteronomy 5:29

Oh, that they had such a heart in them that they would fear Me and always keep all My commandments, that it might be well with them and with their children forever!

In the novel *The Country of the Pointed Firs*, Sara Jewett tells the story of a woman writer who sought an interview with a seasoned sea captain. While walking a path to the home of retired Captain Elijah Tilley, the woman noticed neatly plowed fields leading up to his house with a number of wooden stakes driven into the ground. The stakes were painted white with the tops trimmed in yellow—the same color as the captain's house. The

fields were all evenly plowed, but the stakes seemed random with no pattern or function. “How unusual,” she thought.

As she interviewed the captain, the woman asked, “What is the purpose of those randomly placed white and yellow stakes?” Captain Tilley explained that when he first attempted to plow the ground, he damaged his plow several times as it snagged large rocks beneath the surface. Many of the rocks were too big to be moved, so he set stakes where the rocks were. In this way he could avoid them in the future and protect his equipment.

This illustrates what God has done in the field of our lives. He has given us His commandments as markers indicating trouble spots that we must avoid. People are constantly snagged by sins. They are hurt and damaged over and over again, but we can avoid injury.

Learn this lesson from Captain Tilley. Consider the markers of God’s commandments so that we can avoid becoming snagged by sin and suffering the harmful consequences.

Colossians 3:21

*Fathers, do not provoke your children,
lest they become discouraged.*

A young father decided to seek out good child rearing advice. He decided that his minister was the best option. The pastor’s children were happy and well-behaved. They were a wonderful model of God-fearing children. So, he sought their father for counsel.

After some small talk, the new father asked this question. “What is your secret to parental success? What did you do to produce such happy and well-behaved kids?” The minister answered, “Well, it is not rocket science, but there is something that I believe I did right. I simply taught my children the meaning of four words.”

The expectant father was amazed and eagerly asked, “What are those words?” The pastor said, “The first one is the word ‘no.’ I taught my children that the word ‘no’ had one, and only one, meaning. It is the opposite of yes. It does not mean

maybe, perhaps, or possibly. It means no and it always means no. In fact, sometimes I had to emphasize the meaning of this word with discipline.” The conversation then developed into a short sermonette on the meaning of the seemingly simple word “no.”

As the lesson about this first important word ended, the soon to be father was hesitant to ask about the next three words. Surely a sermon would ensue explaining the final three words.

“Okay,” the soon to be father said. “What is the next word?” To this the minister paused for a moment and said, “The other three words are ‘I love you.’ I not only told my children these three words every day, I tried my best to show their meaning in the way that I treated them. I then taught them the relationship between the words ‘no’ and ‘I love you,’ and in this they learned that when I said no it was for an important reason. It was because I loved them too much to say ‘yes.’”

The advice of this experienced father is something all of us could use. Too many people do not understand the true meaning of “no” because their parents did not rightly teach it to them as children. The result is often a lack of self-discipline which can lead to a lack of success in life, and with it, dissatisfaction, and discouragement. On another level, many children have only experienced the word “no” without the love they need to support the reason for this vital word.

Everyone needs to understand the relationship between these four words. As parents, we must show our children, as well as all those that we love, that when we say “no” it is done out of concern for them. Whether we are new parents or old, let’s remember these four words and use them properly to edify one another in the love, admonition, and discipline of the Lord.

Hebrews 11:32-39

What else can I say? There isn't enough time to tell about Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, David, Samuel, and the prophets. Their faith helped them conquer kingdoms, and because they did right, God made promises to them. They closed the jaws of lions and put out raging fires and escaped from the swords

of their enemies. Although they were weak, they were given the strength and power to chase foreign armies away. Some women received their loved ones back from death. Many of these people were tortured, but they refused to be released. They were sure that they would get a better reward when the dead are raised to life. Others were made fun of and beaten with whips, and some were chained in jail. Still others were stoned to death or sawed in two or killed with swords. Some had nothing but sheep skins or goat skins to wear. They were poor, mistreated, and tortured. The world did not deserve these good people, who had to wander in deserts and on mountains and had to live in caves and holes in the ground. All of them pleased God because of their faith! (CEV)

Many great men and women of faith endured hardships that are sometimes difficult to imagine. They suffered terribly and yet held fast to the truth.

What about us? Do we begin to lose faith in the midst of hard times? Does our motivation to obey God fade when we are suffering? Do we slack off in our duties as a Christian when things are not going the way we would like, or do we use these times as a catalyst for perfection?

World famous cyclist Lance Armstrong overcame seemingly terminal cancer. He not only went on to race again, but he won the Tour de France five times! He wrote this in his autobiography titled *Every Second Counts*.

“I was 25 when cancer nearly killed me; advanced choriocarcinoma spread to my abdomen, lungs, and brain and required two surgeries and four cycles of chemotherapy to get rid of... Every time I win another Tour, I prove that I’m alive and therefore that others can survive, too. I’ve survived cancer again and again and again. But the fact is that I wouldn’t have won even a single Tour de France without the lesson of illness. What it teaches is this: pain is temporary—quitting lasts forever.”

These words have been an inspiration to many. For Christians, they have implications that go beyond this world. We

have been given a chance for something that is far greater than our minds can fully comprehend at this time. Because of our transcendent opportunity, we must go beyond simply professing to believe. We must take the action necessary to make our opportunity a reality.

As we go through tests and trials, what is our attitude like? What reactions do we have, and what behavior do we display? Do we cast off restraint and give in to anger or resentment? Do we relax on prayer and study while giving in to idle activities? Do we feel justified in not living up to our commitment to God? Do we let others down because circumstances are not going our way? Or, do we press towards the mark and the high calling of the Eternal? Will we learn the invaluable lessons of endurance, or will we allow hardship to cloud our vision of the Kingdom of God?

We must understand that we are going to suffer on occasion, but we must not let our trials affect the execution of our faith in God. The pain we suffer in this life is temporary, but if we let down—such a failure is something that will trouble us till the end of time.

Deuteronomy 6:5

You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your strength.

In early 1974, a large portion of undeveloped land in northern Australia was covered with extraordinary green-head ants. This land belonged to a tribe of aborigines who believed the ants were the sacred descendants of their ancient gods. During this year, a mining company discovered uranium deposits in the same area of the green-head ants. They approached the aborigines with a desire to purchase the land for mining. The natives would not sell. They said, “By mining our land you will destroy it, and with it our sacred green ants. Our gods will then pronounce a curse upon us.”

By the end of 1974, the native tribe caved in. They compromised their beliefs and sold the land for \$8.3 million!

Those special ants may have been revered by generations past, but the natives concluded that their gods could find another place to live.

We might find this humorous because of indigenous superstition, but the truth is there are many Christians who have sold out for a lot less than \$8.3 million. What about us? Are our convictions for sale? Will we compromise when it's to our advantage, or do we hold God in such esteem that nothing could buy us off?

Consider the example of King Saul. God's command was clear. The Almighty said to destroy the Amalekites and all their possessions, but Saul only obeyed part of God's instructions. He sold out for the best of the Amalekites' animals and goods, and by that he lost his crown (1Sam. 15:7-9).

In our walk with God, we cannot compromise for personal gain. The consequences for such concession could cost us the crown of life.

Ecclesiastes 4:9-10

Two are better than one, because they have a good reward for their labor. For if they fall, one will lift up his companion. But woe to him who is alone when he falls, for he has no one to help him up.

There were two elderly ladies by the names of Margaret and Ruth who lived in the same convalescent center. Both ladies were accomplished pianists, but each had suffered an incapacitating stroke. Margaret's stroke caused her left side to be greatly restricted in use. Ruth's stroke damaged the function of her right side. Both were convinced that they must give up hope of ever playing the piano again.

The director of the convalescent home felt great anguish over their plight. She suggested that Margaret and Ruth sit side by side in front of the piano and each play with the hand that they were able to use efficiently. In this way, they could play a complete piece together! They agreed and found that they were

able to make beautiful music as long as they worked together. Moreover, a strong friendship developed.

Margaret and Ruth's example is a wonderful lesson for us. Members of the Church of God should work together—in unity! What one member cannot do alone, perhaps two or more can do together.

Let's make a commitment to use our talents in ways that are helpful to others. Be cooperative in combining our abilities so that we are able to build something that is beautiful and enduring. In so doing, an enormous synergy can develop. The whole becomes more than the sum of the parts, and we can be more effective in our service to Christ and each other.

Ephesians 3:16-19

That He would grant you, according to the riches of His glory, to be strengthened with might through His Spirit in the inner man, that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith; that you, being rooted and grounded in love, may be able to comprehend with all the saints what is the width and length and depth and height—to know the love of Christ which passes knowledge; that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.

God tells us that we are to be filled with His Spirit, His values, and His virtues. We are to exhibit the fruits of the Spirit through kindness, honor, and good work ethics (Gal. 5:22-23). But how do we know if we are being filled with that Spirit? There is one sure way to know—simply apply pressure.

Consider a sponge that is saturated with water. How could we know that the sponge was filled? All we have to do is push on it with a finger and we would quickly see water spilling out. We would immediately know what the sponge is filled with. In a similar way, we can know what we are filled with when we come under pressure.

Certainly, every day is filled with strains that come on us. When they do, what comes out? Is it love, patience, kindness, generosity, or joy? Or is it anger, resentment, pride, envy, or lust?

It is time for us to be more watchful of what comes out of us when we are under pressure. Ardently seek to bear fruits of God's Spirit instead of reacting with carnal human nature.

Ecclesiastes 10:1

Dead flies putrefy the perfumer's ointment, and cause it to give off a foul odor; so does a little folly to one respected for wisdom and honor.

If left uncovered, flies will land in a compound of perfume or ointment and die. This can ruin the entire mixture. Instead of a pleasant aroma, the tainted concoction will emit a foul stench.

This fact serves a pointed example. President William J. Clinton was the first democratic president to win a second term since Franklin D. Roosevelt. He accomplished much that is well worth remembering. During his administration, the U.S. enjoyed more peace and economic wellbeing than at any time in its history. He could point to the lowest unemployment rate in modern times, the lowest inflation in 30 years, the highest home ownership in the country's history, lower crime rates in many places, and reduced welfare enrollment. He proposed the first balanced budget in decades and achieved a budget surplus.

However, this is not what most people remember about Bill Clinton. What they remember is the lewd conduct with Monica Lewinsky. This became the flies in his ointment that produced a stench the entire world could smell.

Something similar has happened to many great men and women. It can even happen to us! Foolish behavior affects how we are perceived, received, and remembered. The sweet savor of a Christian is polluted when we behave foolishly. If we are disrespectful, crude, dishonest, malicious, covetous, selfish, or argumentative—such behaviors are like putting dead flies into sweet perfume. Shameful behaviors overshadow previous

positive accomplishments. We simply must be consistent in following God's way at all times.

Ezekiel 18:30

“Therefore I will judge you, O house of Israel, every one according to his ways,” says the Lord GOD. “Repent, and turn from all your transgressions, so that iniquity will not be your ruin.”

For years, the *Wide World of Sports* television program ran a series of clips illustrating the agony of defeat. One clip showed a painful ending to an attempted ski jump. The skier appeared to be in good form as he headed down the ramp, but for some reason he suddenly tumbled head over heels off the side of the jump, bounced off a support structure, and came to a crashing halt. The entire scene looked like an unavoidable accident. However, what viewers didn't know was that the skier chose to abort and fall this way rather than complete the jump the way it was going. But why choose a painful and embarrassing end?

The skier later explained that the speed of his descent was too fast. Midway down the ramp, he came to the stark realization that if he continued at this rate, he would end up landing far past the safe end of the run. Such a landing could have been fatal. As it was, the athlete suffered no more than a headache from the self-induced tumble.

This is a great lesson that everyone can apply to their lives. To change one's course in life can be a dramatic and sometimes painful undertaking, but change is often necessary to avoid suffering a fall that ends in calamity.

Consider if there is something that we need to change. Is there a different direction we should take in life? Are we hesitating because there is a chance of taking a tumble that might actually save us in the end? If so, let's make that change before calamity strikes.

Daniel 3:16-18

Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-Nego answered and said to the king, "O Nebuchadnezzar, we have no need to answer you in this matter. If that is the case, our God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the burning fiery furnace, and He will deliver us from your hand, O king. But if not, let it be known to you, O king, that we do not serve your gods, nor will we worship the gold image which you have set up."

Filled with pride, King Nebuchadnezzar made a golden idol approximately 90 feet high and nine feet wide (Dan. 3:1). At the sound of music, every citizen of the land was commanded to bow down in reverence of this image or suffer death by fire.

Mishael, Azariah, and Hananiah, who were commonly known as Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-Nego, clearly understood the consequences of defying Nebuchadnezzar's decree. But even the threat of a painful and violent death would not deter their commitment to God. This infuriated the king. However, because Nebuchadnezzar valued the wisdom and integrity of these men, he gave them one last chance to comply. The response was premeditated, direct, and without hesitation. These men would never serve another god.

There is a similarity between Mishael, Azariah, and Hananiah and true Christians today. We are forced to live in a society where pagan practice and evil is common. These men had decided beforehand not to partake of society's sins, and their experience provides an important lesson for us.

We should know ahead of time how we are going to respond to temptation and sin. We should not hesitate in our commitment to God and second guess a Spirit-led decision. If we are not prepared, and we pause to reconsider, doubt could lead us to rationalization and compromise. We need to be ready for such trials, and when they occur, we already know our answer. We will never disobey God!

These faithful men were certain that God could save them, but they did not know if He would save them at that moment. Nevertheless, it made no difference. They were willing

to put their lives on the line because they loved God more than themselves. How many of us would respond in this way? When faced with being burned alive, how many would not hesitate with our decision? Would we have the courage of Mishael, Azariah, and Hananiah or would we give in to save our skin?

The fearful might believe that they can avoid suffering by giving in to the ways of this crooked world. However, by allowing such concessions, they are only setting themselves up for a failure that could ultimately consume them (Mat. 13:41-42).

Let's remember the admirable and inspiring example of Mishael, Azariah, and Hananiah. They could not be swayed. They were fully committed to God. They knew how they would respond to temptations of sin. Even when their lives were on the line, they understood the hope and power of God. There is no other way to choose which can truly preserve our life than to choose the way of God.

Hebrews 6:18-19

Lay hold of the hope set before us. This hope we have as an anchor of the soul, both sure and steadfast, and which enters the presence behind the veil.

The magnificent Niagara River plummets some 180 feet at the American and Horseshoe Falls. Before the falls, there are violent and turbulent rapids. Further upstream, where the river's current flows more gently, boats are able to navigate the calmer waters. Even further upstream, a pedestrian walkway spans the river where sightseers may casually stroll across the path. Boldly posted on this bridge's pylons is an enormous sign for all boaters to read. It states, "DO YOU HAVE AN ANCHOR?" Followed by, "DO YOU KNOW HOW TO USE IT?" Park rangers put this sign up as a warning. When venturing downstream, if the river begins moving too fast, a boatman should be able to toss their anchor overboard, and it will stop them from drifting into dangerous waters.

This sign illustrates a warning to us. Because we live in an age of unrest, deception, and corruption, our lives are affected

in one way or another. Waters may appear to be calm and flowing gently at times. Other times, life moves quickly and becomes turbulent. Along the way there are helpful warning signs available. These are posted in the pages of the Bible. We are not only warned about troubled waters, but we are instructed regarding how to avoid dangerous situations. Like the boats navigating the waters of Niagara, we must have an anchor and know how to use it.

Jesus Christ is the anchor of our soul. He has given us warnings to keep us from falling to our death. We need to be continually tied to Him—anchored by the hope of His Kingdom!

Ecclesiastes 12:13

Let us hear the conclusion of the whole matter: Fear God, and keep his commandments: for this is the whole duty of man (KJV).

“The end game” is a unique term that originated in the sport of chess. It refers to the time when most of the pieces on the board have been spent and the game is coming to its conclusion. Before this moment occurs, each player develops an “all out” strategy to end the game and win.

This concept should reach beyond the game of chess. In fact, every activity in life should have an “end game” in which participants give it their all to succeed. As Christians, we need to develop a strategy for our end game. We cannot simply skate through life without an idea of what to do when difficult times arrive. We must have a plan that includes applying the Word of God in order to deal with tests and trials. If we are not prepared, we will end up fulfilling the proverb that states: “There is a way *that seems* right to a man, but its end *is* the way of death” (Proverbs 16:25).

God’s people have a vital reason to consider this concept. There is an effect for every cause. Any endeavor we undertake always concludes in a way that depends on what we do to attain that end. Therefore, we must keep the conclusion of our lives in mind. This is our end game. As the Scriptures warn us, “For God

will bring every work into judgment, including every secret thing, whether good or evil” (Ecc. 12:14).

In that context, consider that everyone is living in their own end game. Time is relatively short for us individually and collectively. Tensions are rising, and economies are extremely volatile. The nations are vastly abandoning God and with this a concern for the future. We are heading for difficult times. As the Apostle Peter wrote, “But the end of all things is at hand; therefore, be serious and watchful in your prayers” (1Pet. 4:7).

We should deeply and sincerely consider how we are going to play the game of our lives. In this age, many seem to let themselves slip into being lukewarm toward the precious things of God. We must not allow this to happen to us. Let’s step up our end game. Let’s stop deciding for ourselves what is right and wrong and allow God’s written Word to define that for us. Let’s pay close attention to the small still voice of the Holy Spirit prompting us to stop making wrong choices in behavior, activities, and entertainment. Let’s study more, pray more, and diligently practice obedience to the great God who will judge us according to how we played our end game.

Exodus 20:8

Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy.

The Creator gave mankind the Sabbath as a gift of freedom from weekly toil. Speaking of this day of rest, Tim Keller wrote, “Rest, ironically, is an activity that must be prepared for, and then pursued. The purpose of Sabbath, however, is not simply to rejuvenate ourselves in order to produce more during the rest of the week. Nor, is Sabbath the simple pursuit of sleep and pleasure.”

In our age, society seems to be moving at a frenetic pace constantly pushing us to accomplish all that we can in as little time possible. While our digital world promised to provide more “free” time, the truth is that modern technology has filled our lives with even more to do.

However, our bodies were not meant to work every day. Biological studies have proven that we need a periodic interruption of the work week. God understood this from the beginning, and as Christians we are to be good stewards of the body and mind. We must prepare to regularly celebrate and enjoy the Sabbath. For this reason, God even designated a day for preparation (Exo. 16:5).

Consider that the Sabbath gives us the opportunity to come out of the world once a week and have fellowship with those of like mind. This is profoundly refreshing! It is an occasion to reconnect with family and brethren. In a world where music, entertainment, peers, and classrooms tend to have more influence on our children than their parents, the Sabbath provides a needed link between family and God.

Even more valuable, the Sabbath is a day where we are commanded to convoke with God. The destiny of those who are called and chosen is to marry Christ (Rev. 19:7). In that sense, the Church is espoused to Him. The Sabbath is a date with our beloved and a reminder of our calling. We should all be grateful for this holy time. As God commanded:

Six days shall work be done, but the seventh day *is* a Sabbath of solemn rest, a holy convocation. You shall do no work *on it*; *it is* the Sabbath of the LORD in all your dwellings (Leviticus 23:3).

Ephesians 4:1-2

I, therefore, the prisoner of the Lord, beseech you to walk worthy of the calling with which you were called, with all lowliness and gentleness, with longsuffering, bearing with one another in love.

From 1986 to 1990, Frank Reed was held hostage in a Lebanon prison cell. He was blindfolded and lived in complete darkness for months at a time. Other times he was chained to a wall for weeks. During the entire ordeal he was ordered to keep absolutely silent.

After his release, Reed told of one occasion in which he was blindfolded and moved to another room. Even though he could not see, Reed could sense that there were others in that room. It was three weeks before he dared attempt to peek out of his blindfold. When he did, he discovered that he was chained near Terry Anderson and Tom Sutherland.

He was beaten, made ill, and tormented, but the thing that Reed said hurt the most was the lack of anyone caring. In an interview with *Time* magazine he said, “Nothing I did mattered to anyone. I began to realize how withering it is to exist without a single expression of caring around me... I learned one overriding fact. Caring is a powerful force. If no one cares, you are truly alone.”

True Christians are never alone. Even though we cannot see Him, Christ cares for us and will never forsake us as long as we remain faithful. This is a great comfort.

However, there are times when many people feel isolated and alienated. Let’s remember how powerful caring can be. Let’s show others the love of Christ by how we treat them. Demonstrate kindness, thoughtfulness, and acts of selfless service. Let those at work, school, home, and church know that we appreciate them. Acknowledge the good things people do by expressing gratitude. Remind those we care about that they matter to us and that they make a difference in our lives.

Ephesians 4:31-32

Let all bitterness, wrath, anger, clamor, and evil speaking be put away from you, with all malice. And be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, even as God in Christ forgave you.

After the Civil War, General Robert E. Lee visited a Kentucky woman who showed him the remains of a grand old tree in front of her war-torn house. She began to bitterly weep because its limbs and trunk had been destroyed by Federal artillery fire. She expected Lee to condemn the North for her loss. At least he should be sympathetic, she thought. After a brief

period of silence, General Lee said, “Cut it down, my dear Madam, and forget it.”

Everyone has had some wrong done to them. How do we handle such offense? Do we forgive in the hope of receiving forgiveness in return? Do we go to our brother alone and seek reconciliation? Or do we allow the hurt feelings to make us bitter? Do we then feel justified for hatred, slander, gossiping, showing disrespect, and even seeking revenge? We see this kind of behavior displayed widely in the world. Sadly, it is occurring at an ever-increasing rate within the Church of God—between people who are supposed to be brethren.

Bitterness is something that we cannot allow to take root if we seek the Kingdom of God. Instead of trying to get back at others, we should forgive, attempt to reconcile, and move forward. The Apostle Paul said that we should even be willing to suffer wrong against us if necessary (1Cor. 6:7). We should be kind and respectful to each other even if we do not receive this kind of treatment in return.

Consider this important truth. It is better to forgive the injustices of the past than to allow them to remain in our minds. If we let bitterness take root, it will poison the rest of our lives and will keep us from obtaining the Kingdom of Heaven (Heb. 12:15). If we desire kindness, mercy, and forgiveness from others—even from God—we must display this same kind of behavior to others. As Christ forewarned, “For with the same measure that you use, it will be measured back to you” (Luke 6:38).

Ephesians 6:11

Put on the whole armor of God, that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil.

The Portia spider is a master predator whose chief weapon is deception. When it sets out to attack another of its species, it uses a variety of methods to lure its victims into striking range. One cunning technique is that it appears to be a dried leaf or foliage that has blown into its victim’s web. Upon inspection its prey will be fatally wounded. The Portia will also crawl onto another’s web

and tap its silken threads imitating the vibrations of a trapped insect. The owner of the web thinks that it has trapped a snack, only to find that it has actually become a meal.

The Portia can also tailor its deception to fit a certain type of spider. For example, some spiders maintain their home inside a rolled-up leaf. In these cases, the Portia will dance on the outside of the leaf, imitating a mating ritual in order to draw out its prey. It is said that the Portia can find the signal of nearly any other spider by a method of trial and error. If one method fails, it will continue to make different beckoning motions until the victim responds to its utter destruction.

Like the Portia, Satan's weapon of choice is also deception. The devil uses tactics similar to those of this unique spider. Satan transforms himself into an angel of light. His ministers also transform themselves into ministers of righteousness (2Cor. 11:14-15). He has misled the world by tricking mankind into believing that evil is good and good is evil. To many, immoral behavior appears to be normal. For those who are less easily deceived, the devil will keep changing his approach. He will try again and again by using different temptations in an effort to lure us into becoming another victim.

When it comes to God's people, Satan has even infiltrated the ranks of the Church. For this reason, Christ warned that false apostles and prophets would rise and deceive, if possible, even the elect (Mat. 24:24). Christ's words remind us that it is possible for Christians to be deceived. A circumstance that can make our deception achievable is lacking God's Spirit and not knowing the Scriptures. We must be able to distinguish between the real article and a counterfeit—truth and lies. This is the only way we can be certain to recognize the myriad of deceptions used by the devil.

Now, more than ever, we must be on guard. Satan's deception is everywhere. It has infected nearly every corner of society. It flourishes in the world around us! We must consistently study God's Word and seek His Spirit so that we are not caught in Satan's trap.

Ephesians 6:12

For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this age, against spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places.

Some ministers preach excitable sermons claiming to have, “the devil on the run.” But Satan is a formidable being more powerful than most realize. Most people seldom reflect on the fact that we are in a daily war with the devil and his demons. While these wicked angels might be limited in the power, they are allowed to use against us, we must consider the battle as being dead serious.

Because of the intense conflict, there are many who have tapped out of the fight. They find it too difficult and give up trying to overcome evil. This is not an option for those whose hope is the Kingdom of God.

There is a scene from the *Star Trek* series that demonstrates this point. A powerful Klingon by the name of Worf was captured by an evil empire called the Dominion. They intend to use him as a dummy for their lethal ground troops to practice hand to hand combat. Soldier after soldier confronts Worf, but none of them lasts very long. They become tired of being beaten so terribly that one after another they tap out. By the end of the day, Worf has taken on all comers and lost to none.

In exasperation, the emperor orders their biggest, toughest warrior to engage the Klingon. Worf is now exhausted from fighting other troops throughout the entire day. He becomes little more than a punching bag for the enemy combatant and yet Worf refuses to tap out. No matter how many times he is knocked down, Worf keeps getting back up.

His endurance finally wins the admiration and respect of Dominion troops. Worf even gains the esteem of the huge warrior who nearly beat him to death. So impressed is the entire audience that they begin to beg Worf to give up. Nonetheless, he refuses to do so. Worf keeps dragging himself to his feet to take more punishment. He will not quit—giving up is simply not an option.

Finally, out of sheer frustration, the evil warrior does the unthinkable. He taps himself out! His enraged commander demands of him, “Why have you done this?” In resigned admission the powerful combatant says, “I had no choice. I cannot defeat him. I can only kill him!”

Satan and his demons are like the evil Dominion. We must fight against them day after day and sometimes even Satan himself will step into the ring. In order for us to prevail, we must never tap out. God has promised that we will not suffer more than we can bear (1Cor. 10:13). We can win in the end if we do not give up, but stay in the fight.

Let us continue our battle against evil to the very end, trusting in God’s promise, and using the weapons He has supplied. We are not defenseless. Take up the breastplate of righteousness, the shield of faith, the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God (Eph. 6:13-18). No matter how many times we are knocked down, no matter how much it may hurt, make a commitment to never tap out! Those who continue to fight against evil can attain a crown of righteousness in the Kingdom of God.

James 1:2-4

Count it all joy when you fall into various trials, knowing that the testing of your faith produces patience. But let patience have its perfect work, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking nothing.

A young lady named Sandra, feeling as low as could be, somberly walked into a florist shop. Her life had been turned upside down because of an automobile accident that stole the life of her unborn child. It was Thanksgiving week, and at this time of year she should have delivered their son. Instead, she deeply grieved over her loss.

Other troubles began to arise. Her husband’s company threatened to transfer his job to a new location. Her sister had called to say that she could not come for her long-awaited holiday visit. To top it off, Sandra’s best friend suggested that her grief was

God-given so that she could empathize with others who are also suffering. “Thanksgiving,” she thought “Thankful for what?”

The shop clerk came over and said, “Good afternoon, can I help you?” Sandra was a bit startled by the cheerful approach of the shop clerk. “I need a floral arrangement” she stammered. “Are you looking for something that conveys gratitude this Thanksgiving?” asked the clerk. “Not exactly,” she blurted out. “In the last five months, everything that could go wrong has gone wrong.” She immediately regretted her outburst, and was surprised when the clerk said, “I have the perfect arrangement for you.”

The clerk stepped in the back for a moment and reappeared with a dozen freshly cut thorny rose stems—not a single flower attached. “I call this the Thanksgiving Special,” said the clerk. Sandra was shocked. “Are you kidding?” she asked. “Is this some kind of joke?” But the clerk did not laugh. “The flowers have been cut clean off,” Sandra said. “That’s right,” said the clerk. “I cut off the flowers.”

The clerk then explained, “Three years ago, a lady feeling much as you do today, came into my shop. She thought she had very little to be thankful for. She lost her father to cancer; the family business was failing; her son had gotten into drugs; and she was facing major surgery. That same year I had also lost my husband,” continued the clerk. “For the first time in my life, I had to spend Thanksgiving alone. I had no children, no family nearby, and too much debt to travel.” “So, what did you do?” Sandra asked. “I learned to be thankful for the thorns,” answered the clerk.

“You see, I’ve always thanked God for the good things in my life and I never questioned why those good things happened to me, but when the bad stuff hit, I cried out, ‘Why—Why me?!’ It took time to learn that the seemingly bad times are just as important as the good! I have always enjoyed the ‘flowers’ of my life, but it took the thorns to show me the meaning of life.”

Just then a balding, elderly gentleman walked into the shop. “Hi, Phil!” greeted the clerk. “My wife sent me in to get our usual Thanksgiving arrangement. Twelve thorny long-stemmed stems!” laughed Phil, as the clerk handed him a tissue-wrapped arrangement from the refrigerator. “Those are for your wife?” asked Sandra. “Do you mind telling me why she wants a bouquet that looks like that?” “I would love to,” replied Phil.

“Two years ago, my wife and I nearly divorced. After forty years, we were in a real mess, but with God’s grace and guidance, we trudged through problem after problem, and our marriage was saved. I stopped in here to get some flowers for her and the clerk told me how she kept a vase of rose stems to remind her of what she had learned from the ‘thorny’ times. That was good enough for me. I took home some of those stems. My wife and I decided to label each one for a specific problem and give thanks for what that problem taught us.”

As Phil paid the clerk, he leaned over and said to Sandra, “I highly recommend the Thanksgiving Special.” “I don’t know if I can be thankful for the thorns in my life,” Sandra said to the clerk. “Well,” the clerk replied, “My experience has shown me that the thorns make the roses more precious. Remember that Jesus wore a crown of thorns so we might realize His love and devotion to us. Don’t resent the thorns.”

Tears began to roll down Sandra’s cheeks. For the first time since the accident, she loosened her grip on her resentment. “I’ll take those twelve long-stemmed thorns. Please,” she managed to say. “I hoped you would,” said the clerk gently. “I’ll have them ready in a minute.” Then the clerk smiled and handed Sandra an arrangement of thorny stems and a card that read, “Praise God for the roses and thank Him for the thorns.”

John 14:2-3

In My Father’s house are many mansions; if it were not so, I would have told you. I go to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and receive you to Myself; that where I am, there you may be also.

In 1889, while a unique structure was being built for an international exposition, the edifice was called monstrous by citizens of the city. The public even demanded that it be torn down as soon as the exposition was over. However, the architect passionately believed in its construction. He loyally defended it from those who wished to destroy it. He knew that his creation

was destined for greatness and fame. Very few supported this brave architect, but those few were intensely loyal. They worked tirelessly to make the structure a reality and a success.

This structure still stands. It became the primary landmark of France. It has even been considered one of the architectural wonders of the world. The architect's name Alexandre Gustave Eiffel, and the edifice was called the Eiffel Tower.

This story illustrates what Christ is doing in our lives. He is the Master Architect, and He is building an edifice that is destined for fame and greatness. It is so magnificent in both size and scope that few would believe it even possible. According to the book of Revelation, Christ's structure measures nearly 1400 miles high, deep, and wide. Its base would cover an area from Los Angeles, California to Dallas, Texas, and up to Calgary, Canada. It is described as being made of translucent gold with jeweled foundations and twelve gates each made from an enormous pearl. Only an elite group will be able to live and work in this structure which is the glorious headquarters for the Kingdom of God.

As Christ works on building New Jerusalem, remember that we are His workers. We are His loyal supporters and under His guidance. We have been called to be a part of the greatest project the universe has ever seen. With the help of Christ, we must strive to work tirelessly to build the character that will enable us to be a part of New Jerusalem. As God's angel related, "Blessed *are* those who do His commandments that they may have the right to the tree of life, and may enter through the gates into the city" (Rev. 22:14).

Others may scoff at our work. They will ridicule our faithful behavior. They will think that there is no way that we could ever be a part of such a magnificent project, but our God tells us that we can. It is this very vision that motivated Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and thousands of others who have already contributed to what God is constructing within His people (Heb. 11:9-10).

Consider those who helped Eiffel build his tower. Consider those who work to become a part of Christ's building project. Reflect on the opportunity we have been given. Let's always keep the vision of New Jerusalem and the Kingdom of Heaven in mind.

Hosea 5:10

The princes of Judah are like those who remove a landmark; I will pour out my wrath on them like water.

A young boy was playing little league baseball. When his turn came to bat, the coach signaled him to bunt. The boy believed that he was the best player on the team, and thought, “I know what I am doing.” Instead of bunting, he swung with all his might and hit the ball into the air, but the center fielder caught it. His team lost the game, and afterward the coach called the boy over to talk to him alone.

“I want to tell you a story,” the coach said. “There was a man who wanted to go to blows with another man. He faced his opponent and each talked trash to the other. Finally, the man reached down in the dirt and drew a line. He told his enemy, ‘You cross that line and I will tear you up.’ His enemy stared at him for a moment and then he stepped across the line. At that, the man drew another line and with his chest puffed out said, ‘Now step over that line and you have had it!’ At this his opponent stepped over the second line. The man paused and then drew another line.”

The coach then took a piece of chalk and drew a line on the sidewalk. He told the young boy, “This is my line. You get to do what you did today one time, and only one time. If you ever do it again, you are off the team.” The coach then threw the chalk as far as he could. He turned to the boy and said, “I did that just so you know that I will not draw another line.”

King David drew a mental line in the sand when he faced Goliath. He would draw no other line that day. He courageously faced the enemy and killed Goliath. However, David had another line that he was certain to never cross. King David knew adultery was wrong, but he drew a new line after admiring Bathsheba.

David knew that adultery was wrong, but surely, he would never murder an innocent man. However, when his cover up of the affair didn’t work, the king drew another line and devised a plan to kill Bathsheba’s husband. God punished David for his terrible sins. The king learned his lesson and never did such a thing again.

What about us? Will we learn the lesson of holding our line? We made a commitment to keep God's laws when we were baptized. Do we ever redraw that line when it appears to be to our advantage? Do we move the boundaries in order to save our skin?

The ancient Israelites kept moving their lines until they were so far out of bounds that God was forced to destroy them as a nation. God told them that they were like those who moved a neighbor's property marker for advantage. Do we attempt to move God's line when it is to our benefit?

With God there is no shadow of turning. He is like the coach that does not draw another line. We are in the process of striving to be like Christ. We must throw away the chalk when it comes to sin, and never move the line of God's law.

John 15:12-13

This is My commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this, than to lay down one's life for his friends.

The love we commonly find in this world is nearly always a selfish attraction in which behaviors are based on the opinion, pleasure, or benefit of a single person. Such love is a facade of real love, and yet it is often portrayed as though it were in the best interest of others. We should avoid such self-driven motives that almost always lead to sin. Instead, we should consider the biblical precepts for love instead.

Author Robert Coleman tells a story that demonstrates a biblical form of love. The story is of a little boy whose sister needed a blood transfusion. The doctor explained that she had become infected with the same disease the boy had recovered from two years earlier only her condition was much worse. Her only chance for recovery was a transfusion from someone who had previously conquered the disease. Since the two children had the same blood type, the boy was the ideal donor. "Would you give your blood to Mary?" the doctor asked. Johnny hesitated. His lower lip started to tremble. Then he said, "Sure, for my sister."

Shortly afterward, the two children were wheeled into the hospital room. Mary was pale and thin while Johnny was robust and healthy. Neither spoke, but when their eyes met Johnny grinned. As the nurse inserted the needle into his arm, Johnny's smile faded as he watched the blood flow through the tube.

With the ordeal almost over, Johnny's trembling voice broke the silence. "Doctor, when do I die?" Only then did the doctor realize why Johnny had hesitated and why his lip had trembled when he agreed to give his blood. Johnny had thought that giving his blood to his sister meant giving his life. In that moment, Johnny decided to give up his life for her.

From the mouth of Jesus Christ, and from the example of this young child, we see the instructions of our God. It is a touching example of true love and the kind of love that we should have. It is the caring and selfless love that Christ expressed by making sacrifices for the benefit of others as well as for the greater-good.

Let's strive to have the behavior that comes from the love of God. Even if it is seemingly not in our best interest, always remember that the lessons and rewards of selfless love are truly in the best interest of all who seek God's Kingdom.

Hebrews 13:8

Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever.

Author Lloyd C. Douglas tells a story of when he was a university student living in a boarding house during meager years. In the same house there was a retired music teacher who had become infirmed and unable to leave the apartment. Seeing that the old teacher was lonely, before heading out to class, Douglas would stop by the man's apartment each morning and the two of them would share the same ritual. Douglas would come down the steps, knock on the old man's door, open it, and ask, "Well, what's the good news?" The elderly man would pick up his tuning fork, tap it on the side of his wheelchair, and say, "That is middle C! It was middle C yesterday; it will be middle

C tomorrow; it will be middle C a thousand years from now. On the other hand, I can hear the tenor upstairs. He sings flat. The piano across the hall is out of tune, but, my friend, this tuning fork will always be middle C!”

With his body becoming more unreliable, the elderly musician discovered something upon which he could always depend. That tuning fork was a constant reality in his life. To him, it was a solid unmoving truth in a convulsing world.

In our lives, things all around us are in a state of constant flux. We live in a technological age that is unparalleled in all of human history. At our current rate, our fund of scientific knowledge doubles every two to five years. The cell phones and computers we purchase are outdated in just a few years. Jobs are lost daily, and relationships can quickly change too. Families are shattered because of divorce. Loved ones move away and circumstances can differ from week to week—sometimes even daily. It is hard to imagine the future anymore because society continues to change at a phenomenal rate.

Yet, there is one thing we can always rely on to never change—a vital constant in an ever-changing world. It is Jesus Christ. His mercy never fails. His love endures. God can always be trusted, and His perfect laws will never change.

Reflect on this magnificent constant and be thankful. Jesus Christ will always stand as a banner to His people, and He will always be our Savior.

John 6:27

Do not labor for the food which perishes, but for the food which endures to everlasting life, which the Son of Man will give you, because God the Father has set His seal on Him.

In a play on words Peter Maurin stated, “The world would be better off if people tried to become better. And people would become better if they stopped trying to become better off. For when everybody tries to become better off, nobody becomes

better off. But when everybody tries to become better, everybody is better off.”

We live in a world that is extremely materialistic. It seems that there is no end to the products the market generates, and vast numbers of people are convinced that they need what is advertised in order to be happy. It is a paradox in which the more people get in order to make them feel satisfied, the more they want while continuing to feel unsatisfied.

Christians should always remember that God will provide what we need when we whole-heartedly seek Him. Remember that we will be better off if we try to be better people. The treasures we should seek are fruits of the Spirit: kindness, love, patience, meekness, and temperance.

Seeking the things of this world will leave us unfulfilled and empty-handed, so let’s seek Christ instead! In this we can ultimately possess something that is invaluable—eternal life!

James 5:12

But above all, my brethren, do not swear, either by heaven or by earth or with any other oath. But let your “Yes” be “Yes,” and your “No,” “No,” lest you fall into judgment.

Every year, people make various resolutions, but there are few ever kept. Notice some of the famous quotes about this New Year’s Day tendency:

“Now is the time to make your annual good resolutions. Next week you can begin paving hell with them as usual.”
– Mark Twain

“Yesterday, everybody smoked his last cigar, took his last drink, and swore his last oath. Thirty days from now, we shall have cast our reformation to the winds and gone to cutting our ancient short comings considerably shorter than ever.” – Mark Twain

“New Year’s Day is a harmless institution of no particular use to anybody except as a scapegoat for promiscuous drunks, friendly calls, and humbug resolutions, and we wish you to enjoy it with a looseness suited to the greatness of the occasion.” – Mark Twain

“Making resolutions is a cleansing ritual of self-assessment and repentance that demands personal honesty and, ultimately, reinforces humility. Breaking them is part of the wonderful cycle.” – Eric Zorn

“Many people look forward to the New Year for a new start on old habits.” – Author Unknown

“A New Year’s resolution is something that goes in one year and out the other.” – Author Unknown

This is the way it is with all of us to some degree. We have good intentions and resolve to truly repent and change. But many times we compromise. We make excuses for doing so and try to justify our shortcomings. From the time of Adam and Eve, mankind has made excuses and blamed circumstances or other people for our failures.

As a people called by God to make a difference now in preparation for the future, let’s make a commitment not to present Him with excuses. If we tell God that we are going to change a certain behavior—make certain that we do it. Let our yes be yes so that we don’t fall into condemnation.

John 1:10

He was in the world, and the world was made through Him, and the world did not know Him.

Actor Cary Grant was walking along a street one day and passed by another fellow. The other man’s eyes locked onto him with excitement. While staring at Grant, the man said, “Wait a minute, you’re... I know who you are! Don’t tell me—uh, Rock Hud... No, you’re...” Grant thought he’d help him out a bit, so he

finished the man's sentence, saying, "Cary Grant." At this, the fellow continued, "No, that's not it!" There was Cary Grant identifying himself, but the fellow had someone else in mind. He could not accept the actor's own words.

Tragically, this phenomenon takes place with Jesus Christ every day. We are instructed to imitate the Savior, yet the world does not recognize who He really is. Some portray Christ as a weak-scrawny Jesus with feminine features and long hair. They sometimes envision him as a person who rejected the laws of His father. They portray Him as an individual who desperately wants everyone to be saved and offers eternal life to anyone willing to simply say the words, "Jesus come into my heart."

The Scriptures describe Christ as glorious in majesty and power. He is the Creator, King of kings, Lord of lords, uncompromising in God's commandments. And yet many think He is someone else. In fact, most believers do not even study His words with reverence. As a result, the vast majority does not believe His clear statements.

Do not allow the secular view of Jesus into your mind. Keep your eyes on Him and meditate on exactly who He really is.

John 7:24

*Do not judge according to appearance,
but judge with righteous judgment.*

A young lady was waiting between flights at the airport. Feeling the need for a snack, she visited the lounge and bought a small package of cookies. She then went to a waiting area where she located two vacant seats. She sat down leaving a space between her and a nicely dressed man. As she read a magazine, her attention was drawn to a rustling noise coming from the empty seat next to her. She looked from behind the pages and was flabbergasted! The man was helping himself to her cookies. Not wanting to make a scene, she reached for the bag and took a cookie to let him know those cookies were hers.

A minute or two passed and then there came more rustling. He was helping himself to another cookie! So, she took

another one as well. By this time, they had come to the end of the package and she was angry, but dared not say anything for fear of making a scene. Then, as if to add insult to injury, the man broke the last cookie in half and pushed one half over toward her while he ate the other half. “Of all the nerve,” she thought.

Still fuming, her flight was announced over the loud speaker. She opened her hand bag to get her ticket. To her shock and embarrassment, there was her package of unopened cookies. It was she who had been eating his cookies!

How many times do we misjudge others because we don't see the entire picture? We assume things, often the worst, without going to the other person in order to clarify the issue. Let's change that. Let's believe the best of others, and if we think there is an occasion to question a person's motive or action, respectfully ask them for clarification? In this way we won't judge by appearance, but we will be equipped to assess the situation with a good understanding.

Hebrews 2:3

*How shall we escape if we neglect
so great a salvation?*

Soil erosion is a natural part of the earth's design. Erosion has modified the surface of the planet more than the combined activities of all the earthquakes, volcanoes, tornadoes, and tidal waves since the beginning of history, yet its processes are so gradual that we most people are prone to ignore it.

Few people fear mild winds and gentle movements of water, but these two forces power the bulk of erosion. The Earth's landmasses are made up of rocks and minerals. Wind, rain, and freezing-thawing cycles break down these rocks and minerals into smaller grains. The cycle is repeated year after year with little notice.

This process bears an interesting parallel to the Christian's life. Spiritual erosion is something that can affect each one of us. Each day, the pulls of the world attempt to erode our commitment to seeking the Kingdom of God. We must

maintain a level of God’s Spirit so that we continue to hold our ground in the Lord (2Pet. 3:18).

We need to begin each day with the realization that there are forces at work to erode God’s Spirit in us. The biggest mistake we could make is to neglect our salvation. We do that by believing that spiritual erosion is a benign process and forget the duty and reasonable service that comes with our calling (Luke 17:10; Rom. 12:1). If we do not work at continuing our growth in Christ, these forces that move upon us will eventually wear us down.

Those who live near the ocean realize that they must do something to protect their homes from the eroding forces of nature. They place large rocks out in the water called rip-rap. Its purpose is to act as a block against the process of the sea striving to claim new territory. Christ is our rock, and we must build our life upon Him so that spiritual erosion will not claim our lives. As He admonished us:

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

2 Timothy 3:15

The Holy Scriptures... are able to make you wise for salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus.

Those who work in new home construction recognize the need to carefully follow blueprints. On every worksite, there is an office where a complete set of these structural plans can be found. Workmen constantly check the prints for measurements, materials, and technical specifications. They carefully compare details of the documents with their work in order to ensure that the job is done

correctly. These workers realize that blueprints must be meticulously adhered to or there might be severe consequences!

Some have been seriously injured, and others have been forced out of business by making the mistake of not entirely following these vital documents. In fact, the integrity of the entire project relies on adherence to blueprints that must be reviewed and consulted regularly as the project moves forward. Throughout the process, pages will become creased, smudged, and written on by the hands of diligent workers who check and recheck their work.

Similar to these construction workers, every Christian is involved in a spiritual building project. We are working to build righteous character, and the Bible contains blueprints that were inspired by the Architect of the universe! The Holy Scriptures are a guide-book to moral standards that must be followed if we hope to attain the Kingdom of Heaven. We should have the same kind of respect and diligence for studying God’s Word as those who build homes with integrity.

We must regularly study the Scriptures for their doctrine, reproof, correction, and instruction in righteousness (2Tim. 3:16). As we do, our Bibles will begin to appear worn, creased, and marked up from frequent use. As Paul said, “Be diligent to present yourself approved to God, a worker who does not need to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth” (2Tim. 2:15).

Isaiah 55:8

“For My thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways My ways,” says the LORD.

Sometimes life is hard to deal with. We might feel weak and ineffectual while facing various obstacles. When such times come upon us, consider that God’s thoughts are not like ours. He sees a bigger picture of us. For that reason, focus on these enduring principles that are found in God’s Word.

When we say, “It’s impossible,” God’s Word says, “All things are possible” (Luke 18:27).

When we say, “I’m too tired,” God’s Word says, “I will give you rest” (Matthew 11:28-30).

When we say, “No one really loves me,” God’s Word says, “I love you” (John 3:16).

When we say, “I can’t go on,” God’s Word says, “My grace is sufficient” (2Corinthians 12:9).

When we say, “I can’t figure it out,” God’s Word says, “I will direct your steps” (Proverbs 3:5-6).

When we say, “I can’t do it,” God’s Word says, “You can do all things through Christ” (Philippians 4:13).

When we say, “I’m not able,” God’s Word says, “You are able” (2Corinthians 9:8).

When we say, “It’s not worth it,” God’s Word says, “It will be worth it” (Roman 8:18).

When we say, “I can’t forgive myself,” God’s Word says, “I forgive you” (1John 1:9; Romans 8:1).

When we say, “I can’t manage,” God’s Word says, “I will supply all your needs” (Philippians 4:19).

When we say, “I’m afraid,” God’s Word says, “Fear not” (Hebrews 13:6; 1John 4:18).

When we say, “I’m always worried and frustrated,” God’s Word says, “Cast your cares on Me” (1Peter 5:7).

When we say, “I’m not smart enough,” God’s Word says, “I give you wisdom” (1Corinthians 1:30).

When we say, “I feel alone,” God’s Word says, “I’ll never leave you or forsake you” (Hebrews 13:5).

The Eternal Church of God offers a variety of books, booklets, articles, audio, and video to help people better understand the Bible. Some of the printed material available includes:

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