

*Bible Studies on the
Power of God's Word*

Volume 2

Pathway to Wisdom

William Gibbs

Bible Studies on the Power of God's Word, Volume 2: Pathway to Wisdom

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Introduction

Looking Back to Volume 1. Volume 1 of this study cited the origin, purpose, and function of the Word, and introduced ways that its truths can be assimilated. God gave us His truth, so we can see Him and know Him and learn how to serve Him. We saw in Volume 1 the *conditions* that must exist before, during, and after we absorb the truths of the Word. We also came to understand the need for us to spend time studying. The value of this time, as we learned, will depend on our meeting the requisite “conditions”, which include such things as confessing our sins, praying for wisdom, and believing the truths as we learn them. In addition, we saw the association of the power of the Word with the potent life of the Holy Spirit, Who transmitted the contents of the Word to prophets and apostles, and now clarifies truth for us.

Volume 1 should be read first, to provide the best advantage for extracting the benefits of Volume 2. The subject is the same in both books, but there are some concepts in Volume 1 that will aid in mastering the contents of Volume 2.

Looking Forward to Volume 2. Without the disclosures provided in God's Word, and the teaching ministry of the Holy Spirit, we would learn nothing, and we would have no basis for understanding our place in the world, in life, and in eternity. We would live and die in darkness, and never know the story of redemption and grace, which offers us eternal life. But we have the Word, and we have believed it...and we are learning the story it tells.

As believers, if we choose not to learn the Word, we will live in the same darkness as unbelievers, except that we will not *die* that way, since we have been given eternal life. But, until we are in eternity, the way to live in the light is available to us...and the way to that light is found in the Word. If we do not live in the light, we will not be operating within God's divine perspective, and we will not see all the missiles of evil headed straight for us.

In this volume, we will come to understand all of the following, and more: what it means to feed on the Word of God, its instructions for sanctification, the benefits we derive from knowing the truth, the good things we can do when we follow instructions, the ways and places that are available for acquiring knowledge, the forces that prevent our learning, and the consequences that come if we ignore God's Word.

We will also examine what it means to live in the blessings that God promises. He would not promise what He cannot or will not deliver. We will see the favors He has promised, as we access His mercy, forgiveness, grace, and unfailing love. By the time we are finished, we will **know** that God is loving, faithful, and good. “Great is the Lord, and greatly to be praised, and his greatness is unsearchable.” (Ps. 145:3) (Endnote 1)

Feeding on the Word

Digesting the Word. The concept of feeding on the Word, or ingesting the thoughts of God as expressed in Scripture, has a corollary in the function of digestion in our bodies. We intake food, but if it is not altered for absorption into our metabolism, it will be useless and offer no life-giving qualities. By the same token, the messages of Scripture, after they are heard, must undergo manipulation by the Holy Spirit to give *power* to them, thus changing them from “knowledge” into “understanding” and making them useful for spiritual operations. Without this conversion of dormant knowledge into dynamic understanding, and ultimately into powerful wisdom, acquisition of truth would be merely an intellectual, and not a spiritual, occurrence. Our lives would never be changed or improved, except superficially.

But the Holy Spirit lives within all of us who are saved, and—as we saw in Volume 1—if we are prepared to learn the truth, the Spirit will “teach” us. This means He will clarify the Word of truth and make it applicable to our lives in the form of wisdom and divine perspective. And, in the same way that digested food gives the body energy, processed truth connects our hearts with all the life-giving assets of God’s *grace systems*, and enables us to perform His assignments...in His energy. This requires “feeding” on His truth, however, without which we will weaken and faint. We can do nothing without consistent, frequent nourishment from the Word. As often as we eat for our physical bodies, we should feed on the Word for our spiritual well-being.

The Holy Spirit is in every part of the feeding-learning process, as we see in the following:

- He selects our “food”, which is His Word.
- He “washes our hands before we eat”, meaning He prepares us by cleansing us, by recognizing our faith, and by acknowledging our prayerful search for wisdom (grace provisions for preparation).
- He “feeds us”, using the gifts of teachers and other “edifiers” that He empowers.
- He “digests” for us the words we accept, by clarifying their meaning through His “teaching” ministry within us, which converts knowledge to understanding.
- He “energizes” us by His power to apply what we understand.

So the Spirit virtually delivers the knowledge (His Word), prepares and teaches the learner, refines the knowledge into understanding, and applies His own truth through us. By His doing the work from start to finish, there is nothing left for us to do but remain humble (confess), and accept the grace (believe). This is “faith”...resting in His power and ability and letting Him do the heavy spiritual lifting. Without faith, however, we will depend on our own strength, and we will collapse beneath the weight of responsibility.

This is the learning process: hearing, believing, processing, and applying truth. But there is another way to view our *intake* of Scripture, and that is by looking at the actual process of feeding on the nature of God by learning His Word. The process of learning and the process of feeding on God's nature are correlated, and we will see the connection between them before we are through.

Partaking of God's Divine Nature. By learning God's Word, we are feeding on God's divine nature. The Word is an expression of that nature, and by feeding on it, we are absorbing the essential vitality of God's expressed nature. Done right, the truths of the Word are infused as currents of spiritual power, received by us, embraced by our hearts, and made available for the Holy Spirit to use within us...and in our lives. The Word is the resource, and we are the recipients, but the Holy Spirit is the origin and medium for the entire process that turns words into action.

We must be reminded that the most essential component in this process is keeping the Spirit in charge, so He can do what **ONLY** He can do, and that is to produce the life of Christ *within* us, which translates as the character of Christ emanating *from* us. To do this, we must be clean, or have all sins confessed, and to *keep on doing this*, we must walk by faith. As we increase understanding and wisdom, our faith will get stronger, which enables greater consistency in staying under the control of the Spirit, so He can do His work.

But, for this to work, WE MUST FEED. 2 Pet. 1:3-4 says the following:

His divine power has given us everything we need for life and godliness through our knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and goodness. Through these he has given us his very great and precious promises, so that through them you may participate in the divine nature and escape the corruption in the world caused by evil desires.

Everything we need for life and godliness comes through great determination and practice. Right? NO! What we need, as we see in this verse, comes through "knowledge"! Through knowledge of the Word, we become equipped for all things spiritual...including dealing with evil in all its forms ("corruption"), and producing divine righteousness ("godliness"). Defeat of evil and the generation of righteousness are products of "knowing" Scripture, which shows us how to become and stay "spiritual".

There is also a point to be made from this rich passage concerning "promises", but we will save that for our discussion of that topic later in this study. The main emphasis we want to see here is in verse 4, specifically the term "participate" (as translated in the NIV). A correct understanding of this verse depends on a correct translation of this word...and we believe the NIV is inadequate in this case.

We call attention to a previous study on this verse, as seen in the chapter titled "Self-Control", in *Maturity*. In that study, we presented the *correct* translation of "participate" as "partake", which is what we are to do regarding the divine nature of God. "Partake" means to "feed on", and the thing we are "eating" is God's nature. In the discussion cited in

Maturity, we presented this feeding process as an incorporation of parts of God Himself. We want to amplify this here.

When we take in “knowledge”, *and it is processed as understanding* (this step cannot be omitted), we take in the essence of God *in the form of His Word*, which is—when it is learned—“alive and powerful” (Heb. 4:12). But we must be clear that the part of God that we are taking in is His “mind”, or the content of His thinking. We are taking in God’s essence...through His knowledge. By absorbing His knowledge, we are feeding on His nature.

Whether we view the process of acquiring knowledge as “feeding” or “learning”, we must remember that “spiritual truths” that are “heard” will not be “spiritually understood” until they are “processed” by the Spirit. Truth, like food, has the *potential* to nourish, but will not do so until it is ingested, digested, and converted into energy.

Another clarification will also be helpful: When we are saved, we receive all of the Holy Spirit that we will ever get. So the “part” of God that is received as we study the Word is not the “Person” of God, which we already have, but the *core content of His mind*, as it has been revealed and presented in His Word.

So, the point we must glean from 2 Pet. 1:3-4 is that our learning of the Word is a process of feeding, but this spiritual dining is about much more than taking in phrases or concepts. It is an assimilation of divine view point, which can have enormous effects on us. By understanding the Word, we will acquire the very thinking of God (the core of His nature). In 2 Cor. 2:16b, Paul, in context with a discussion of the origin and nature of “spiritual truths”—or “the things of the Spirit”—concluded this: “...we have the mind of Christ.” When we feed on the Word, we feed on the mind of Christ.

Is There a Difference Between “Processing Truth” and “Feeding on the Word”?

When we learn the truths of the Bible, and are in fellowship and believing what we learn, the truths are *processed* and become understanding, which can then be loaded up and applied as wisdom. The Word itself is alive and powerful, because the truths and images that the words of the Bible convey are divinely inspired. But the power and nutritional value of these words mean nothing in our lives as a “Book” in our hand. The power comes from learning the truths through the entire process of hearing, believing, processing, and applying, which can only take place under the influence and direction of the Holy Spirit. All meaning and value of truth come from Him.

When we “learn” the Word, we are “feeding” on the Word. And to feed on the Word, we must be prepared, which is like opening our mouths when we eat...and we must believe and receive what is taught, which is like chewing and swallowing. Whether intake of the Word is viewed as “feeding”...or “learning”...the *content* of the Word becomes valuable only when it is swallowed and digested...or accepted and processed. So, even though the truths of the Word express God’s divine nature, *they must be processed into the heart* for them to be received as “the mind of Christ”. “Feeding on God’s nature” is another way of saying “processing truths from God’s Word”. Processing and feeding are functionally identical.

However we frame the “process” for learning and growing, one indisputable conclusion *must not be missed*, and that is this: **If we do not regularly take in the Word, we will weaken spiritually, and we will not be effective in our Christian walk.** If getting closer to God means anything at all to us (and it better!), then we *cannot* bypass the crucial step of *learning about Him through His Word*.

Passages Related to Feeding on the Word. The following are verses reflecting the concept of spiritual life being sustained by feeding on the Word:

- Ps. 81:13 and 16—“If my people would but listen to me, if Israel would follow my ways...you would be fed with the finest of wheat; with honey from the rock I would satisfy you.” Coupled with Matt. 4:4 (seen below) we can see that feeding on the “finest of wheat” and “honey from the rock” is actually “listening” to the Word. To receive truth, we must “listen”.
- Ezek. 2:8—“But you, son of man, listen to what I say to you. Do not rebel like that rebellious house; open your mouth and eat what I give you.” The Holy Spirit was speaking to Ezekiel and giving him a *message* that he was to deliver to the people of Israel. He was to “eat” the message that he was receiving.
- Ezek. 3:1-3—“And he said to me, ‘Son of man, eat what is before you, eat this scroll; then go and speak to the house of Israel.’ So I opened my mouth, and he gave me the scroll to eat. Then he said to me, ‘Son of man, eat this scroll I am giving you and fill your stomach with it.’ So I ate it, and it tasted as sweet as honey in my mouth.” The scroll is truth, and the stomach corresponds with the heart. We are to fill our hearts with the truth.
- Jer. 15:16—“When your words came, I ate them; they were my joy and my heart’s delight, for I bear your name, O Lord God Almighty.” Truth is a delight to our hearts, because we believe in the One Who gives it to us...He is our God. Notice that truth brings “joy”, which—according to studies we have done before—connotes fellowship. Study teaches and encourages fellowship.
- Deut. 8:3—“He humbled you, causing you to hunger and then feeding you with manna, which neither you nor your fathers had known, to teach you that man does not live on bread alone but on every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord.” We are sustained, not because we have a Tom Thumb nearby, but because of God’s Word...more specifically, because of His promise to provide for us. This is how we “live and move and have our being”...because of Him (Acts 17:28).
- Matt. 4:4—“It is written: Man shall not live by bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God.” Jesus repeats the words of Deuteronomy, telling us that spiritual life comes from God’s Word, and not from our dietary intake. The correlation goes like this: physical food sustains our physical lives; spiritual food sustains our spiritual lives. If either is absent, WE WILL NOT SURVIVE.

Recapitulation. What follows here is a recap and extension of some of the things we have understood so far about the Scripture-learning process, as seen in the previous volume, and so far in this one.

The *words* of God's Word present *truth*. Our task is to find it by seeking it, and believing it when we find it. The truth being pursued is alive and powerful through the Holy Spirit...because the *life* in the Word is the life given to it by the Spirit of Christ. Truth points to Him, and *gets its power and significance from Him*.

The words themselves are "spiritual", but they are not the Spirit. The actual words used in the Bible are used in many other places outside the Bible, with many uses not related to God or eternity. So the "words" themselves are not independently "holy". The Word itself is "holy" because 1) it comes from God, 2) it is made holy by the Spirit when we learn it, and 3) it specifies the divine pathway for us to reach personal holiness through the Spirit.

Feeding on God's Word is the same as feeding on God's nature, or absorbing the essence of His thinking and receiving the nutritious contents of His Word. By hearing and believing the Word, we are strengthened for service in the power of the Spirit. The connection of our spirit with the Holy Spirit is enhanced, improved, and increased by our receiving and believing truth. This is because, by following the precepts of Scripture, we are able to access the techniques that tell us how to stay spiritual and become mature. Truth implanted becomes power imparted.

The ultimate power of truth is found in its Author. God presents to us an expression of His divine nature, first as words, then as knowledge, then as understanding and wisdom, and finally as attitudes and actions in the world, all directed by and performed through His Spirit.

Conversely, our hearts will not benefit from the truth if the Holy Spirit is not actively engaged. This is why we must confess our sins and pray for wisdom before we study...so the Holy Spirit can empower His truth within us. Then we must believe the truth, so the Holy Spirit can convert it to understanding, which He will use to produce His righteousness through us. When we believe the Word, we are believing God. And that belief keeps the Spirit activated within us.

Finally, as we prepare to learn, and enter a state of faith that will accept the truth, we must spend the *time* needed to view and re-view the truth in the Word. Preparation and faith must be followed by a consistent schedule of study. The power will not last if we ignore Scripture. And, of course, if we become indifferent or even hostile to the Word, we will not be gaining in maturity, and the fruit of the Spirit will not be found in us. The flesh will stay in charge.

Synopsis. We must *prepare* to learn, *believe* what we learn, and *apply* what we learn. We must "ingest" the Word by listening, and then "digest" the Word by believing. When we hear and accept the Word, God-consciousness, faith, and fear of the Lord will increase, and the Holy Spirit will be activated to energize us and propel us on to greater service. He will,

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in short, fulfill His own commands, techniques, and promises from the Word, through our understanding of them.

The Truth and Sanctification

Sanctification at Salvation. We will not spend much time on this particular aspect of sanctification, except to acknowledge that it takes place when we accept Christ at salvation...this is one of many things that happens at salvation. *Regenerational sanctification* gives us our initial cleansing and qualifies us *positionally* to become a child of God. 2 Thess. 2:13-14 refers to this process, saying the following:

But we ought always to thank God for you, brothers loved by the Lord, because from the beginning God chose you to be saved through the sanctifying work of the Spirit and through belief in the truth. He called you to this through our gospel, that you might share in the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ.

This passage clearly indicates a sanctification that occurs in conjunction with an initial faith in Christ. We see this also in 1 Cor. 1:30 and 6:11, which, taken together, say this:

It is because of him that you are in Christ Jesus, who has become for us wisdom from God—that is, our righteousness, holiness [sanctification], and redemption.... And that is what some of you were. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God.

We are completely *cleansed* at salvation, because all our sins were absorbed by Christ on the cross. He was our substitute, and through His work, we have forgiveness at the time we are saved, resulting in sanctification. Unfortunately, we retain our sinful natures after salvation, with the result that we continue to sin; so a process of “sanctification” is needed to accommodate us after we are saved.

Sanctification of Believers. We want to see the relationship between truth and sanctification, but first it will be helpful for us to get a general understanding of sanctification as it relates to believers.

First of all, it is God's will that all believers should be sanctified, meaning completely forgiven of all sins, and clean and pure before God. Paul addressed his “brothers” in 1 Thess. 4:3a, saying “It is God's will that you be sanctified....” This is not the sanctification of salvation, because they are already saved. Paul goes on to indicate all kinds of things that result from being cleansed, such as avoiding sexual immorality, maintaining self-control, and not taking advantage of fellow believers. When we are “clean”, we can do these things because we will be in fellowship and energized by the Holy Spirit. Verse 7 adds, “For God did not call us to be impure, but to live a holy [sanctified] life.”

Heb. 10:14 refers to both sanctification at salvation and sanctification in the Christian life. This verse says, “...because by one sacrifice he has made perfect forever those who are being made holy.” “Made perfect” applies to sanctification at salvation. “Being made holy” happens *after* salvation, as part of the grace system offered to believers.

“Being made holy” refers to the cleansing that occurs when we confess our sins to God, at which time our sins are forgiven. And this process must be repeated over and over, because we sin frequently, if not continually. We need forgiveness constantly, so in the process of confessing, we are being sanctified as we move along.

The following conclusion should be clear from Heb. 10:14: We have a permanent position of “perfection” (eternal sanctification); but we have a fluctuating, and (ideally) *improving* condition of “holiness” (temporal sanctification). We are a work “in progress”. (See Appendix A, “Verses on Confession”, for a list of verses reflecting the practice of, and purpose for, confessing our sins.)

Sanctification by the Word. Read carefully: The Word cleanses, not because our sins are forgiven by simply learning its truths, but through the process of *applying* the techniques it specifies that bring about forgiveness. The Word shows us HOW to be cleansed. So we are cleansed by the Word, yes, but the *method* for the Word’s cleansing is this: *following the procedures* for cleansing. These include 1) confession of our sins for forgiveness, followed by 2) faith for ongoing fellowship, also known as walking in the Spirit.

There are a couple of other ways that the Word can be considered in a “sanctifying” role. The first is that our “minds are renewed” by truth, thus cleaning up the contents of our understanding. Our concepts will then be “purged” of false notions. Another way the “word” of God comes into play as part of sanctification, or cleansing, is that He “speaks” forgiveness when we confess our sins. His spoken word (though inaudible to us), purifies us. There are still other ways that the Word “sanctifies”, but in our current discussion, we are presenting the Word as the *instruction manual* for getting forgiveness.

The Word is the visible part of the process of forgiveness, in that it openly pronounces procedures for sanctification. But, behind the scenes, the Holy Spirit is the one who does the sanctifying. The Word and the Holy Spirit work in tandem...the “way-to”, with the “way”. Just remember that the Spirit is the source of all power and life, and the Spirit is the one who brings potency to the process.

Eph. 5:25-26 shows the effects of the Word regarding cleanliness. This passage says, “Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing with water through the word.” The Word is involved in the “washing”, but don’t forget WHOSE WORD IT IS. The Word is the truth of God, as presented by His Spirit to acquaint us with the steps and processes for walking in His way, by His Word, in His power. The Word tells us how to *receive* the washing, but we must remember that the Holy Spirit actually *does* the washing. Verse 26 can be translated, “washing with water through the *instructions* in the Word.” The Holy Spirit is the agent for sanctification...and His cleansing comes to us when we “obey” the directions in His Word.

1 Pet. 1:22 also views sanctification as coming through compliance with procedures in the Word. This verse says, “Now that you have purified yourselves by obeying the truth so that you have sincere love for your brothers, love one another deeply from the heart.” So how does this reflect sanctification? In previous studies we have seen that “obeying the truth”

means “following the techniques in the Word”; and “having sincere love” reflects a “condition of fellowship”. The truth that must be obeyed, then, is the call to genuine confession, followed by walking in the Spirit. Cleansing goes on when we *follow the directions* for cleansing!

Growth and Sanctification. Growth in the Word engenders maturity, ongoing sanctification, and productivity. These are based on following specific techniques described in the Word: Maturity is based on stronger faith; sanctification is based on being cleansed; and productivity is based on walking in the Spirit. The outcome is noteworthy: When we are mature, clean, and walking by faith, we will be living our lives in the power of the Holy Spirit, *which is the whole point of everything we have learned!*

We learn so we can grow, and by growing, we master the grace techniques that provide the fullness of God's power and provision, including sanctification. Sanctification is a grace technique...and a spiritual privilege. We want to be sanctified, not just so we can be clean and sparkly, but because we have a job to do, and *service begins with cleanliness*. When we are clean, then we can grow...and as we grow, service will become more purposeful.

Here are some verses reflecting the role of Scripture in facilitating the growth of sanctified believers:

- Acts 20:32—“Now I commit you to God and to the word of his grace, which can build you up and give you an inheritance among all those who are sanctified.”
- Eph. 1:17-19—“I keep asking that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the glorious Father, may give you the Spirit of wisdom and revelation, so that you may know him better. I pray also that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened in order that you may know the hope to which he has called you, the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints, and his incomparably great power for us who believe. That power is like the working of his mighty strength.”
- Jn. 15:7—“If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be given you.”
- Ps. 19:7-11—“The law of the Lord is perfect, reviving the soul. The statutes of the Lord are trustworthy, making wise the simple. The precepts of the Lord are right, giving joy to the heart. The commands of the Lord are radiant, giving light to the eyes. The fear of the Lord is pure, enduring forever. The ordinances of the Lord are sure and altogether righteous. They are more precious than gold, than much pure gold; they are sweeter than honey, than honey from the comb. By them is your servant warned; in keeping them there is great reward.”
- 1 Pet. 1:13 and 15—“Therefore, prepare your minds for action; be self-controlled; set your hope fully on the grace to be given you when Jesus Christ is revealed...But just as he who called you is holy, so be holy in all you do; for it is written: “Be holy, because I am holy.”

- 2 Tim. 1:13-14—“What you heard from me, keep as the pattern of sound teaching, with faith and love in Christ Jesus. Guard the good deposit that was entrusted to you—guard it with the help of the Holy Spirit who lives in us.”
- 1 Thess. 4:1-2—“Finally, brothers, we instructed you how to live in order to please God, as in fact you are living. Now we ask you and urge you in the Lord Jesus to do this more and more. For you know what instructions we gave you by the authority of the Lord Jesus.”
- 1 Pet. 2:2—“Like newborn babies, crave pure spiritual milk, so that by it you may grow up in your salvation.”
- 2 Pet. 1:3-4—“His divine power has given us everything we need for life and godliness through our knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and goodness. Through these he has given us his very great and precious promises, so that through them you may participate in the divine nature and escape the corruption in the world caused by evil desires.”
- Eph. 5:26—“...to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing with water through the word.”

These verses, taken together, formulate a strong challenge for us to make the Word and its pronouncements the center of our lives. When we do this, we will grow and thus increasingly witness the operation of *grace systems* in us and around us, beginning with sanctification.

A Love for Truth

The Word of God is Pure. We saw in Volume 1 a number of verses that feature the Word as a treasure more valuable than gold or silver or pearls, something we would pay any price to get, and are willing to give up anything to acquire. That makes truth our most valuable possession, and gives us a perspective of the place it should hold in our lives. The Word is complete, it is true, it is effective, and it is pure. Because of this, and because of what it does to enable us to relate to God in meaningful ways, we love it.

There is nothing about the Word of God that is tainted or sullied. There is no corruption or subterfuge in connection with it. No deceit or exaggeration. This amazing book, penned by so many writers from so many periods in history, is astoundingly consistent and reliable. The Bible has been tested, challenged, questioned, distorted, and even burned...but it still stands as the best-selling, most-read book of all time. This is because there are many people in the world who seek the truth, and who treasure it when they find it. They love the truth, and trust it, partly because it is so pure.

Ps. 12:6 says, “And the words of the Lord are flawless, like silver refined in a furnace of clay, purified seven times.” The Word is pure, without fault or flaw. Ps. 119:140 says, “Your promises have been thoroughly tested, and your servant loves them.” The endless truths, the techniques, the descriptions of God, the promises, the history, the prophecies, and the perfect plan of God all make up this pure aggregate of truth, which presents the essence of God’s nature. The purity of its truth draws us, and—as we embrace it—our love for it grows.

Things that Happen when we Love the Word. When we have affection for the Word, it is of course because we love the Protagonist of the book, Who is also the Author. But also, when we read the words, or study the concepts in Scripture, we feel appreciation for the truths themselves. We love the *truth*. And because we do, we are told that certain things will happen.

One of the things that happen when we love the truth is that **we will have peace and stability**. Ps. 119:165 says, “Great peace have they who love your law [for us, this is the “Word”], and nothing can make them stumble.” As per previous studies, “peace” is a symbol of fellowship, and “not stumbling” represents our walk in the Spirit (or a walk by faith). As a result of *loving* the Word, we will take time to *learn* how to maintain fellowship and live under the leadership and control of the Holy Spirit.

On the other hand, if we do not love...truly seek and value...the Word, we will not know how to access and retain the power of the Holy Spirit, and we will “stumble” into sin and/or self-righteousness. We will eventually fall on our face, and collapse in a useless heap. As we walk the walk of the Christian faith, we must have spiritual *energy* and *balance* to stay on our feet. The Word shows us how we get these.

It is interesting that the act of “walking” is a process of perpetually falling and catching ourselves. As we take each step, for a split second we are falling, so we move one of our feet forward to regain our balance and prevent the fall. When this process is repeated, it becomes “walking”. This is how our spiritual lives work. By loving the Word and accepting its truths, **we discover and apply methods that enable us to walk forward one step at a time**. We do this by 1) confessing to get into fellowship (catching ourselves), and 2) relying on the strength of God's Spirit to sustain us (restoring our balance). This is “the walk by means of the Spirit” (cf., Gal. 5:16, 25; Rom. 8:4).

Another thing that happens when we love the Word is that **we will defend its truths**. This does not imply divisive arguing over trivial points, but it does suggest that we must *know where we stand on the truths of the Word*, and have a strong scriptural basis for our positions. We will have more to say about this later in this series.

The “defense” of the Word has to do mostly with thwarting the attacks of the world and Satan, as well as the constant impulses of our sinful natures. The more truth we understand, the better equipped we will be to defend against these (cf., Matt. 4:4, 7, 10). In 2 Cor. 10:3-5, we see this defense referred to as “waging war” against opposing spiritual forces. Because we love the truth, we *protect* it. This passage says this:

For though we live in the world, we do not wage war as the world does. The weapons we fight with are not the weapons of the world. On the contrary, they have divine power to demolish strongholds. We demolish arguments and every pretension that sets itself up against the knowledge of God, and we take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ.

These forces that we are fighting against are demonic and powerful, set on erasing our understanding and corrupting our thoughts. Resisting them requires preparation and study and training that rivals that of Navy SEALs. As much as SEALs are to be admired, the enemies they face do not reach the level of power possessed by the ones we encounter as believers. And if we are not equipped to face them, we are “sitting ducks”. Key reminder: “Being equipped” means “knowing with confidence how to operate in the power of the Holy Spirit”. This is the “divine power” needed to “demolish arguments...against the knowledge of God.”

Sometimes, our love for the Word will **prompt us to use it to encourage fellow believers, or move us to try to change the minds of those who “oppose truth”**. In Titus 1:9, Paul is giving instructions to Titus regarding qualifications for “overseers” in the church, but this can apply to all of us. This verse says, “He must hold firmly to the trustworthy message as it has been taught, so that he can encourage others by sound doctrine and refute those who oppose it.”

The better prepared we are by *knowing the Word*, the more likely it is that we will be effective in administering Scripture as a balm, or wielding it like a sword, and in knowing which is needed. Whenever we must “correct” someone who is mistaken, however, we should do so in love, and with “gentleness”. As Paul advised Timothy, “Those who oppose

him he must gently instruct, in the hope that God will grant them repentance leading them to a knowledge of the truth" (2 Tim. 2:25). There are occasions when we should stand firm on sound doctrinal grounds, but our defense of the Word must always be conducted in a spirit of love.

Finally, if we love the Word, **we will spend time with it**. If we love laziness, or entertainment, or comfort, or anything else, more than learning the truth, we will not have its full benefits. If we live *in* the Word (learning it), and *by* the Word (applying it), we will be ready to do battle...or to love. If not, we will be battered in battle, and love will be lost.

What's Not to Love? Are there parts of Scripture that we should not love? The answer to this question is obviously, "No!" Paul told Timothy, "All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting, and training in righteousness." ALL SCRIPTURE. I do believe, however, that some scriptures will naturally receive more emphasis in our studies than others.

Scriptures that tell us *how to* access the life of Christ, *how to* be filled with the Spirit and operate in His power, and *how to* mature and/or grow in grace and knowledge...these are the teachings that we will be drawn to, because they tell us *how to* "function" as believers. Essentially, we must know *how to* draw on God's resources...the ones that equip us to *trust Him to produce through us what we cannot produce on our own*.

This means that techniques, methods, procedures, strategies, and operational principles will tend to require the most time and attention, especially at first. As we learn these, and implement them in our lives, we will move toward maturity. And, as we progress, the other important features of the Word will have more meaning, because we will develop a broader doctrinal framework for understanding their value. For example, a study on end times or rewards in heaven is fascinating and essential, but if we study these and neglect teachings on prayer or faith or the empowerment of the Holy Spirit, knowing about end times or rewards will not be a great help to us. There is, it seems, a proper "sequence" for lessons from the Word.

We need **techniques for living**, thoroughly examined and explained, as soon after we are saved as possible, and repeatedly throughout our Christian lives. In fact, all new believers need to go through a kind of scriptural "basic training" to get them started in the right direction. And all believers need constant updates to be reminded of the procedures for knowing God intimately, and pleasing Him.

So we may seem to love some parts of Scripture more than others, but it is all about where we are in our growth process. As we know the Bible better, we will have greater love for all its parts. Like a long-term, loving marriage, the longer we stay in it, the more we will find to love.

Benefits of Following God's Word

What it Means to Follow the Word. We will see below that blessings come when we follow the Word, so why don't we just follow it and get the blessings? This sounds easy enough. But the size of the Word alone suggests the enormity of the task of *knowing* the Word, let alone *following* it. We can rest assured that once-a-week, thirty-minute lessons will not give us the kind of knowledge we are talking about here. The kind of knowledge and obedience that is required for us to be viewed as "following the Word", involves *intense enthusiasm* for the truth.

We must understand what it means to "follow the Word". The badge of a "Follower of the Word" goes only to those with the kind of intensity we see in Deut. 6:6-8, quoted often in previous studies. This passage says this:

These commandments that I give you today are to be upon your hearts. Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up. Tie them as symbols on your hands and bind them on your foreheads. Write them on the doorframes of your houses and on your gates.

Followers of the Word have a relentless focus that keeps the words of Scripture close to them, and because of this, they stay close to God. To them the Word of life is an in-your-face, before-your-eyes, and on-your-mind proposition. These are the ones who are blessed...because the Word is their life (cf., Prov. 4:13).

Incidentally, just because someone spends *time* in study does not mean they are learning the *truth* of the Word. Remember that *preparation* must be made prior to study for the learning experience to be meaningful. That preparation is delineated specifically and exactly in the Bible, and without it, no learning will take place. Seminarians and pastors around the world spend time *studying*, but if they are not preparing properly, they will not be learning and/or teaching the truth. Thank God, a number of them still are.

Furthermore, there is a danger that "knowledge" will become "stored intellectual facts", and not get processed into the heart. Knowledge in the "mind" is *not* the same as understanding in the "heart". To be processed into the heart as understanding, knowledge must be believed, which qualifies it to be enriched and empowered by the Holy Spirit. It is only in *understanding* truth that we can "follow" it, because **following the Word is a spiritual exercise, and not an intellectual one!** Enthusiasm for, and understanding of, the Word is based on *spiritual conditions* and not on mental acuity, or even the content and quality of the lessons.

Just because you "know" the Bible sufficiently to pass tests at seminary, or complete rigorous exercises for ministerial ordination, does not mean you "understand" the truth. Any believer can "know" without understanding. It is even possible for church dignitaries to pontificate a myriad of recondite liturgical observances or hermeneutical verities, and not have a clue

about accessing the power of the indwelling Holy Spirit. Such “knowledge” is better off in the mind of a child, who will believe the simple truth that **God** is the point of knowing, and not knowing itself. Such a child will see little value in knowledge for its own sake.

People who are preoccupied with knowledge alone are like those Paul described as “...having a form of godliness but denying its power. Have nothing to do with them” (2 Tim. 3:5). It is best to avoid those who “know”, but don’t have the “glow”. Listen to leaders who point to the power of God. Follow those who wear the badge. Follow the “Followers”. There is much more to say about this, and we will...later in this study.

Those Who Follow the Word are Blessed. Rev. 22:7 says, “Behold, I am coming soon! Blessed is he who keeps the words of the prophecy in this book.” When we keep the Word, blessings come to us. This is to be distinguished from suffering. There is blessing, and there is suffering, even though sometimes we may have to suffer to get to the blessing. But *blessing and suffering have different definitions in the Bible!* They are NOT the same. So, when we “follow” the Word, or “keep” it, which is one way of saying “understand” it, we will receive blessings from God. This is promised!

Whatever else the plan of God has for us, or whatever God’s will might be, if we learn God’s Word **we will be blessed!** (Don’t forget that “learn” always implies the full sequence: hear, believe, process, understand, and apply.) Blessings come to us because of what we do with God’s Word. The other side of the coin is this: If we neglect the Word, and do not “learn” it, we will NOT receive the blessings.

Ps. 119:1-2 backs this up, saying, “Blessed are they whose ways are blameless, who walk according to the law of the Lord. Blessed are they who keep his statutes and seek him with all their heart.” When we walk according to God’s truth, we will be blessed. If we are “walking according to the truth”, it is assumed that we have “learned” the truth. Another condition for blessing in this verse is that we are “blameless”, meaning “in fellowship”...and “seeking him *with all our heart*”, which refers to all the other techniques for getting closer to God: praying, trusting, surrendering, waiting, enduring, and so on.

The meaning and application of the word “blessing” is probably individual and personal, but it will always include spiritual strength, stability, provision (see Matt. 6:33), “met” needs, and everything working together for good. The whole panoply of promises (we will study them later) will come into play when we **seek God with all our heart**. It is interesting that this phrase, “seek Him with all your heart”, quoted just above in Ps. 119:2, introduces the longest book in the Bible, which is one-hundred percent focused on the Word of God. “Seeking Him” means *searching His Word with all our hearts*.

Other Benefits of Learning and Following the Truth. Prov. 6:20-24 offers the following for learners of the truth:

My son, keep your father’s commands and do not forsake your mother’s teaching. Bind them upon your heart forever; fasten them around your neck. When you walk, they will guide you; when you sleep, they will watch over you; when you awake,

they will speak to you. For these commands are a lamp, this teaching is a light, and the corrections of discipline are the way to life, keeping you from the immoral woman, from the smooth tongue of the wayward wife.

Here are the benefits that the Word itself provides, according to this passage:

1. The Word will guide us.
2. It will watch over us.
3. It will speak to us.
4. It will provide a lamp and a light.
5. It will give us correction.
6. It will keep us from immorality.

Read carefully! Here we see the power and provision of the Word, imbued within the life of a believer who is walking by faith, walking in the Spirit, and walking in the truth. To elaborate the benefits we listed above, we see that, when we learn the Word, truth will do the following: It will acquaint us with what God wants us to do...even at the level of personal decision-making. It will protect us from evil and will whisper assurances to us when we are confused and unsure. It will light the way for us, so that we can see where we are going...and where He *wants* us to go. It will give us correction when we stray, so we can confess and return to fellowship with Him. And it will give us power over all the forces of sin that come at us like a train.

If we are lost and disoriented, distressed and afraid, uncertain and disillusioned, we have an urgent need to turn (or return) to God's Word, so that He can build His fort around us, teach us, and make us safe and at-home in His kingdom. He is impeded, though, because there is so much reluctance to learn the Word.

Learning the Word to Bear Fruit

The Word Bears Fruit. Is. 55:11 says, "...so is my word that goes out from my mouth; it will not return to me empty, but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it." God sends His "gospel" to describe clearly for unbelievers their option to believe in Christ and receive eternal life. He also sends His "teachings" to believers, so they can know how to live successfully in a precarious and hostile world.

He leaves the "receptivity" of His Word with those who hear it...which means He give us the option of refusing His Word. But it will still accomplish what He wants, as long as even one person accepts Christ, and as long as even one believer reaches maturity through His teachings. When the Word is learned, and it accomplishes its purpose, it is "fruitful", meaning that it gets positive results in the lives of those who accept it. For unbelievers, the result is salvation; for believers, the result is living in the Spirit by using the techniques that the Word teaches.

Col. 1:5-6 tells us that the "gospel", or "word of truth", as it is also called, constantly "bears fruit", locally and around the world. This is still going on today. The gospel message is, first of all, for unbelievers, who get the good news that their sins have been paid for, and that eternal life with God is available to them. Then there is "good news" for believers, in that we are not left to fend for ourselves, but have been given the Holy Spirit, who will produce His fruit in us when we learn how to access His power. Col. 1:9-10 (NET) shows how learning the Word provides the impetus for bearing fruit, as follows:

For this reason we also, from the day we heard about you, have not ceased praying for you and asking God to fill you with wisdom and understanding, so that you may live worthily of the Lord and please him in all respects—bearing fruit in every good deed, growing in the knowledge of God....

This shows clearly the effects of the Word on our productivity. When we are filled with "wisdom and understanding", we can "live worthily of the Lord". Obviously, this is not something we can do "in the flesh". Verse 8 in Col. 1 (NET) says, "...who also told us of your love in the Spirit." When we operate "in the Spirit", *then* we can do what we see in verse 11 (NET): "...being strengthened with all power according to his glorious might for the display of all patience and steadfastness..." When we *learn*, we will be strengthened by HIS MIGHT! And fruit will be produced.

Ps. 1:1-3 cites the fruitfulness of the believer who walks in truth, as follows:

Blessed is the man who does not walk in the counsel of the wicked or stand in the way of sinners or sit in the seat of mockers. But his delight is in the law of the Lord, and on his law he meditates day and night. He is like a tree planted by streams of water, which yields its fruit in season and whose leaf does not wither. Whatever he does prospers.

“Waters” is a term frequently applied to the Holy Spirit, and that is the source for “fruit”, as seen in this passage. When we “delight in the law [in the Word]”, and “meditate on it day and night”, we will learn and understand the principles of spirituality that enable us to draw on the power of the Holy Spirit, so He can produce His fruit. This will not only please God...it will cause us to “prosper”.

Eph. 5:8b-9 says, “Live as children of light (for the fruit of the light consists in all goodness, righteousness and truth).” We have examined “living in the light” a number of times in previous studies, and have seen that it is basically “living in fellowship” or “walking in the Spirit”. Fruit of the light is identical with the fruit of the Spirit. No meaningful fruit is produced apart from the Holy Spirit. In Gal. 5:22, we see all the “fruit of the Spirit”. These “fruits” are subsumed here in three different perspectives: in *goodness*, in *righteousness*, and in *truth* (see verse 9 above). These are described briefly in the following:

1. Goodness—Fruit that is seen in “goodness” comes from fellowship, the result of our being spiritually clean. Being clean leads to divine good.
2. Righteousness—Fruit that is seen in “righteousness” comes from the direct work of the Holy Spirit. He generates righteousness through believers that He fills and controls, i.e., those who are “walking in the Spirit”.
3. Truth—The fruit that resides in the “truth” involves the whole *grace system*, which includes all the strategies for spirituality. These techniques enable believers to participate in the production of divine good and righteousness through the power of the Holy Spirit.

We are particularly interested, for the purposes of this study, in the aspect of fruit that is found in the “truth”. The Word gives us all we need to know to operate within God’s plan of grace. God’s grace toward us features mercy and forgiveness, and results in fellowship and spiritual empowerment. When we understand God’s program of grace, and have learned how to rely on Him to clean us, direct us, and use us according to His will, we will see fruit being produced through us. People will be saved, and believers will be strengthened, as a result of the fruit that comes from our knowing how to walk in God’s grace and power.

Sowing Seed and Bearing Fruit. Gal. 6:7-9 gives us the following in regard to “sowing and reaping”, which means “planting and harvesting”:

Do not be deceived: God cannot be mocked. A man reaps what he sows. The one who sows to please his sinful nature, from that nature will reap destruction; the one who sows to please the Spirit, from the Spirit will reap eternal life. Let us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up.

If we are “deceived”, it is because we are ignoring God’s Word, as lack of understanding invites deception. “Mocking” means, literally, “turning up the nose at”. This is a gesture of disdain or disregard toward the Word, as a result of self-trust or *pride*. When we think *we*

have all the answers, we are kidding ourselves, and shunning the most essential nutrient in our lives...the truth.

But if the truth is “planted”, and God’s guidelines for living are followed, then we will reap a harvest of “eternal life”, which means one of two things (maybe both): 1) We will enjoy the empowerment of the *life which is eternal*, referring to the Holy Spirit, by staying in fellowship, and/or 2) we will “harvest” eternal life by following the Spirit’s lead in sharing the gospel with unbelievers, and/or edifying fellow believers so they, in turn, share the gospel, etc. Both interpretations seem to apply. But notice: we can’t stop, or “give up”, or we will dry up on the vine.

This passage calls for us to “sow to please the Spirit”. Remember that the Spirit wants to “fellowship” with us, so “sowing to the Spirit”, as opposed to “sowing to please the sinful nature”, is the same as following the steps for staying in fellowship. This also equates to “walking in the Spirit”, which is the point of the previous chapter in Galatians. But there is another dimension to “sowing”, which is the “planting” of truth in our hearts. This sowing amounts to *prayerful study*. By planting truth, we harvest “life”...all under the auspices of God’s grace and power.

In summary, we sow...or plant...by 1) preparing the soil through confession of our sins and asking for wisdom, and 2) planting the seeds by hearing and believing the truth in the Word. When this is done, we can watch for a “harvest”, as the Holy Spirit processes truth into our hearts, and as that truth is applied in our lives. Divine good, or fruit, will then be produced through us in the form of saved souls and mature believers.

The Parable of the Sower. Jesus used a parable to illustrate sowing and reaping, as it applies to our spiritual walk. We see this in Mark 4:3-29. This passage tells us, in summary, to “hear” and “believe” the Word to bear fruit. The point is made that, when we “receive” the Word and “accept” it, which means to “believe” it, the Word will be productive in us...as the Holy Spirit puts our understanding to good use.

Begin by reading the passage in Mark 4. Then continue here. Here is what we see in this section of truth:

1. It is clear from the parable and Jesus’ interpretation of it, that the “seeds” being sown represent the truths of the Word...seen as the “gospel” for unbelievers, and “teachings” for believers (verses 14-20). Our focus is on the function of truth as it pertains to believers.
2. Those who *want* the truth will receive it. Verse 9 says, “He who has ears to hear, let him hear.”
3. When truth is received, it must be accepted, or believed, so that what is “heard” can become “understanding”. Verse 12 says, “...they may be ever seeing, but never perceiving, and ever hearing but never understanding; otherwise they might turn and be forgiven!” This refers to a *willingness* to learn, followed by *preparations* for learning, leading to *hearing*. “Understanding” is still pending at the time of “hearing”.

4. As we “hear” the Word, we must *accept*, or *believe* the Word, so that what we *hear*, will be processed as *understanding* and *wisdom*. Verse 20 specifies the learning sequence, and gives the ideal outcome, saying, “Others, like seed sown on good soil, hear the word, accept it, and produce a crop.” When a crop is produced, fruit is being borne, which is the point of learning and applying truth.
5. This is how it is supposed to work, but many times believers are not prepared to hear, or do not believe the teaching, so the Word being delivered does not reach its mark. At *any* level of maturity, *preparation* must be done...and *faith in the teaching* must exist...in order for *learning* to take place. But each level of maturity will elicit certain tendencies and capabilities, which will affect the likelihood that proper preparation and processing is actually taking place. These tendencies are distinguished within several stages of growth (cf., v. 15), as follows:
 - a. **Carnal believers.** When carnal believers, meaning those who are out of fellowship, hear the truth, Satan immediately snatches it away, so that it cannot process into the heart as understanding. (verses 4 and 15)
 - b. **Baby and immature believers.** When beginning or early-stage believers hear the Word, and they are *in fellowship*, the teaching will process into the heart. But...the problem with “weaker” believers is that they will not *stay in fellowship* for long, thus reducing the size of their learning window. These believers are not “rooted”, and will quickly drift. (verses 5-6 and 16)
 - c. **Believers at the Mid-level Stage of Maturity.** These believers are progressing, but they are volatile and unstable. This is a dangerous time, because they may look at areas of strength in themselves and think they are okay, when they actually need to see their weaknesses, and turn humbly and repeatedly to God for help. As “maturing” believers, they become vulnerable to attacks from Satan, who hasn’t bothered with them until now. He will bombard them with circumstances and events that worry them, that seduce them with wealth, and that overwhelm them with “desires” (you fill in the blanks as to what is desired). These “choke out” the Word, virtually enveloping these believers in fleshly view-point (with their cooperation, of course). This will prevent them from learning or hanging onto the truth. Please note: Anything that *pulls attention away from God*, even such legitimate occurrences as relationships...or illnesses...may have the effect of choking out the truth for believers at the mid-level stage of maturity. (verses 7 and 18-19)
 - d. **Mature believers.** One of the things that is prominent in this parable, and elsewhere in Scripture, but that is not mentioned so far in this discussion, is that *fruit is rare for believers who have not matured*. The fruit of the Spirit is most likely to be seen in believers who are mature...those who exhibit great passion for the Word. These believers hear the truth, believe it, and apply it,

thus meeting the conditions for the Holy Spirit to generate love, joy, peace, goodness, and so on, *in them*. The whole plan of God for believers still living on the earth is most-evident in this outcome: bearing His fruit, by His power. (verses 8 and 20)

Conclusion. Seeds are planted in the form of truth, and the Word will do its work, when it is properly learned. But the most important truth for us to know is that God is the one who causes us to grow, and He alone produces fruit through us. 1 Cor. 3:6-7 reiterates this truth in the following: "I planted the seed, Apollos watered it, but God made it grow. So neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything, but only God, who makes things grow." Mark 4:27-28a echoes this, saying, "Night and day, whether he [the one who plants] sleeps or gets up, the seed sprouts and grows, *though he does not know how*. All by itself the soil produces grain..." (Emphasis mine.) God does it all.

The things we cannot do...the things we must rely on God to do...occur in ways that we cannot explain. We understand only what God has revealed, and much that goes on is beyond our understanding. For example, we know that the Holy Spirit teaches us His Word. But we do not know exactly how this instruction is conducted, or how it causes us to grow. And we do not know how he transforms knowledge into understanding. But we *do know* that knowledge believed *becomes* understanding, so that an intellectual concept is changed into a spiritual quality that inexorably and persistently changes the one being taught. We are promised then that fruit will come, because the commission of the Word has been fulfilled.

Learning from Experience

Experience as a Criterion for Truth. We have said many times that experience cannot be relied upon as a basis for understanding God's will...or the way He wants us to live. We need to qualify this somewhat, because *there is a way* to look at experience as a teacher of divine truth. We must start with a caution, however, that experience can NEVER be a *primary* criterion for truth. Only the Word has that distinction. Experience can be meaningful, *if we have learned sufficient Scripture to see God's hand in what is happening.* Step one must be our learning the truths of the Word *well.* Step two will be our looking at events in our lives to see what they mean in light of the truths we have learned.

We are tempted to introduce this study with a review of the way God plans our lives, to see again that our entire experience is recorded already in a book with our name on it. When we studied the plan of God, we saw that our choices—and the events that come to us—all interplay in a phenomenal way that allows God to control everything, while allowing us to choose freely. It is best not to go too deeply into this subject, or we will end up re-writing our book, *Living in God's Plan.* Please see that study to learn more about God's plan, which is the origin and frame for everything that happens to us.

The passage from Scripture that really opened my eyes to the truth that “events can teach us” is found in Mark 6:52, which says, “...they had not understood about the loaves; their hearts were hardened.” In context, when the disciples saw Jesus walking on the water, they were “terrified”, because they thought He was a ghost. They lost faith under this frightening condition, because they had not learned from the earlier event of the “feeding of the five thousand”. They had not learned from that miracle, because their hearts were “hardened”...due to carnality, perhaps, but more likely because their volition was resistant to the truth.

They failed to learn from their experience with the loaves, because they were not prepared for it, or did not want it, or did not have a scriptural framework for it. At any rate, they missed it! So Jesus gave them an object lesson in faith...by walking on the water. The lesson for us in this passage is that—when things happen—we must be prepared to see what is going on in the light of *God's working,* and not as accidents or coincidence. We can learn from “incidents”, and—if we don't—the lessons that follow may be scary ones.

Events *are* meaningful. They have spiritual implications, and truths can be found in them. They also reflect God's dealings with us in ways that create opportunities for our growth. What happens to us is designed to allow us to grow and to increase our faith in Him. Death seemed imminent for Paul, when he wrote about his own lessons from experience in 2 Cor. 1:9, as follows: “Indeed, in our hearts we felt the sentence of death. But this happened that we might not rely on ourselves but on God, who raises the dead.”

The things that “happen” to us, as they did to Paul, are to TEACH US TO RELY ON GOD! Events are designed to instruct us in ways that increase our confidence in His grace. We

CAN learn from experience, if we are prepared for it, and *if we want it*. It may be hard to find words that express the *desire* to do this more so than a phrase from a John Denver song, "I Want to Live". The following words have a unique meaning for those of us who are groaning to grow:

I want to live,

I want to grow,

I want to see,

I want to know...

And because we want to grow...and to know...we seek the truth. We seek it first in the Word, and then we take truth into our "experience" to see if there is meaning in all the seeming chaos of our lives...and in the world around us. As we grow, we will understand these better. And by understanding them better, we will grow even more. Using the words from the song above as a kind of outline, and integrating truths we have learned from Scripture, we can propose a likely sequence for our growth that includes *learning from the Word* and *learning from events*. Here is the likely queue:

1. We want to KNOW, which means we want to "learn". We must learn the Word *first*, to help us decipher meaning out of what is happening. Knowing God's truths will help us "see".
2. We want to SEE, which means to correctly interpret events in our lives by seeing God's hand in them. Experience will verify and establish His truth. But we will not "see" God's hand until we "know" God's Word, and when we finally "see", we will "know at a deeper level".
3. We want to GROW. This means we want to reach maturity as quickly as we can. When we "know" and "see", we are on the fast track to maturity. This implicates a devotion and passion for the truth.
4. We want to LIVE in all the fullness of God, and embrace His grace provisions without reservation, which will come when we know...and see...and grow. Our life is in Him...and He is what we want.

There is always the danger that someone will jump the gun and try to interpret *events* in life without first mastering the *truths* of life, meaning the Word of God. This will lead to confusion and serious errors in thinking. Until we have a sufficient grasp of Scripture, we will not "see" the truths in the events, and will misinterpret them. We may have gotten explanations for what is happening, but they are wrong ones. And—since we are *misunderstanding* what is happening—our faith will founder. Understanding truth precedes understanding events. Put another way, seeing truth in experience is for mature believers.

Learning Through Tests and Trials. What we want from this study is to better understand the messages or lessons God sends through experiences of all kinds. Many experiences God brings or allows fall into the category of "tests" and "trials" to strengthen

our faith. We have studied these many times. It is hard to know the percentage of our experience that falls into the category of “testing”...we would probably be surprised.

We have studied in detail James 1:2-3, Rom. 5:3-4, and 1 Pet. 1:6-7. These describe the nature and value of God's training through tests and trials, which usually connote “suffering”. This training is a huge part of our lives, which is why it has been included in virtually all the studies we have done. In these studies we have seen trials as something to be “endured”, and they are, but we must also make the point that these trials are opportunities to understand truths about God, especially that He is *good*. We want to learn how He works as a loving and gracious Father, guiding us to maturity. But to see God in the “heat of battle” of our training, we must acquire the proper perspective *prior* to the training.

1 Pet. 1:13 tells us, “Prepare your minds for action.” The reason this has to be done *before suffering comes*, is that, when it does come, understanding is going to be harder to come by. It is simply harder to “learn” under pressure. This is why James tells us to “pray for wisdom”, after describing the tests and trials of God's training program. For the training to make sense to us, we must acquire “wisdom” from the Word about the character and operational will of God. And this must be done *before* the storm hits, so that we can fit what we know about God into lightning rounds of rapidly-unfolding experiences.

To fully understand the function of training, we must distinguish it from discipline, which is another related subject we have thoroughly studied. Discipline involves *correction* for 1) missteps (sins) that have not been confessed, and 2) failure to study the Word. (See *Walking by Faith*, “Faith is Strengthened by Testing and Training”, for a full discussion of these.) But IF we have confessed our sins and studied...and suffering is still present...we can be sure that the suffering is being presented as a chance for us to grow.

Fellowship is essential for interpreting experience correctly. We established in previous studies that “joy” is a *signal* for fellowship. Peter and James and Paul cite “trials” as occasions for “joy”, because they assume the suffering is being done *in fellowship*. “Trials” are *training events*, times when we need to *keep on confessing and praying and trusting*, so that we can endure the training exercise and maintain our “joy”, or *fellowship*. Many believers get derailed during training, because they fail the tests, and end up in carnality. Job is a perfect example of this. (See “Is God Good? The Story of Job”, in *Living in God's Plan*.) Most suffering, sadly, is probably due to discipline, because we have not confessed, or have refused to study. This suffering is unnecessary, and can be changed if we choose to humble ourselves to confess, pray, and learn, which will enable us to prepare to trust God through any crisis, setback, or even tragedy. When we learn enough from the Word (and experience) to trust Him regardless of conditions, we will have reached a normal, although not common, plateau of advanced maturity.

“Blessings” are another part of our experience with God that we need to understand. The amount of coverage given in Scripture to “blessing” is at least equal to that allowed for “suffering”. We will look at *blessings* in considerable detail when we talk about God's promises later in this series. Preview: Blessings are also part of God's training.

Conclusion. There are many sources and opportunities for learning. We learn from *discipline* to confess and study. We learn from *training* that God is trustworthy and good. We learn from *studying* how we should live and what to believe. And then there are many other unspecified truths that we can learn from our own *personal experience*, if we know where to look, or what to look for. So we will continue the climb toward maturity through study and experience, so that learning will build on learning, and faith will build on faith.

But I think there's still more. I believe it is possible to reach a *level* of maturity that will enable us to be so in tune with the essence of God that we know instantly what is going on, when something happens. I think we can reach a level of understanding and faith that will give us eyes to see His plan and His will in every event. This is what we want...to be close enough to God and familiar enough with Him to gain clear insight into His Way, so that we can walk in it with each step.

Pure fellowship with Him...that is what we hunger for. With this in mind, we press on.

Studying Without the Heart Being in It

Coming to the Table Hungry. When we come to sit before a pastor-teacher, or when we go into a place apart where we privately meditate and study, if our hearts are not prepared to receive the truth, the whole study time is meaningless. We have seen that we should confess our sins and pray for wisdom before we study, and these are foundational to the learning process. We are also aware of our need to believe what we hear (through filters, of course), in order for the hearing to become understanding.

But there is an attitude behind all of these that underpins our assimilation of truth. That is our volition...our choice-maker, which lies at the “heart of our hearts”. We must CHOOSE God’s truth...but not only that...when we come to learn, we must WANT it with a hunger that is ravenous. We must devour truth as a wolf does a fresh animal carcass—consuming up to twenty pounds of meat in one feeding. We must study with a sense of urgency and excitement that compels us to chase the truth with rabid intensity.

We must have passion, devotion, zeal, craving, and awe when we approach our studies. This is not an “academic exercise”, something to yawn our way through and check our watches periodically to see if study-time is almost over. It is a time to “wake up” so we can build our faith and renew our spirits...and put ammunition in our belts for impending encounters with evil or legalism. So this time requires a potent *readiness of heart*, as well as spiritual preparation (confession and prayer). Preparation is not complete until we have opened our hearts to accept the Word with focus and interest.

Opening the Heart. And how is that done? This is hard. We mentioned volition. This goes to the center of who we are, and what we really want. If we really want the truth, our hearts will be open. To go through the steps for spiritual preparation and processing is one thing, but there seems to be a final action that takes place at the point of destination for all study, which is the heart. We will explore what this is, though we will probably not fully explain it.

Going back to our discussion of the heart in “The Internal Make-up of Man”, a chapter in *Walking in the Spirit*, we said that the heart is the center of our spiritual life. It is the place of spiritual enlightenment OR spiritual darkness. Eph. 1:17-18 makes it clear that there is a kind of “sensor” in the heart that is open or closed. This apparatus seems to operate through the volition, the “wanter” in the heart, which will either invite the truth that is being learned into the heart or will keep the doors to the heart closed. This device is known as the “eyes of the heart”. This passage in Ephesians says this:

I keep asking that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the glorious Father, may give you the Spirit of wisdom and revelation, so that you may know him better. I pray also that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened in order that you know the hope to which he has called you, the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints....

When the “eyes of the heart” are opened, they will let the light through, and “knowing” (understanding) will result.

There is also a reference to the heart, as it relates to learning, in the book of Matthew. Matt. 13:15 reiterates the role of the heart as the “receiver of understanding”. This passage says the following:

For this people’s heart has become calloused; they hardly hear with their ears, and they have closed their eyes. Otherwise they might see with their eyes, hear with their ears, understand with their hearts and turn, and I would heal them.

For knowledge-becoming-understanding to process all the way into the heart, so that we “turn”...or change...there must be an open-eyed reception of it past the gateway to the heart...i.e., there must be a thirst for the truth. When the eyes to the heart are opened, the heart will “understand”.

So there seems to be a final step of *welcoming* the truth into the heart that is required for understanding to be “seated” in the heart. This is a “softening” of the heart. Without this, ignorance will result, and wisdom will not be developed.

But why would the heart be “hardened” or closed? The heart, as per *Walking in the Spirit*, is the repository for all parts of the internal make-up of man, including the mind, the soul, and the spirit...and, incidentally...the sinful nature and the Holy Spirit. Excluding the Holy Spirit, any part of the heart could be a suspect for keeping the door to the heart closed.

When the heart is “hardened”, meaning it is rejecting the truth because of some trick of the will, darkness will fall on all understanding being delivered to the heart. Eph. 4:18 says, “They are darkened in their understanding and separated from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them due to the hardening of their hearts.”

Volition seems to be the key player in the opening/closing dilemma, so “hardening” is an act of *our will*. We have to make up our minds who it is that we will serve. If it is God, then we have to *decide in His favor over and over by inviting His truth into our hearts*, and acknowledging that it is “sweet”. And by inviting His truth in, *we are inviting His influence*...surrendering to His will and His plan. This is taking in the truth and *yielding* to its demands. This is a perpetual relinquishment of our will to His. And it is the hardest thing I can imagine we will ever have to do.

We have reached the limits of our present understanding of volition...but one thing seems certain: this kind of spiritual apex will come only as a result of consistently using all the mechanics of grace, plus an irresistible drive to know God. We must evaluate ourselves to see what it is we really want...because that is what indicates our heart’s desire.

A Heart for Truth Related to Worship. Ezek. 33:30-32 gives the following description of believers whose hearts are not into study and worship. See if any of this sounds familiar:

As for you, son of man, your countrymen are talking together about you by the walls and at the doors of the houses, saying to each other, ‘Come and hear the message that

has come from the LORD.' My people come to you, as they usually do, and sit before you to listen to your words, but they do not put them into practice. With their mouths they express devotion, but their hearts are greedy for unjust gain. Indeed, to them you are nothing more than one who sings love songs with a beautiful voice and plays an instrument well, for they hear your words but do not put them into practice.

Music is an important part of worship. But it is not the *heart* of worship. The core purpose of all worship is “learning”, because this is what God uses to equip us for *service*. We will pray and acknowledge God, and give thanks, and praise Him in word and song, but the *purpose* for gathering to worship is to shore up our equipment (understanding) to enable us to live life in His name...in His power.

The parts of a worship service mentioned above all have their own spiritual significance, which is another subject, but these are also for helping us *prepare* for “learning”. If any single part of the service is the *primary* reason we are in attendance, it is the *teaching/learning* part. The greatest value of being taught is, as stated above, that the understanding we get from the lessons can be applied when we return to our daily lives.

It is a common mistake for believers to gather for the wrong reasons. Consider your objective in attending. Do you *want* the Word? Will you enthusiastically receive it, conceive it, and believe it? That should be your main reason for being there, if your heart is properly aligned. And—by the way—if your pastor is not teaching the truth, find one who is. You want a church, not a dairy (nothing but milk).

Hearts that Come Near to Hear and Fear, or Tend to Stray and Stay Away. We will see several passages that display conditions of “heartless” worship or study. It’s like playing tennis with an unstrung racquet...it has no impact. Is. 29:13 describes believers who take on the appearance of being sincere in their devotion, but their hearts are not engaged with God and His truth. This passage gives us this: “The Lord says: ‘These people come near to me with their mouth and honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. Their worship of me is made up only of rules taught by men.’”

Distance from God is a heart condition. To learn the Bible, our hearts must be seeking the path to Him. This readiness goes beyond confession and prayer, and even faith, and gets to the core of our thirst for God. If we want to get closer to Him, our hearts will be soft and fallow ground for the planting of His Word. We must *decide* to hear the truth. We must sit still, open our ears (and/or our eyes), and receive instruction. Otherwise, we will have zeal for *something*, but it will not be for the tremendous truths of the Word. Prov. 19:2a describes it this way: “It is not good to have zeal without knowledge, nor to be hasty and miss the way.”

When we study and pray, it is time to slow down. We must not rush our time in the Word. Otherwise, we will enter the fray of life “without knowledge”. We will be very busy and engaged in the affairs of our daily routines, but our activities will be “catch-as-catch-can”, prompting us to say, “I don’t know what I’m doing, so I’ll just sort of make it up as I go

along". This is not an auspicious plan...it "misses the way". Rom. 10:2-4 confirms the fallacy of misguided zeal, saying the following:

For I can testify about them that they are zealous for God, but their zeal is not based on knowledge. Since they did not know the righteousness that comes from God and sought to establish their own, they did not submit to God's righteousness. Christ is the end of the law so that there may be righteousness for everyone who believes.

Paul is referring to Prov. 19:2 and bringing its truth into the Church Age. The main point we need to get from this rich passage is that having religious fervor is not the same as craving the Word. Nor is any other pursuit. When our motivation for getting with other believers revolves around localized church codes, or legalistic practices, or even such selfish preoccupations as approbation-gathering, mate-trolling, social-linking, emotion-generating, business-networking, or any other activity or objective that is not "learning the Word" (and edifying fellow believers, so *they* can learn the Word), then our hearts will not be in the right place to receive the truth.

2 Tim. 3:6-7 tells what happens with those whom Paul calls, "weak-willed women who are loaded down with sin" (verse 6), and says they are "always learning, but never able to acknowledge the truth" (v. 7). "Learning" here means "hearing"...not "learning" as we have defined it. These women (and we can be sure this applies to men, as well) are weak-willed AND loaded with sin. Sin prevents any acceptance of truth, and they have no WILL to change this condition and open their hearts to the truth. There is no "heart" in the hearing. This passage illustrates that merely hearing or reading the truth will be meaningless, unless preparations are made, and the heart is willing to receive it.

Hearts that are Open to God...or Closed. Hearts that are open to God, and therefore open to learning, will receive and accept the truth from the Word. Hearts that have not been prepared by confession, prayer, and commitment to the learning will not be receptive to the truth. Here are several verses that illustrate the two heart-states:

- Jer. 2:13—"My people have committed two sins: they have forsaken me, the spring of living water, and have dug their own cisterns, broken cisterns that cannot hold water." These believers have forsaken God, or positioned their hearts against Him. They are thus forsaking the "living water", and digging their own wells...that hold *no* water. These believers are not prepared for the truth, or for the Giver of Truth, so they have disqualified themselves for accepting instruction.
- Jer. 17:5—"Cursed is the one who trusts in man, who depends on flesh for his strength and whose heart turns away from the Lord." Applied to learning, this cursing is directed toward those of us who 1) trust in our own view-point for truth, rather than the Word, 2) depend on ourselves to glean the truth, rather than relying on the Holy Spirit to teach us, and 3) express negative volition toward God and His truth. These conditions leave us in a "cursed" state, which simply means that we are

in line for discipline. Like a starving man who has collapsed in the desert, we are in trouble.

- Ps. 66:18—“If I had cherished sin in my heart, the Lord would not have listened. . . .” This refers to the cut-off of our prayers when we have unconfessed sin in our hearts. The cessation of many benefits occurs when we are out of fellowship. For example, the Holy Spirit will not be teaching us, because we have refused Him access. Sin disengages spiritual assets, and neutralizes truth receptors in the heart.
- Prov. 28:13-14—“He who conceals his sins does not prosper, but whoever confesses and renounces them finds mercy. Blessed is the man who always fears the Lord, but he who hardens his heart falls into trouble.” Not confessing and not being receptive to truth results in “trouble”. If our hearts do not welcome the truth with flags flying, bands playing, and crowds cheering, we will not have much to celebrate.

Conclusion. If you feel that the lessons of Scripture are going in one ear and out the other, you will need to use the grace resources God provides to allow truth to *process* into the heart. As part of this, you must ultimately have a passion for God, a deep craving for truth, and a submissive surrender to His way. Only then will the truth reach into the recesses of the heart where it can germinate and do its enlightening and strengthening work through the power of the Holy Spirit. You must want truth more than anything; otherwise, your participation in the work of the kingdom will be fleeting and unfruitful. To learn, your heart must be in it. If it isn't, you will remain as you are.

Roadblocks to Learning

The Barrier of Position. There are two types of people: saved and unsaved. People who are saved have an eternal position “in Christ”. Those who are not saved have an eternal position of condemnation and separation from Christ...until or unless they believe in Christ. Position has its privilege. For believers, the privilege is the potential for understanding the Word of God. But unbelievers do not have any apparatus for understanding this truth. They have no “privilege”...only a barrier. 2 Cor. 4:3-4 describes this barrier very well, saying the following:

And even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing [unbelievers]. The god of this age has blinded the minds of unbelievers, so that they cannot see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God.

Later, we will have a full discussion of the part Satan plays in blocking truth, but in this verse, we are looking at the effects of “position” on learning, which is that unbelievers cannot understand Scripture until they believe in Christ. They can “know” the concepts intellectually, but they cannot “understand” them spiritually. Eph. 4:17-19 echoes this inability of unbelievers, by saying this:

So I tell you this, and insist on it in the Lord, that you must no longer live as the Gentiles do, in the futility of their thinking. They are darkened in their understanding and separated from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them due to the hardening of their hearts. Having lost all sensitivity, they have given themselves over to sensuality so as to indulge in every kind of impurity, with a continual lust for more.

Unbelievers are “willfully ignorant” of the truth, because their hearts are in thick-walled resistance to God. Jesus Himself cited the inability of unbelievers to accept truth, saying the following to the Pharisees in Jn. 8:42-44a:

Jesus said to them, “If God were your Father, you would love me, for I came from God and now am here. I have not come on my own; but he sent me. Why is my language not clear to you? Because you are unable to hear what I say. You belong to your father the devil...”

Jesus continued this declaration in verse 47, saying, “He who belongs to God hears what God says. The reason you do not hear is that you do not belong to God.” The word “hear”, as it is used in these verses, does not mean they are hearing impaired, but that they are incapable of processing what they hear...into their hearts. The truth is blocked by their unbelief.

Removing the “Position” Barrier. When we believe in Christ, the barrier between the truth and us is removed, and we then have the capability for learning God’s Word. In 1 Jn. 2:20-21a, John assured his readers, “But you have an anointing from the Holy One, and all of you know the truth. I do not write to you because you do not know the truth but because

you do know it....” We receive the anointing of the Holy Spirit at salvation. This is an “appointment to holiness”, which occurs at the time the Holy Spirit comes to live within us. This anointing gives us the ability to learn...and the Holy Spirit can then teach us. Because we are saved, we can “know the truth”. We have seen many verses in previous studies that substantiate this view.

The Barrier of Condition. Unconfessed sin results in carnality, or control of the sinful nature. This places us “out of fellowship”, and leaves us without the teaching of the Holy Spirit, which means we are stripped of the spiritual capacity to learn truth. We have studied this frequently in the past.

There is another problem with carnality that impacts our learning readiness, and that is this: It sends us toward...and keeps us in...*babyhood*. A baby may be “spiritual” for the moment after confessing his sins, but not for long, because he does not yet understand how to *stay* in fellowship and walk in the Spirit. Being carnal, then, is not synonymous with immaturity but an immature believer is likely to be carnal most of the time, until he can *learn to stay in fellowship long enough to learn some basic operational techniques*. Heb. 5:11-14 describes the condition of baby believers:

We have much to say about this, but it is hard to explain because you are slow to learn. In fact, though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you the elementary truths of God's word all over again. You need milk, not solid food! Anyone who lives on milk, being still an infant, is not acquainted with the teaching about righteousness. But solid food is for the mature, who by constant use have trained themselves to distinguish good from evil.

It is possible to be a Christian for a very long time, and still be a baby. Time in church membership is not the key to spirituality and maturity. The condition of infancy comes from 1) not *learning* the truth, and/or 2) never being *taught* the truth. It is within our purview to change both conditions by assiduously pursuing an intake of Scripture. When we learn and apply truth, we move from “infant” to “toddler”, and beyond. This is because we: 1) *prepared* to study, *believed* what we learned, and *opened our hearts* to the truth, and 2) found a pastor, or other gifted teacher, who teaches the truth (both *teaching* and *truth* are essential).

1 Cor. 3:1-3 shows Paul chastising the Corinthians for not learning, by saying the following:

Brothers, I could not address you as spiritual but as worldly—mere infants in Christ. I gave you milk, not solid food, for you were not yet ready for it. Indeed, you are still not ready. You are still worldly [literally, “fleshly”, or controlled by the flesh]. For since there is jealousy and quarreling among you, are you not worldly [fleshly]? Are you not acting like mere men [unbelievers]?

These believers are blocked from learning, either because they are out of fellowship or they are not progressing upward through the sequential curriculum of scriptural teachings. They are refusing to confess...or they are not following all of God's steps for learning. This

assures that they will not be effective as witnesses for Christ, or as supporters of fellow believers. Like the tennis racquet in the last chapter—they will have no impact.

Removing the “Condition” Barrier. God wants us to learn the truth, so—if *we* want the truth—there is only one thing left for us to do and that is to get into a place where we can acquire it. To be taught, we must be in the right “condition”. We must be *fully prepared* to learn, beginning with fellowship, continuing with prayers for understanding, and followed by belief in what is taught. When the Holy Spirit is in charge, is teaching us, and is empowering us for application of the truth, then the barrier of a faulty spiritual condition will be removed...all roadblocks will be gone, and we can move forward.

When the Road is Cleared. 1 Tim. 2:4 says, “...who wants all men to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth.” God wants two things: 1) for all men to be “saved”, and 2) for all to come to “a knowledge of the truth”. These are separate occurrences. At the time a person is saved, he is “opened up” to the truth, while actually “coming to knowledge” comes after that. This verse is saying that God envisions our “salvation”, followed by our “learning”. Notice that God’s desire for us to learn the Word is the thing that He wants most after salvation...probably because it is the key to everything else we will do with, by, and for Him. Since God *wants* us to have knowledge, that makes it *very* important.

The first “step” in the Christian life is to be saved. What comes after that is feeding on the formula that God has prepared for baby believers. It is called “milk”. Like an infant who announces clearly to all in range that he is hungry, we must cry out to God for the nourishing milk of His Word. 1 Pet. 2:2 says it like this: “Like newborn babies, crave pure spiritual milk, so that by it you may grow up in your salvation.” Peter’s advice to newborns: Crave it. Cry for it. Demand it. Pound the highchair tray for it. You must be taught! Your spiritual life depends on it.

When a person is saved, they should be given training in the basics of scriptural knowledge IMMEDIATELY! Not to do so is to lock them up in the playpen. Acts 2:42 shows how some new Jewish converts handled their infancy in Christ. This verse says, “They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer.” Notice that the *first* thing they did was to “devote themselves to the apostles’ teaching”. First things first: they were completely focused on learning and growing. This is our model.

Satan's Opposition to Truth

Satan's Access to Us. Satan wants to prevent believers from becoming effective opponents against him. He does anything he can to thwart efforts on the part of believers to grow in knowledge and grace, because that is when they don the armor to take him on. One advantage that Satan has is this: He has access to our minds. We have seen this many times.

Since Satan cannot get close to the Holy Spirit within us, it is likely that his place of access is within the sinful nature. We have shown in past studies that the sinful nature is the primary source of evil within us, and that Satan is pumping evil notions, thoughts, and reactions into our "flesh". If it is true that his access inside of us is limited to the sinful nature, then this means that "fellowship" would disengage Satan's influence, as it "dethrones" the flesh, because the Holy Spirit will then be in charge. Divinity, rather than iniquity, will dominate our humanity.

To prevent learning and maturity, thus avoiding a bane to his business, Satan "snatches away knowledge" from a "listening believer". According to Mark 4:15, Satan has the ability to take away our knowledge, before it has even been processed. The trick for avoiding this is to *stay in fellowship...and believe the teaching...* at the time we are learning, thus foiling Satan's purpose as a spoiler of truth.

What we are establishing is that Satan or his emissaries can access our minds, and *influence us* from the inside (and the outside too, of course), presenting misinformation to us that will mislead us and trick us into thinking and acting in sinful and destructive ways. And he *does this to believers!* 2 Cor. 11:3 clearly indicates his access to our inner parts, saying, "But I am afraid that just as Eve was deceived by the serpent's cunning, your minds may somehow be led astray from your sincere and pure devotion to Christ." Satan's ideas, and perhaps Satan himself (or his henchmen), will always attack our hearts and minds to lead us astray.

The deceitful ways of humans with one another is bad enough, as per the whole Madison Avenue advertising industry, where exaggeration is king, and deceit means "green". But compared to the ingenious schemes and inventions of Satan, Madison Avenue is child's play. Satan will have the unprepared believer enthusiastically embracing lies, and even broadcasting them as truths. This is disastrous for that believer, and for all those who follow him. Satan is out to destroy "truth", and to undercut those who get close to it.

It is Satan's access to our minds—again, probably through the sinful nature—that gives him his greatest influence over us. Whatever devastating thing he may do on the "outside", it is the up-close and personal nature of his interaction with us on the "inside" that is most dangerous. The inside is where he injects us with his lies, and where we accept the lies as truth. The real tragedy is that, when we believe the lies, we join Satan's army and become an enemy of God (See James 4:4).

To counter this surreptitious attack, we must be prepared *internally...spiritually...* or we will be one of "those". You know...P. T. Barnum said it..."There's one born every day...and

two to take him.” It’s a synonym for “mark”, or maybe “soft touch”. Okay. SUCKER. And Satan spots one in a flash. The easiest marks are the arrogant...they think they are tougher than Satan.

The Angel of Light. 2 Cor. 11:14-15 gives the following information regarding Satan:

And no wonder, for Satan himself masquerades as an angel of light. It is not surprising, then, if his servants masquerade as servants of righteousness. Their end will be what their actions deserve.

Satan will eventually get what he deserves, but—for now—he is in costume or “disguise” and will not be recognized for what he is. And his purpose will be obscured by his “show of lights”. His work is often done through demons, and their work is mostly through people. Either demons or people can pose as “ministers of righteousness”, while they are actually representing Satan. Many times these “ministers” will occupy pulpits or places of prominence, to influence as many believers as possible and get them to pursue pointless causes...or embrace false ideas, many times in the name of “righteousness”. “Morality”, for example, can be a cause or pursuit that confuses believers, since Satan’s use of morality is to get us to do *moral things in the flesh*. Morality without spirituality *serves Satan*. But that’s another subject.

What we are driving at is that Satan deceives us. And the hardest thing about dealing with his deceit is this: We don’t see it. It is below the radar...invisible to us...UNLESS we have stored up sufficient truth to be able to recognize the misleading messages. This is not easy...this spiritual jousting. He is much better prepared than we are to wage a battle of ideas. This is why we must *avoid our own ideas, and stick with Scripture*, if we hope to counter Satan’s illusions.

Rev. 12:9 describes Satan this way: “The great dragon was hurled down—that ancient serpent called the devil, or Satan, who leads the whole world astray...” Satan is not just a cunning foe...he is a “super-foe”, and we are no match for him. One of the truths that Satan wants to snatch from us is that ONLY GOD can overpower Satan, especially in this age, when he is free to roam (albeit within certain limits marked out by the Holy Spirit). The Holy Spirit can control Satan, but *we can’t!* We *must* have help. This is why we need to put as much understanding into our baskets as we can...while there’s still time left on the clock.

John 13:2 tells us this: “The evening meal was being served, and the devil had already prompted Judas Iscariot, son of Simon, to betray Jesus.” Okay, so we might feel a little better knowing that Judas was an unbeliever, which would make it possible for Satan to “prompt” him. But we are believers, so aren’t we safe? We must understand this: If our sinful nature is in charge of our thinking, meaning we are out of fellowship, we will have little more to resist Satan than Judas did, and *Satan will prompt us to do “wrong” the same way he did Judas*. Believers want to recoil at the notion that such insidious power can get to us...which is why we are digging this stuff out of Scripture. We need to know this.

Lies, Lies, and More Lies. Jn 8:44 adds to our understanding of Satan's character, giving us the following words of Jesus, as spoken to the Pharisees:

You belong to your father, the devil, and you want to carry out your father's desire. He was a murderer from the beginning, not holding to the truth, for there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks his native language, for he is a liar and the father of lies.

I am reminded of a dramatic device which portrays a character in a play as a "nobleman"...an exemplary citizen and charming individual...when he is really nothing but a charlatan, out to steal something or even kill someone. The audience knows he is bad, but the characters in the play do not know, so they are falling cheerfully into his trap. Satan is like this. He is a murderer, posing as a paragon of perfection, and many believe his pack of lies. But he is not some comical character who really won't do any harm...he is not innocuous, or a minimal threat...he is vicious and ruthless and deadly dangerous, and he is out to get you. He will destroy you, if you listen to him. His is the "sirens' song", the seeds of deception, and the strongest corruption of the truth. He is God's greatest opponent...and we just happen to live behind enemy lines in His camp (i.e., in the "world").

We are not safe on our own, and we must never for one second believe that we can rely on our own resources to resist the lies of Satan. 2 Tim. 2:24-26 offers help, as follows:

And the Lord's servant must not quarrel; instead, he must be kind to everyone, able to teach, not resentful. Those who oppose him he must gently instruct, in the hope that God will grant them repentance leading them to a knowledge of the truth, and that they will come to their senses and escape from the trap of the devil, who has taken them captive to do his will.

There are many truths here. But we are focused only on a small number of things pertaining to our topic. First of all, notice that "repentance", or confession, leads a believer toward the truth. Secondly, this "truth" will replace Satan's "insanity", thus enabling the believer to escape captivity to the ideas of Satan. Finally, if we are not operating in fellowship and in the power of the Holy Spirit, the truth we have will be crushed by Satan, and we will have nothing with which to break the fetters of lies with which he shackles us.

It is clear that these lies can only get worse, as indicated in 1 Tim. 4:1, which says, "The Spirit clearly says that in later times some will abandon the faith and follow deceiving spirits and things taught by demons." The lies of Satan are not just softly suggested or off-handedly mentioned...they are *taught*. They are clearly explained in terms that can only be described as logical and sensible, but they are LIES, and we must be trained to recognize them as such. To do this we must have something to screen them against, and that is TRUTH.

Give no Quarter. Eph. 4:26-27 says, "In your anger do not sin. Do not let the sun go down while you are still angry, and do not give the devil a foothold." So, if we can be angry *without* sinning, what is there about anger that can cause it to become "sin"? Notice the phrase, "...do not give the devil a foothold." The point is that anger puts us in a place of

weakness, just like *many other things* we do, but anger is the example given. When we are angry, we are weak, and when we are weak, Satan can slip in and whisper suggestions into our sinful natures. They often seem harmless enough, but if we follow them, the door will be opened to Satan...and all he needs is a crack.

Here's another example of a "small opening" for Satan: There is nothing whatsoever wrong with going on a "tour of homes", but—if envy or greed is a problem for you—you may be setting yourself up to fall into sin's trap. This is especially true if you have a history of wanting what others have, or if you want to enlarge your "holdings" to look good to others, etc. Through the innocuous activity of touring nice houses, you have brought yourself into an environment that exposes a weakness.

As you mature you will avoid areas where your weaknesses are exposed, knowing this is where Satan patiently waits to take advantage of you...always watching for an opening so he can creep into your thoughts. Until you have built an arsenal of truth, your weak spots will be targets for satanic suggestions. Understanding and avoiding areas of weakness is *not* legalism...it is operating with an awareness of the devices of Satan, who wants to jerk us from standing straight up, to lying flat on our backs. And we make it easy for him to do this, if we decide to stand on "slippery" surfaces, if you get my drift.

Here is the point: Satan will always try to get to us at our weakest points in our weakest moments. We can never let our guard down, which means that we must stay close to the Great Protector (see 2 Th. 3:3) to resist Satan's attacks. The evil predator Satan is always looking for an opening through which to attack us, and surrender comes all too easily for us, either because of our weaknesses (as per the sinful nature), or because we just don't see it. This is why we *learn*...to know and to grow...to slip the grip.

Truths from Scripture on Satan. We are just scratching the surface on the topic of Satan, but our greatest interest has been on the notion of Satan as he affects our understanding and application of the Word. But there are many general references in Scripture that help us understand his tactics. Here are some pertinent comments on Satan, with the scriptures that prompt them:

- Satan prevented Paul from traveling. 1 Th. 2:18—"For we wanted to come to you—certainly I, Paul, did, again and again—but Satan stopped us."
- Paul was tormented by a demon to keep him humble. 2 Cor. 12:7—"To keep me from becoming conceited because of these surpassingly great revelations, there was given me a thorn in my flesh, a messenger of Satan, to torment me."
- Paul cautioned Ephesians in Eph. 6:10-18 to "put on the full armor of God" in order to withstand "spiritual forces of evil", and the "flaming arrows of the evil one". This whole passage is about being fortified against Satan...by using God's methods and power. We quote Eph. 6:12-13a—"For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms. Therefore put on the

full armor of God, so that when the day of evil comes, you may be able to stand your ground....”

- Paul warned Corinthian believers not to become partners with Satan. 1 Cor. 10:20—“No, but the sacrifices of pagans are offered to demons, not to God, and I do not want you be participants [partners] with demons.”
- Satan used lies and deceit to get Eve to sin. Gen. 3:1-6 (quoting v. 6a)—“When the woman saw that the fruit of the tree was good for food and pleasing to the eye, and also desirable for gaining wisdom, she took some and ate it.”
- Satan tempted Jesus to stop Jesus’ ministry, but Jesus fended him off three times by quoting Scripture. Matt. 4:1-11 (quoting v. 10-11)—“Jesus said to him, ‘Away from me, Satan! For it is written: Worship the Lord your God, and serve him only.’”
- Jesus came down to deal with sin, which Satan had introduced into the world. That work now continues with us, as we rely on the Spirit of Christ to enable us to resist sin. 1 Jn. 3:8—“He who does what is sinful is of the devil, because the devil has been sinning from the beginning. The reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the devil’s work.” (For more on this, I suggest you read *Living Within God’s Standards*, which has a complete study on 1 Jn. in the chapter, “Fellowship in John’s First Epistle”.)
- Christ disarmed the principalities and powers at the cross. Satan’s power is now “restrained”, but it will ultimately be “crushed”. Col. 2:15—“And having disarmed the powers and authorities, he made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross.”
- Peter tried to talk Jesus out of suffering on the cross and Jesus recognized that Satan was behind Peter’s effort. Jesus addressed Peter with a command meant for Satan. Matt. 16:23—“Jesus turned and said to Peter, ‘Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; you do not have in mind the things of God, but the things of men.’”
- The weapons God offers as a part of His arsenal carry with them divine power to destroy evil strongholds...or enemy forts. 2 Cor. 10:3-4—“For though we live in the world, we do not wage war as the world does. The weapons we fight with are not the weapons of the world. On the contrary, they have divine power to demolish strongholds.”
- Fellowship is crucial to resisting the devil. “Born of God” in the following verse is not “born again”, or saved, but refers to a *believer*, a “saved” person, who is “regenerated spiritually” through confession, forgiveness, and restoration to fellowship. (See *Living Within God’s Standards*, “Fellowship in John’s First Epistle”.) 1 Jn. 5:18—“We know that anyone born of God does not continue to sin; the one who was born of God [Christ] keeps him safe, and the evil one cannot harm him.”

- We have “power” when we resist Satan, if we are wearing God’s armor, but we cannot resist him without it. The armor includes the filling of the Holy Spirit, prayer, study of the Word, and trusting God (see James 4:4-10). James 4:7—“Submit yourselves, then, to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you.”
- Once again, we can resist the devil, but only by “standing firm in the faith”, which means to rely on the Scripture we have learned. (We learned previously that “*the faith*” means “the body of teaching that has been given to us”...meaning the Word.) 1 Pet. 5:8-9a—“Be self-controlled and alert. Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour. Resist him, standing firm in the faith...”
- It is possible for believers to be “thrown to the wolves”, or “turned over to Satan”, as Paul did to two believers as punishment for blasphemy. When we are out of fellowship and under divine discipline, Satan will not be far off. 1 Tim. 1:20—“Among them are Hymenaeus and Alexander, whom I have handed over to Satan to be taught not to blaspheme.”

Authority over Demons. “When Jesus had called the Twelve together, he gave them power and authority to drive out all demons and to cure diseases...” (Lk. 9:1). The “gift” they received from Christ was the ability to “cast out demons”. Later he was speaking to seventy disciples, when He said the following:

I saw Satan fall like lightning from heaven. I have given you authority to trample on snakes and scorpions and to overcome all the power of the enemy; nothing will harm you. However, do not rejoice that the spirits submit to you, but rejoice that your names are written in heaven.

Still later, Jesus said He drove out demons “by the finger of God”. The point is clear: **Divine power has authority over Satan and his demons**, and that power was given to the disciples. So, a human can be more powerful than Satan...*in the power of God*...but not without it. 1 Jn. 4:4b says, “You, dear children, are from God and have overcome them, because the one who is in you is greater than the one who is in the world.” Again, we are not stronger or more powerful than Satan, but God is. The *way* the power is used still needs more exploration.

There are two considerations in question when we talk about our “authority over Satan”. The **first consideration** deals with our own personal authority over Satan. We have seen repeatedly in Scripture that, when we are in fellowship and mature, we are equipped to deal with Satan; we *overcome* him. On the other hand, when we are out of fellowship or immature, Satan will have the upper hand.

The issue of resisting Satan is a *spiritual* one, with ramifications into our function as believers. We are filled and controlled by the Spirit...or we are not. Only through the filling and empowerment of the Holy Spirit can we resist the lies and deception of

Satan...and prevent him from disrupting our spirituality and growth. He will not overpower us, as long as the Holy Spirit controls us.

The **second consideration** has to do with *removal* of the presence of satanic beings, or demons. What we want to know is whether or not we can remove, or “cast out”, demons from other believers. Notice that we are saying “demons”, instead of Satan, because much of his work is actually delegated to them. He has to do this, because he is not omnipresent, like God is.

Casting demons out of others has reference to a “gift”, falling into a category of special spiritual functioning that includes prophecy, tongues, miracles, knowledge, and so on. Many believe that the completion of Scripture made these gifts unnecessary, and so their distribution as gifts was stopped. I am not completely convinced that they have ceased, altogether...good men disagree on this issue. I do believe that the use of demon removal would be rare and for special purposes; otherwise, it could become a distraction from study and growth, more than a proof of God's power. This issue will continue to be studied. I can say that the wholesale “touching-and-falling-down” demon removal and/or healing activity that we sometimes see on church channels is highly questionable.

As for the place of demons in our own lives, and their impact on all areas of our spiritual, mental, and physical health and well-being, I believe the *effects* of demons has been sufficiently covered throughout all our studies. The real issue for us regarding demonic activity is this: WE MUST LEARN—AND APPLY—ALL WE POSSIBLY CAN FROM THE WORD, so that we will UNDERSTAND how to be empowered by the Holy Spirit, and thereby prevail over evil in our lives and in Satan's world.

Conclusion. As we ponder Satan's wiles, it is easy to miss the subtlety of his subterfuge...the whispers...the tiny little impulses or fleeting thoughts that we have, without even knowing where they come from. They start very small, but a seed has been planted. And that seed can grow into an embryo, and that embryo can grow into a vicious monster. It can control us, and ruin us, and ruin lives around us, and we are *blind* to the wrong we are doing. This is not science fiction...this is how Satan works. He destroys us one drop of acid at a time, and we don't notice until we have no feet for walking, and no hands for serving. Satan will stick his arrows into us, and we won't even feel it...until much later. Seek truth NOW. Suit up for battle!

“4-1-1” the truth as a “9-1-1”. Getting “information” is an “emergency”. It can't happen quickly enough. Young people, especially, be on guard. The entire world is Satan's sandbox, which is really spiritual quicksand. Get into the Word and don't take your eyes off of it. It's your lifeline!

The Effects of Human Tradition and Knowledge on Learning

Prejudice. Prejudice means to “pre-judge”, or to have a set of values or views that precondition us to like or dislike certain things...or that make us agree or disagree with given positions. Jesus constantly battled prejudice among the Pharisees, because, even though they were educated in the “knowledge” of Scripture, they were not open to Jesus, so their “understanding” was incorrect. This allowed all kinds of distortions. What they “knew” was “false”, thus causing a condition of prejudice against the “truth”.

In Mark 7:7-13, Jesus spoke to the Pharisees about their “knowledge”. We quote here selected verses from this passage (6-8 and 13):

He replied, “Isaiah was right when he prophesied about you hypocrites; as it is written: ‘These people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. They worship me in vain; their teachings are but rules taught by men.’ You have let go of the commands of God and are holding on to the traditions of men....Thus you nullify the word of God by your tradition that you have handed down. And you do many things like that.”

Their prejudice was based on a volitional position which rejected truth. Having taken a position *against* Christ, the resulting prejudice invited all kinds of false notions. These were cited as the “traditions of men”, which “nullified the Word of God”. Ideas from the “human” realm and perspective can easily get mixed into divine view point, and completely overshadow the Word by spoiling or diluting truth. This can bring down individuals...and entire churches. If a life...or a church...is not built on the foundation of the truth...then neither one can stand, spiritually speaking.

In Col. 2:8, we see again a condition of prejudice based on incorrect perception and knowledge. This verse says, “See to it that no one takes you captive through hollow and deceptive philosophy, which depends on human tradition and the basic principles of this world rather than on Christ.” Once “deceptive philosophy” (a significant system of beliefs based on “human traditions”) is well-established, it becomes the “norm”, and the prejudice that evolves thereafter is etched into stone (as into “hardened hearts”). Philosophy will “take you captive” and lock you away in a dark dungeon in chains...for decades. I speak advisedly. It just sounds so “smart”.

Prejudice is what you know or believe beforehand. It can prevent you from accepting new truths. But when you are *prepared* to learn, as we have discussed in this volume and the previous one, YOU CAN LEARN NEW TRUTHS. Keep in mind that real truth comes from God, and not from man. Traditions and knowledge that come from man are “man-made”, not “God-made”, and we must choose which we will accept. We can be sure of one thing: man’s ideas on spiritual issues do *not* produce *truth*.

False Ideas and Their Removal. False ideas can creep in like seepage into an underground cave, and—like a cave—they can leave us hollow and empty. False ideas are propagated by Satan, by unbelievers, and by carnal believers. There are plenty of supporters for false notions of many kinds. Col. 2:18b gives one reason that false ideas are accepted. This verse says, “...his unspiritual mind puffs him up with idle notions.”

An “unspiritual mind (heart)” in a believer is one that is separated from fellowship with God. A believer who is “unspiritual” will not understand truth, and will 1) participate in sinful behavior, or 2) embrace practices of legalism (based on “idle notions” or “traditions of men”). We are most interested in the latter, for purposes of this study. Col. 2:20-23, speaking about the deceptive draw of legalism among the Colossians, says the following:

Since you died with Christ to the basic principles of this world, why, as though you still belonged to it, do you submit to its rules: “Do not handle! Do not taste! Do not touch!”? These are all destined to perish with use, because they are based on human commands and teachings. Such regulations indeed have an appearance of wisdom, with their self-imposed worship, their false humility and their harsh treatment of the body, but they lack any value in restraining sensual indulgence.

How many churches have invented a long string of rules for their members, isolating privately-manufactured “principles”, and claiming that these reflect God’s truth and will? And how many have returned to systems and requirements from the Law, by superimposing its standards on church-age believers, thus ignoring *grace*, the new standard and guide for living? Such departures from the truth come from the pride of the flesh and the propaganda of Satan. And P. T. Barnum was right!

We stated above that being “prepared” to learn—and, of course, believing the truth—will enable the truth to *process* into our hearts. Rom. 12:2 gives us additional information about this process, as follows:

Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God’s will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will.

When our minds, meaning our *hearts*, are renewed, it is because we have *new understanding*, as we have studied in the past. This helps us see what God’s will is, puts spiritual truth into our hearts, and causes false ideas to disintegrate. This is a process of “cleansing”, since the old ideas are being purged by new ideas (see Eph. 5:26).

In fact, the whole growth experience is based on increased faith, for which the foundation is *new understanding*. This understanding displaces ignorance in the heart and installs the viewpoint of God, so that 1) truth can dominate, 2) conformity to the “pattern of this world” (including its ideas) can be eliminated, and 3) our lives can be changed. Understanding does this.

How to Find the Truth. One of the seminal concepts of this two-volume study is that knowledge becomes understanding when it is heard, believed, and gladly received into the

heart. We have called this “learning”. Basically, understanding comes when we believe Scripture. But Scripture has many handlers, and we won't have to look far to find vast chasms of disagreement on its meanings.

In order to learn the Word, I believe we need to use the right methods. This study cannot get into the many styles that are extant worldwide for interpreting Scripture (known as “hermeneutics”). The size and scope of these approaches is quite large, and quite clearly beyond the purview of these studies. What we *can* do is make some arm-chair suggestions for embarking on a study of the Bible. Hopefully, these will prevent your barreling down the wrong path.

We say at the outset that we must *prepare, believe, and accept the truth*, so we can learn the Word. But this is what *I* learned, not necessarily what *you* found. We are talking about starting from scratch, with a blank tablet and an open mind. If you want real truth, I believe you will find it. I have *enough* confidence in what *I* have learned that I have repeatedly and wholeheartedly recommended it to believers at all stages of growth. But if you want a *fresh* look at the Word, what follows are some tips on how to go about it.

First of all, Paul told Timothy to “rightly divide the Word of truth”. The Word is divided a lot of ways, but the important divisions, it would seem, are those that disclose categories of truth that show us *what God wants us to do*. Given this as a starting point, the question arises: How do we find what God actually wants us to *do* in the huge volume of the Word, most of which addresses this very issue? Here is my recommendation: Scripture must be broken down into manageable segments...it must be “rightly divided”. The only way we can build an understanding of Scripture is to take it point by point...or topic by topic. We must develop the “categories” of Biblical teachings, and *look at all that the Scripture has to say on each specific topic*.

By setting up *specific topics*, we can pour into each one all that we find in Scripture pertaining to that subject. Then we can—prayerfully—take the verses we find, stack them up, compare them, do word and context analyses, and let the truth coalesce around the ideas that emerge. I actually use scissors to separate the verses on a topic, and then group and sort them into sub-topics to build individual concepts. Here's the point: Truths are likely to surface, if we will look at individual verses and passages in relation to all the other verses and passages...*on the same topic*. Then we can knit these together and get a larger view—meaning increased understanding—of the whole of Scripture. This is how all these studies have been completed.

Consequences for Ignoring or Rejecting the Word

Discipline Introduced. One of the consequences for not learning the Word is discipline. The most frequently-occurring references to discipline in Scripture have to do with its use to correct the “sin” problem in the lives of believers. But another cause for discipline occurs when we ignore or reject the truth of the Word. When we neglect our studies, or do not study in fellowship and with faith, or do not apply the truth we learn, consequences can be expected.

We have studied discipline thoroughly in the past, so the following verses are “reminders”. The purpose of discipline, as seen in these passages, is to get us back on the right track...either by getting us back into fellowship...or back into a pattern of study and growth. The following verses confirm the use of discipline as God’s correction tool:

- Ps. 119:66-67—“Teach me knowledge and good judgment, for I believe in your commands. Before I was afflicted I went astray, but now I obey your word.” Notice the suggested pattern and sequence: 1) Straying from the truth, 2) being disciplined, 3) returning to the Word (and/or fellowship), 4) being taught, 5) “believing” what is heard, and 6) applying truth to practice. Discipline prompts our return and restoration.
- Heb. 12:11—“No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it.” Discipline pushes believers back to fellowship and learning, so that the fruit of the Spirit (a “harvest of righteousness”) can be borne.
- Jer. 31:18-19—“I have surely heard Ephraim’s moaning: ‘You disciplined me like an unruly calf, and I have been disciplined. Restore me, and I will return, because you are the Lord my God. After I strayed, I repented; after I came to understand, I beat my breast. I was ashamed and humiliated because I bore the disgrace of my youth.’” This passage refers to “restoration” from being out of fellowship, but notice the reference to our new best friend: “came to understand”. This is the outcome of discipline: It prompts us 1) to return to fellowship, and 2) to re-focus on learning.
- Jer. 22:21-22—“I warned you when you felt secure, but you said, ‘I will not listen!’ This has been your way from your youth; you have not obeyed me. The wind will drive all your shepherds away, and your allies will go into exile. Then you will be ashamed and disgraced because of all your wickedness.” When we do not listen to the Word, we tend to fall into sin, and discipline will be scheduled to make us “ashamed” and bring us back.

Those Who are “Saved” Still Need to be “Saved”, and the “Non-condemned” may be “Judged”. We are still talking about discipline, but take time to consider the following: The term “saved” commonly refers to *eternal salvation*, which is the position of

believers...while the term “condemned” reflects the status of unbelievers. But there is a way in which believers need to be “saved”, even though they have *eternal salvation*. And believers can be “judged”, even though they are not “condemned”. We need to look more closely at the terms, “saved” and “condemned”.

Saved. 2 Th. 2:13 gives a reference to “eternal salvation”, the kind that unbelievers need and believers already have, as follows:

But we ought always to thank God for you, brothers loved by the Lord, because from the beginning God chose you to be saved through the sanctifying work of the Spirit and through belief in the truth.

“Saved” in this verse is pointing up the regeneration of unbelievers who come to faith in Christ. They are “saved” forever. When this same term, “saved”, is used in regard to people who are already believers, it means to “be delivered”. Believers need deliverance...but from what? Here it is: they need to be delivered from the stain of sin and the blight of ignorance, which leads to their “being judged”, or placed under the disciplinary correction of God. In a prayer showing David seeking God’s mercy and forgiveness, he prayed that God would “have mercy”, grant divine strength, and “save” him (Ps. 86:16). He was talking about *deliverance*...from his guilt, as well as from his enemies.

Condemned. The term “condemned” presents the position of *unbelievers*. They are condemned for all eternity, until or unless they believe in Christ. The “judgment” of *believers*, on the other hand, is not condemnation, but rather a form of “discipline”, which occurs when sins are *not* confessed. 1 Cor. 11:31-32 says, “But if we judged ourselves, we would not come under judgment. When we are judged by the Lord, we are being disciplined so that we will not be condemned with the world.” If we don’t confess, or judge ourselves, God will “judge” us by administering discipline. “Discipline” is given to believers, in place of “condemnation”. Why? Because they have believed in Christ, meaning they are eternally saved and *cannot* be condemned.

A Word to the Wise. We will have more to say about discipline, especially as it relates to study patterns, later in this study. For now, we close our “introduction” to discipline with the following warning against pursuing evil and refusing to “listen” to the Word. This caution is given in Jer. 26:2-3, as follows:

This is what the Lord says: Stand in the courtyard of the Lord’s house and speak to all the people of the towns of Judah who come to worship in the house of the Lord. Tell them everything I command you; do not omit a word. Perhaps they will listen and each will turn from his evil way. Then I will relent and not bring on them the disaster I was planning because of the evil they have done.

This message was for the Israelites, but the concept applies to us: We must turn from evil (i.e., confess), and we must hang onto every word...and follow the truth...or we will see “disaster” in some form. Jeremiah says “*perhaps*” we will listen. This suggests that the choice to listen and learn is ours, as is the choice to follow what we learn. Likewise, the *consequences*

are ours...and these will fall on us, if we choose not to learn and apply the Word. We will have more to say about these “consequences” shortly.

Misuse of the Truth. Just as believers can “sin”, they can also ignore, mishandle, reject, and even oppose the truth. Gal. 3:1b points out the need to accept the Word when we hear it. This verse asks, “Did you receive the Spirit by observing the law, or by believing what you heard?” This verse refers to the “belief” that takes place at salvation, but the principle applies...we must *believe* what we hear from the Word. *Not to believe* negates the benefit, blessing, and boost we are intended to get from the truth.

2 Tim. 3:8 describes those who reject the truth, saying, “Just as Jannes and Jambres opposed Moses, so also these men oppose the truth—men of depraved minds, who, as far as the faith is concerned, are rejected.” We want to focus on the term “oppose the truth”. These can be believers *or* unbelievers, since carnal believers can act and think like unbelievers...and they can *oppose* the truth. Not just reject or neglect...“oppose”.

Truth can also be *mishandled*. 2 Tim. 2:14-15 warns against trivial doctrinal “knit-picking”, and tells Timothy to handle truth properly by studying diligently and building scriptural concepts carefully. This passage says the following:

Keep reminding them of these things. Warn them before God against quarreling about words; it is of no value, and only ruins those who listen. Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a workman who does not need to be ashamed and who correctly handles the word of truth.

Our focus must be on the most important principles, techniques, and promises of Scripture, since these are the contents of truth that will help us to grow and serve...and that will build our faith to the point that we can trust God through all kinds of situations. If we get off on side-issues, or become preoccupied with minor issues or concepts, it will be easy for us to wander from the truth and end up in carnality (see James 5:19 and Rom. 2:8).

Another condition that is created when we reject truth is that we become vulnerable to all kinds of misinformation. 2 Tim. 4:4 says, “They will turn their ears away from the truth and turn aside to myths.” When our volition turns negative toward the Word, the screen goes dark, but it is waiting to be written on. This creates an opportunity for the influx of false teachings and false ideas that will erase or obscure the truth.

In 1 Th. 4:1-8, Paul was teaching the Thessalonians how to live in ways that please God. When he finishes the point he is making, he says, in verse 8, “Therefore, he who rejects this instruction does not reject man but God, who gives you his Holy Spirit.” We cannot reject God’s Word without rejecting God. The effects are the same. By the same measure, when we study and believe the Word, and are thereby partaking of God’s nature as it is expressed in His truth, we are accepting God Himself. When we reject the Word, we reject God; when we believe the Word, we believe God. And when “belief” is the outcome of study, we are properly handling the Word.

Discipline: the Consequences for not Learning. Deut. 28 shows the kinds of severe things that can happen when we are targeted to be disciplined. An example is seen in verse 27, which says, “The Lord will afflict you with the boils of Egypt and with tumors, festering sores and the itch, from which you cannot be cured.” Discipline can reach levels that may be considered “harsh”, up to and including physical death, so it is of GREAT CONSEQUENCE that we address a major condition that brings discipline about...and that condition is *neglecting the Word*.

Fellowship and study go hand in hand, as do so many of the techniques God has given us for living. Much of Revelation 3 deals with fellowship, issuing a call for all believers—beginning with the churches addressed in the passage—to “repent”, be “cleansed”, and receive forgiveness. Rev. 3:3a gives the secret for our being able to understand and use the technique of repentance, and that secret is *learning the Word*. Slow down for this counsel from the Word, which says, “Remember, therefore, what you have received [believed] and heard [learned]; obey it [apply it], and repent [confess].” And then the verse declares that we will receive a “visit” if we do not “hear, believe, and apply” the Word, as follows (verse 3b): “But if you do not wake up, I will come like a thief, and you will not know at what time I will come to you.” This does not refer to the rapture or the second coming...this is the “visitation” of God’s discipline, which is designed to prompt us to confess and study.

The “visitation” that comes to believers that will not repent of their sins and/or will not study and learn, is seen later in this chapter (Rev. 3), where it says, “Those whom I love I rebuke and discipline. So be earnest, and repent” (Rev. 3:19). And the next verse (v. 20) begins with a command for what we should do next...one word...“Listen!”

A passage in Job summarizes all we are saying about consequences that come when we do not learn and apply the techniques of the Word. Here is what this passage says:

He does not take his eyes off the righteous; he enthrones them with kings and exalts them forever. But if men are bound in chains, held fast by cords of affliction, he tells them what they have done—that they have sinned arrogantly. He makes them listen to correction and commands them to repent of their evil. If they obey and serve him, they will spend the rest of their days in prosperity and their years in contentment. But if they do not listen they will perish by the sword and die without knowledge. (Job 36:7-12)

This passage speaks volumes, telling us that we will do well if we learn God’s Word and apply it. On the other hand, if we are under discipline, even though God gives us many opportunities to make things right by confessing and studying, we will not be prosperous and we will not be content. And if we continue not listening, we can even be taken out of this life through physical death.

There are many other verses that show the consequences for not assimilating truth regularly. We present some of these passages in the following:

- Rom. 2:8—“But for those who are self-seeking and who reject the truth and follow evil, there will be wrath and anger.” Notice what will happen to those whose search is focused on themselves, rather than on the truth. And because they ignore the truth, they reject it. That rejection results in patterns of sin and rebellion, and brings wrath and anger in the form of discipline.
- Hosea 4:1-3, 6 (quoting verse 6)—“...my people are destroyed for lack of knowledge.” Those without “knowledge”, meaning “understanding”, are those who do not do what verse 1 calls for: “Hear the word of the Lord...” When we do not listen to God’s Word, discipline will come, perhaps to the extreme of physical death.
- Prov. 1:29-31—“Since they hated knowledge and did not choose to fear the Lord, since they would not accept my advice and spurned my rebuke, they will eat the fruit of their ways and be filled with the fruit of their schemes.” The only fruit the person who hates the truth will generate is “discomfort”, in the form of discipline.
- Jer. 26:4-6—“If you do not listen to me and follow my law, which I have set before you, and if you do not listen to the words of my servants the prophets, whom I have sent to you again and again (though you have not listened), then I will make this house like Shiloh and this city an object of cursing among all the nations of the earth.” Listen and follow...learn and apply...or face the consequences. You will become an “object of cursing”, which means you will come under divine discipline.

But there is hope...that is, if we choose correctly. Prov. 4:4 says, “Lay hold of my words with all your heart; keep my commands and you will live.” We can live, if we live in the Word. For believers in this Age, this is not just physical living...this is living the glorious life of Christ. He is *alive* in us...empowering us...IF we stay in fellowship and—again—*IF we live in His truth*. Deut. 4:39-40 pronounces an assurance intended for the Jews, but which we can apply to ourselves, in principle. Here is what this passage says:

Acknowledge and take to heart this day that the Lord is God in heaven above and on the earth below. There is no other. Keep his decrees and commands, which I am giving you today, so that it may go well with you and your children after you and that you may live long in the land the Lord your God gives you for all time.

If we will learn the Word, and follow its prescriptions for living, it will “go well” with us. I consider this a *promise*, indicating that God will make special provision for any believer who *seeks the truths* of His Word, and who *follows their requirements...by using the assets* they offer.

The Instructional Value of Worship

Coming Together to Worship. Worship means to “serve”. Service is an attitude of humility and full acknowledgement of God. We usually think of worship as a time of group gatherings, when people collectively honor God and seek His truth, and—of course—it can also be a private, personal experience. Our focus in this study is to see how *collective* worship can actually “teach” us to serve...in humility and faith.

We want to make some observations about current worship practices in general, and see what lessons we might be able to glean from *scriptural* worship. Unfortunately, Satan wants to distort the purposes and processes for worship, just like he does everything else, so we will need to point out some practices that we see as spiritually counter-productive, as we examine ways in which worship is conducted. To begin with, we want to disclose a dilemma in current practice.

Observations on Balance in Worship. There are (at least) two aspects of our humanity that corrupt worship and make it less effective. One is emotions...the other is intellect. When either of these human qualities *dominates* our worship, we will not be worshipping according to God's design.

First: emotions. Excessive “emotional” expression, and/or the use of emotions as a gauge for spirituality, can downplay or crowd out scriptural instruction. Emotional exhilaration can pump us up, but leave us flat. Over-emphasis on emotions as a means of validating or enhancing worship can obscure the need for and the place of true spirituality. True worship involves *true spirituality*, which may or may not be accompanied by a strong emotional response. Emotions should not be deliberately suppressed, but neither should they be artificially induced.

Then there's intellect. Excessive “intellectual” emphasis can also undermine true worship. It is possible for patrons to store large volumes of data and facts about or from the Bible, and these **not** contribute to their spiritual walk. Sometimes, parishioners can quote the church line, or even recite copious amounts of scripture, but have hearts that are devoid of understanding, and seem—frankly—a little “cold” and clinical. *Rote memory* is not the key to meaningful study and growth; *reception of truth* occupies that role. And there are several steps involved in the “reception of truth”: 1) The pastor (or equivalent) must *prepare* and teach, 2) the person in the pew must *prepare* and learn, and 3) what is learned must be *applied*.

We continue on the topic of “intellect”: Until “knowledge” is received and believed, thus being processed into the heart as “understanding”, it will be on the edge of the brain and the tip of the tongue, but it will have no spiritual impact. Truth trapped in the intellect will never graduate from knowledge to understanding. Actually, the content of learning that is *most important* among the complete repertoire of Christian doctrines...is that which can be learned, understood, and applied by any believer, even by a *child*. The plan of salvation and the plan for spiritual living *are not complicated*, and do not require a giant intellect.

So, in regard to the emotional/intellectual dichotomy, we add this: When we think of worship, the word “balance” comes to mind; we want to avoid *too much emotion*, and/or *too much emphasis on “head knowledge”*. The practices established in any given church will become the “norm” for believers in that church. If the “tradition” of the church is to wind-up emotional states as part of worship, events in the “worship service” will be designed to bring this about...usually involving stirring music, repetitive phrases, or self-induced emotional conditions. Again, the danger is in “extremity”. Appropriate emotional engagement is totally suitable.

The same is true for “teaching and hearing” that is spiritually-superficial, even though it may represent abstruse cerebral cognition couched in arcane algorithms (if you see what I mean). It is easy to slip into a highly-charged conceptual “trance”...seeing much, but being blinded to the truth. We must avoid this danger. Furthermore, regarding intellect-oriented worship, if the tradition in a church is, indeed, to teach “truth” as esoteric concepts, using exclusive jargon and complex imagery, a kind of “secret society” can evolve, wrapped in linguistic codes and special knowledge. Such purely-intellectual emphasis becomes an exercise of the brain, more than a process of the heart. This approach may indeed offer knowledge, but it does not yield *understanding leading to spirituality!* Teaching should be directed at WAYS TO LIVE, and focus should always be on THE SPIRIT OF CHRIST AS THE SOURCE FOR CHRISTIAN LIVING!

Any extreme can prevent worship...emotional or intellectual or otherwise...and this will negate opportunities for growth. But the most likely cause for not deriving full benefit from worship is that the concepts of source and outcome have become confused. The “source” for meaningful worship is God, and worship is an “outcome” of closeness to Him. The tendency is to make emotional excitation or intellectual stimulation the “source” of worship. Unfortunately, these will provide no meaningful “outcome”. The objective of worship is this: greater understanding of, and participation in, true spirituality. And when spirituality is established, worship can proceed under the leadership of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit values worship, and worship gets its value through the Spirit.

If Satan can trick us into gravitating toward polar extremes, he can get us off-center and keep us from assimilating the lessons intended in God's plan for worship. Worship is a “fruit” of the Spirit, a gift of grace, and a chance to be nourished and strengthened. We all have emotions and intellect, and these certainly play a part in worship...but only as a *piece* of the worship experience, and not as the main event. The **basis** and **projected outcome** for true worship is our *communion* with God. Without *fellowship*, worship will not take place, regardless of what we “do” when we come together.

One more repetition: Without the filling and control of the Holy Spirit, all the emotions and intellect at our disposal will not produce true worship. Worship of God *begins* with God, and then is reflected *back* to God. Our objective is to participate in “God-focused” worship, wherein we acknowledge Him, praise Him, thank Him, and learn more about Him.

Finally, be assured that many churches display neither emotion *nor* intellect, let alone spiritual content, and they are not even “mentionable”. These are the religious masses, meeting in the name of “Christianity”, but otherwise showing little sign of godliness and reflecting no clue as to “truth”. These groups are spiritually dormant...and boring. And, by the way, they constitute the bulk of the population of Christendom. Many of these “churches” have become tombs for dead faith.

Getting the Scriptural Perspective on Worship. We want to immerse ourselves in a number of scriptures that deal with worship, to give us a feel for the divine view of it, as described in the Word. Here are some scriptures, with comments about them:

- Matt. 18:19-20—“Again, I tell you that if two of you on earth agree about anything you ask for, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven. For where two or three come together in my name, there am I with them.” When people gather...meaning more than one...and they are “in fellowship” (“in my name”), the Spirit of Christ will be there with them, so prayers (and worship) will be meaningful.
- Luke 4:8—“Jesus answered, ‘It is written: Worship the Lord your God and serve him only’.” If selfish motives or preoccupation with distractions (also known as “idols”) dominate a believer’s heart, true worship of God will not take place.
- Jn. 4:23-24—“Yet a time is coming and has now come when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for they are the kind of worshipers the Father seeks. God is spirit, and his worshipers must worship in spirit and in truth.” The two most important aspects of worship are the “spirit”, meaning the Spirit of God, and the “truth”, which is the Word of God. Without fellowship and study, real worship will not occur.
- Acts 17:25—“And he is not served by human hands, as if he needed anything, because he himself gives all men life and breath and everything else.” When we come to worship, we bring nothing from ourselves that God needs. It is our awareness of what He is, and the spiritual coat of divine “paint” with which He covers us, that pleases Him. He wants our “spirituality”, not our “humanity”.
- 1 Cor. 11:17-18—“In the following directives I have no praise for you, for your meetings do more harm than good. In the first place, I hear that when you come together as a church, there are divisions among you, and to some extent I believe it.” Divisions can be the result of pride and competition, in which case “fellowship among fellow believers” will not exist, because of the absence of “fellowship with God”. Fellowship is the way to stay unified...and to worship.
- Phil. 3:3—“For it is we who are the circumcision, we who worship by the Spirit of God, who glory in Christ Jesus, and who put no confidence in the flesh...” This is a very clear argument for worshiping in fellowship, and for leaving fleshly extremes out, such as over-emphasis on emotions or intellect.

- Heb. 10:25—“Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching.” Believers assemble to help each other grow. This means they should exhort, encourage, teach, and learn.
- Acts 5:12b—“And all the believers used to meet together in Solomon’s Colonnade.” The word “together” means “united with a single mind and purpose”. When fellowship and the filling of the Spirit are present, believers will be united.

Learning Through Worship. God teaches us through worship. When believers gather, if they are focused on God, there is a natural tendency toward growth. This takes place through God-centered conversation, singing, prayer, testimonies, and the teaching of the Word by the pastor and/or other gifted teachers. It also takes place as a result of the ordinances of baptism and communion, which illustrate important scriptural truths. The most important and straightest path to growth is obviously through the direct *teaching* that is done when believers come together. If teaching is omitted or down-played, the benefit of the rest of the worship service will be limited, and the learning that takes place will be “milky”, at best.

We will look at several passages of Scripture that provide the conditions for, and the importance of, learning through worship. We start with Eccl. 5:1, which says, “Guard your steps when you go to the house of God. Go near to listen rather than to offer the sacrifice of fools, who do not know that they do wrong.” The “sacrifice of fools”, in context, is a “verbalized commitment driven by the flesh”. This takes place when we resolve to do this or that, and offer claims about what we will do in the name of morality or righteousness. This is a case of “talk” being “cheap”.

Here’s what this means: The socialized protocol and emotions of the moment may prompt a lot of *words of worship* that do not constitute a *worshipful heart*. Eccl. 5:7 says it well: “Much dreaming and many words are meaningless. Therefore stand in awe of God.” Worship is “awe of God”, not self-service, self-righteousness, and self-improvement.

Back to Eccl. 5:1, we see the requirement for true worship, which is to “go near to listen”. This is the primary purpose and benefit of worship...to listen and learn. For this to happen, the pastor must be *teaching*, the hearer must be *learning*, and truth must be reaching the heart. We will have more to say about procedures for worship, when we discuss the rationale for “choosing a church” in our next study.

Preparation is the first step for us, as we enter worship. Preparation before worship is the same as preparation for study...in fact, worship should include study, or it is not true worship. The same preparation applies to each aspect of worship. 1 Cor. 11:27-28 gives us the following example:

Therefore, whoever eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty of sinning against the body and blood of the Lord. A man ought to examine himself before he eats of the bread and drinks of the cup.

The principle of preparation is the same for communion, study, witnessing, singing, and all the rest. Preparation begins with self-examination and self-judgment. Even prayer cannot be done without this. After confession, we can pray for wisdom and make a decision to receive truth into our hearts. When we are prepared, truth will come to us, mostly from the teaching that is done...but also from the worship experience as a whole.

When we are prepared, we can also offer praise. Ps. 119:7 says, "I will praise you with an upright heart as I learn your righteous laws." When our hearts are right, we will have the attitude of gratitude...along with an acknowledgement of God, trust, surrender, fear, and God-consciousness. And when our hearts are pure (cleansed), we can "learn God's Word".

Another way that we learn in worship is through the interchange of gifted service. This practice is frequently omitted in collective worship...resulting in missed opportunities for mutual support from many types of gifted service. Believers are commanded to encourage each other. Each believer who is "growing in grace and knowledge" has something to offer other believers. And it's okay to KNOW what your gifts are and to LET OTHER BELIEVERS KNOW, so they can access your services. My gift is this: Seeing connections among passages in Scripture and writing about them (no comments, please).

When the church machine is operating properly, believers grow, unbelievers get saved, God gets glorified, and the beautiful plan of God gets fulfilled. The idea is perfect, and God has even accounted for "imperfections" (that would be *us*) by His grace and mercy. Our role is to do our part—each of us—to ensure that our spirituality is intact, and that the work we are doing is the "fruit of the Holy Spirit", and not the "works of the flesh". The result will be this: Everything we DO and everything we SAY, when we are with fellow believers, will be to BUILD THEM UP. The word is "edify", which is to build an "edifice", or a super-structure of faith and divine power. Our job is to build-up the faith of others, as we build our own.

Eph. 4:15-16 describes our edifying roles this way:

Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will in all things grow up into him who is the Head, that is, Christ. From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work.

When we come together, it's not about real estate, riches, and regal rags (holdings, money, and new clothes), and it is not about knowledge, power, or position. It is about the *spiritual service* we do for each other in the power of the Holy Spirit, as we walk and war together—fellow-travelers and brother-soldiers—living and fighting in a hostile and dangerous world.

Paul's Prayer. One of the things we do when we come together is *pray*. We pray for knowledge, for lost souls, for each other...and that God's "will" might be done. Paul emphasized this a great deal in connection with personal and collective worship, as we have seen in many previous studies.

Paul was clearly a “prayer warrior”...and a great intercessor. Can you imagine how it would feel to have a powerful believer like Paul praying for you? It would probably sharpen your sense of God’s presence, just hearing Paul pray (worshiping God and not Paul, of course).

Here’s an observation: Perhaps Paul *did* pray for YOU...personally. When Paul wrote his epistles, the very “words of God”, he was addressing not only those who received his letter “in the mail”...he was addressing all believers who came after, including you. He said, “I pray”, and he surely meant, “I pray for YOU”. His prayer looked “forward” to you.

Eph. 3:14-19 shows us the contents of one of Paul’s prayers. Read the following as a prayer that had you specifically in mind:

For this reason I kneel before the Father, from whom his whole family in heaven and on earth derives its name. I pray that out of his glorious riches he may strengthen you with power through his Spirit in your inner being, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith. And I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, may have power, together with all the saints, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, and to know this love that surpasses knowledge—that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God.

The reference is to “you”. Paul prayed that *you* would be empowered through fellowship and the filling of the Holy Spirit, and that the fruit of the Spirit would be borne in your life, while the love of Christ would always be increasingly understood (or “grasped”) in your heart. God’s strength, His love, His knowledge, His fullness...these are the things that Paul shared with us through his epistles...and that he hoped would be ours in their entirety. These are the things he sought for us through his prayer, given long ago.

Choosing a Pasture in Which to Feed

Start with the Pastor. When we look for a “pasture in which to feed”, or a church in which to worship and serve, we must start with the primary authority and leader of the church...the *pastor*. The pastor will set, or greatly influence, the tone, agenda, structure, routine, and doctrine of the local church. To serve well, and fulfill his ministerial calling, he must 1) be prepared in all ways to serve, and 2) be a gifted teacher of the Word.

If a church is off-center, or de-emphasizes the dissemination and understanding of truth as presented in the Word, the pastor is the one who is most responsible for this, and the one most likely to change it. As the pastor structures the church “program”, he must rely on his own spirituality and understanding to provide him with balance and wisdom in his function as shepherd. His priorities must be such that he ranks first things...*first*...and then holds his ground, as he will certainly be under attack to pursue causes and tasks that prevent, rather than fulfill, his mission as the church leader.

Acts 6:1-4 gives us a glimpse of the activities a pastor should emphasize in his role. This passage says the following:

In those days when the number of disciples was increasing, the Grecian Jews among them complained against the Hebraic Jews because their widows were being overlooked in the daily distribution of food. So the Twelve gathered all the disciples together and said, “It would not be right for us to neglect the ministry of the word of God in order to wait on tables. Brothers, choose seven men from among you who are known to be full of the Spirit and wisdom. We will turn this responsibility over to them and will give our attention to prayer and the ministry of the word.”

It could not be clearer. The minutiae of church work...the trivia of administrative functions...should be done by people with those gifts. The pastor’s primary gift is the ability to teach, and *at no time* should this not receive the highest priority. Expectations on the part of parishioners who look for the pastor to be everywhere...to hold every hand...are out of line. His first job is to *teach*...or to “feed the flock”.

When you are looking for a church, it will be an easy task to determine whether the pastor is teaching. The issue of the *content* of his teaching is another issue, which is not emphasized in this study. Our personal views on the “truth” that should be taught cannot be hidden: ten books declare them. Our focus at this point is to explore the role of the pastor as “teacher”, and—for the most part—*not* the content of his message, even though that must also be evaluated.

The Pastor Must Have the Gift of Teaching. The role of the pastor is fully described in what are called the “Pastoral Epistles”. These include two epistles to Timothy, and one to Titus. These letters contain a full guide for pastoral services, and a complete range of parameters for Spirit-led leadership. It is not the purpose of this study to offer a complete course on pastoring, or to train pastors on ways to serve according to scriptural

guidelines...though these are absolutely essential. The focus of this study is to help believers who have no church, or who are dissatisfied with their present one, to see what they should look for in a church, starting with the pastor.

The key qualities a pastor must have are given here to help you determine whether a pastor is living up to his role as the church leader. We begin with the most important asset in a pastor, and that is his *ability to teach*. Spirituality is “presumed”, without which NO worthwhile service will take place. So we are looking at a Spirit-filled pastor, and the only question remaining is this: Can he teach? 2 Tim. 2:24 provides a lead-off into this topic, saying, “And the Lord’s servant must not quarrel; instead, he must be kind to everyone, able to teach, not resentful.” If the pastor is spiritual, he will be kind, rather than quarrelsome, but notice the “ability” (or “gift”) that he brings to the table: He is “able to teach”.

Even if the pastor’s intentions are good, and he is “teaching”, his teaching must be “getting through”, or “bearing fruit”. If his words fall to the floor, and worship-time is also nap-time, his ability to teach may be in question. The most important aspect of this ability is his understanding of the truth in the Word. Then his delivery should be *clear* and *understandable*, even if it is not “exciting”, although a pastor/teacher’s gift will not be effective if he cannot at least hold the attention of his audience.

Pastors are Students. Pastors are teachers, but they must first of all be “students”. They cannot teach what they do not know, so they must come to the ministry with a foundation in the Word, and then they must faithfully conduct Spirit-led study, so that their message will be full of truth *that will feed the congregation*. Paul told Timothy to study and teach, as we see in 1 Tim. 4:7b-11. We quote part of that passage here (from v. 7), which commands, “...train yourself...” Timothy was being told to study, so that he could achieve full scriptural understanding and fellowship (“godliness”) and to convey what he learned to his flock. Verse 11 directs the following: “Command and teach these things,” which means the things he was learning by studying Paul’s writings.

If a pastor is not spending most of his time studying, find another one who is. Outside of having the “gift” to start with, this is the most important component in being a pastor: carefully examining the Word. 1 Tim. 4: 15-16 confirms this, saying the following:

Be diligent in these matters; give yourself wholly to them, so that everyone may see your progress. Watch your life and doctrine closely. Persevere in them, because if you do, you will save both yourself and your hearers.

Paul tells Timothy to direct his full energy to walking in the Spirit (“watching his life”) and studying the Word (“watching his doctrine”). He was to do this “diligently” and with “perseverance”. With these done, then he would be qualified to fulfill verse 11...to “Command and teach”. SIDE NOTE: The term “save” in verse 16 undoubtedly means “delivered from carnality and immaturity”, since both Timothy and his “hearers” were believers, and already had *eternal salvation*.

Pastors are Teachers. Ephesians 4 is helpful in explaining the gifted nature and required role of a pastor/teacher. The role of “pastor” is united with that of “teacher” in this passage, though a believer may be a gifted teacher without being a pastor, as seen elsewhere in Scripture. The role of “pastor”, however, is inextricably linked with the assignment of “teaching”. It is not the only thing he does, but it is the most important...and it cannot be omitted.

Eph. 4:7-16 provides a framework for the placement and mission of the pastor/teacher. We quote portions of this passage to highlight key points in regard to the pastor's role as a teacher. Verse 11 says, “It was he who gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers.” These were special gifts provided to equip believers for growth, service, and battle-readiness. Verses 12-13, given in part, confirm the outcome of these gifts, as follows: “to prepare God's people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up...until we become mature...” Verses 14-16 continue the discussion, saying, once again in part, “Then we will no longer be infants...instead, speaking the truth in love, we will in all things grow up into him who is the Head, that is, Christ...as each part does its work.”

So the role of the pastor/teacher, functioning with whatever leadership gifts are still at work today (some of these are called into question by respected scholars), is to contribute to the maturity of believers in the church.

As for some gifts not being “at work” today, there is no question that the gift of pastor/teacher is *continuing* into the present time, even if certain other gifts have ceased. For the sake of managing the gift of pastor, the Pastoral Epistles were written. These represent Paul's swan song...the last “books” that he wrote. These offer full instruction for pastoring, though not for apostleship or prophecy. This special attention given to the “pastoring” gift, shows that its use is valid and viable at the end of Paul's ministry, and clearly into the present day. Some thirty years later, at the time John wrote his *Revelation*, diverse messages were addressed to the “messengers” at several churches, evidently meaning the “pastor/teachers”. I am confident that the gift of “pastor” is fully operational and current. The position of “evangelist” is also validated as a current gift, as per 2 Tim. 4:5, and can sometimes be associated with the gift of “pastor”.

2 Tim. 4:2-3 gives a statement on the teaching role of the pastor, as follows:

Preach the Word; be prepared in season and out of season; correct, rebuke and encourage—with great patience and careful instruction. For the time will come when men will not put up with sound doctrine. Instead, to suit their own desires, they will gather around them a great number of teachers to say what their itching ears want to hear.

Timothy is to teach all those attending his lessons, and the instructions he gives them should correct, rebuke, and encourage his listeners, as needed. Furthermore, he should do this “with great patience”, which is a watered-down way of saying, “with slavish persistence”. He is to study and teach to the point of exhaustion.

The need for tenacity and perseverance in teaching is urgent, because “sound doctrine” is under attack, meaning the truth will be corrupted at every turn by Satan and his followers...both angelic and human. This requires Timothy to “keep reminding them of these things” (2 Tim. 2:14). The truths of scriptural doctrine have to be repeated over and over, to counter false teachings.

Peter said he would keep on repeating the concepts of the Word for as long as he remained alive. This is what we see in 2 Pet. 1:12-15, as follows:

So I will always remind you of these things, even though you know them and are firmly established in the truth you now have. I think it is right to refresh your memory as long as I live in the tent of this body, because I know that I will soon put it aside, as our Lord Jesus Christ has made clear to me. And I will make every effort to see that after my departure you will always be able to remember these things.

Any school teacher will tell you that the secret to good teaching is *repetition*. When I was in “education”, I learned that—in order for a new concept to be *truly* learned—it had to be repeated fourteen times. That is why gifted pastors will say the important things over and over. This is sometimes laborious for seasoned listeners, but the real “labor” (which is accomplished “in the Spirit”, of course) is done by the pastor, who has to repeat concepts until *everyone* gets it...if that takes fourteen times, or four hundred times. He must bring the truth “home”. This is why perseverance and endurance are so important for a pastor (see 2 Tim. 4:5).

Pastors are not Divine. There is a danger that all kinds of inappropriate attachments to pastors can develop. They seem so “perfect” sometimes, and smart, and spiritual, and they operate with such aplomb and savvy. So it is possible that the pastor himself can become the draw, and not his message. This may enlarge attendance, and perhaps even increase attention to the message, but it may ultimately result in carnality, because our eyes are on “man” and not on “God”. This condition can easily become “idol worship”, and prevent a believer from growing.

Paul warned against this in 1 Cor. 3:1-9, telling Corinthian believers that they were not maturing, partly because they were idolizing him and other leaders. Verse 4 says, “For when one says, ‘I follow Paul’ and another, ‘I follow Apollos,’ are you not mere men [carnal believers]?” Paul also said, “What, after all, is Apollos? And what is Paul? Only servants, through whom you came to believe—as the Lord has assigned to each his task.”

Paul cites this condition again in 1 Cor. 1:11-14, where Paul asks those who are idolizing their spiritual leaders, “Is Christ divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Were you baptized into the name of Paul?” He wanted them to know that his words came from Christ, and that “words of human wisdom” had no value. The content of his message had value only because it was from God. He was directing their focus toward God and away from himself.

When you are picking a pastor and a church, leave out the “Hollywood” effect and look for *teaching that favors Jesus Christ*, along with a *learning environment that features spirituality*. Glitz,

glamour, and the glory of human performance and appearance will not sustain you. Even if the pastor's teaching is "spot-on", you will not benefit from it, if your reason for listening to him is not properly motivated.

Observations on Choosing a Church. All I can do when it comes to choosing a church is offer my opinion, with the basic rationale being what I have already given...including the place of spirituality in worship, the operation of gifts, the teaching role of a pastor, the avoidance of extremes, and so on. But there are still some other qualities that distinguish churches that you might want to think about, as you explore the merit of available churches. There will be "doctrinal" differences, of course, from church to church, but those differences will not be emphasized here.

One thing that I have observed is that churches tend to *emphasize* the thing that makes them different. Even things that I agree with can be overplayed, such as the "permanence of salvation". If every other "sermon" has to do with God's "keeping us" after He "saves us", then believers hearing this are not going to grow much. Many such beliefs, even if they are important and true, can get more attention than Scripture intends.

Another condition of overemphasis often occurs in churches that embrace "predestination", in the vein of John Calvin. Whenever a pastor, and therefore his church, believes that God chooses those that He wants to save, you will likely hear some form of the "doctrine of the elect" every time church doors open. But "Calvinistic" churches are not alone...almost all churches have some form of passionate preoccupation and many of these detract from training for growth.

One more example can be seen in certain "grace" churches, where studies may tend to focus on "rewards". Even though the doctrine may be accurate, if it *blankets* the doctrinal curriculum, it may leave you deficient in other crucial areas of spiritual understanding and development. For some other groups, focus on "spectacular" gifts, physical healing, and experience-based learning may drown out the sounds of scriptural instruction. Here's the point: **Any pursuit that gets emphasis disproportionate to its "nutritional" value will tend to upstage Bible study...and downplay spirituality.** This even includes Bible history and prophecy. These must be presented in connection with teachings that help us LIVE.

I repeat: Avoid churches that continually give any activity or doctrine a higher priority than an understanding of truth *for living*. And I would avoid, as well, any church that spends so much time on "questionable" doctrines that *important truths* about faith, humility, spirituality, and grace get squelched. We should always do what the Bereans did with Paul...*verify what we hear by comparing it with Scripture.*

Another red flag to watch for, when it comes to picking a church, is that *world systems* can get mixed in with teachings and practices, even those that are Word-based. Many churches, in order to make themselves palatable to the world, incorporate features that appeal to "outsiders" to draw them in. All kinds of construction projects are devoted to this: coffee bars, gymnasiums, climbing walls, game parlors, bowling alleys, and so on. These are not

“bad” things, but these do not inherently contribute to the growth of individual church members. Key question: What is the *emphasis* of the church you are evaluating? If it is not the Word, keep looking.

Adoption of “world systems” is also seen in the integration of “self-help” programs of all kinds. These are designed to improve the status and condition of “humanity”, but do not contribute to “spirituality”. These may actually make some things better, but this pursuit is purely of the flesh, and improvements will be only “skin-deep”. Our help and hope is with God, AND in a *better understanding of how we can operate in His system...*not in learning about world systems from psychology, self-help organizations, authors, etc. These *will not prompt growth*, even after the church dresses them up with a Christian bow.

Actually, picking a church is probably like considering any other significant choice in our lives. What criteria do you use to do the following?

- Look for a college or other school.
- Look for a mate.
- Look for a job.
- Look for a house or a car.
- Look for a friend.

Like all areas of the Christian life, finding these requires prayerful thought and careful evaluation. Certainly that applies to choosing a church. And like all choices involving commitment, when you are choosing a church, you must ask questions to determine if a “match” has been found. Here are a few questions, tailored specifically to the evaluation of a church for suitability:

- Will it teach me what I need to know in order to LIVE IN CHRIST?
- Does it actually schedule regular Bible teaching?
- Is Bible Study at the heart of the church program?
- Will it feed me and foster a sense of belonging and relevance for me?
- Does the church provide an opportunity for me to exercise my gifts?
- Will I be at home there and feel a spirit of unity, cooperation, love, and edification?
- Can I trust the pastor as a teacher of truth?
- Is His teaching based entirely on the truth of the Word?
- Do I see what he is teaching in my own personal review of Scripture?
- Is this a place where I will grow, mature, and serve, as I believe God intends, so that God will be pleased with...and glorified by...my life?

Choosing a church is a personal choice. The biggest question you will inevitably ask is this: Does the church fit me? Or—put another way—do I like it? If you like your church, even if it is not spiritually centered or doctrinally correct, that is probably where you will stay. But I truly suggest that you re-read books 1-10, hit re-set, and look again.

Ways to Study

Practical Suggestions for Making Bible Study a Regular Part of Your Life. We offer in the following list some observations and recommendations regarding a study of the Word, so that you can access all that it offers. These are largely “pragmatic” procedures that can be used to regulate and enhance your study routine. Here are my suggestions:

1. Read the Bible directly.
2. Use a study Bible to help you understand what you are reading. (I recently acquired the *Ryrie Study Bible* and like it).
3. Listen to an audio reading of the Bible.
4. Attend a church where Bible study is clearly emphasized and regularly scheduled. Refer to the previous chapter for more on choosing a pastor and a church. You are reminded to avoid churches which adopt extreme practices that obscure or downplay concentration on the truth of the Word. And then, the teaching that takes place should advance foremost the truths that acquaint you with God's techniques for living, and the promises and provisions He makes to assist us in serving Him.
5. Use audio or video lessons that teach Bible lessons designed to edify and strengthen. More on this below.
6. Some television programs are instructive, but avoid those that see Christianity as a way to make money, or that exhibit any of the extremes that we have discussed.
7. Associate regularly with gifted Christians who study, stay in fellowship, and contribute to the edification of fellow believers. NOTE: It is not enough just to spend time with believers. Two conditions must exist for encounters with Christian brothers to be instructive: 1) You and the other believers must be in fellowship, and 2) the topic must focus on God and His truth.
8. Carefully choose and read books, articles, and materials that 1) elucidate the words of Scripture, and 2) provide information and techniques that enable you to grow and *get closer to God*.
9. There are numerous courses offered online, through correspondence, and at local seminaries. Once again, choose wisely.
10. Search the Internet for Bible topics and commentaries. Here are some tips for places to go on the Internet:
 - a. One place I use regularly to collect verses on individual topics is biblos.com. When you (prayerfully) compile scriptures on a given topic...sort them, compare them, and analyze them...you will be able to get at core truths from the Word. In addition to “topics”, biblos.com provides scripture-search

features, and commentaries. Scriptures separated by topic can also be found at bibletopics.com.

- b. A place that I have used to collect articles and multi-media studies is bible.org. I especially recommend writings by J. Hampton Keathley, III, at [this site](http://this.site).
- c. If you are more serious and want to get deeper into the finer points of Bible doctrines, visit tgm.org, which offers concordances, lexicons, word studies, and other helpful study features.
- d. To find Bible-teaching pastors, church services, and programs, the Internet is a better resource than the television. You can find lessons in a variety of media, including “live” on the Internet. Once again, choose wisely...and prayerfully. Outside of what I have already given, I have no other specific endorsements for online services and lessons, because there are so many, but there are some good ones, if you search for them.

Don't Forget Preparation. Whatever agenda you use for your study regimen, remember to prepare before you study, or the lesson or message you hear will be meaningless. Be sure to confess your sins, pray for wisdom, believe the truth when you “hear” it, and welcome it into your heart as you “learn” it. Then you will be ready to go “verify” it in Scripture, and “apply” it to your life.

Living in the Power of God's Kindness—OR— Believing the Promises

Setting up and Accessing the Promises

Recognizing God. God wants us, as believers, to know who *we* are...so that we can recognize our dependence on Him...and He wants us to acknowledge who *He* is...He is our God. In all the techniques He gives us for getting closer to Him, there is a kind of humility that He is asking from us, a clear vision of our smallness next to His greatness. This is an awareness that we are not divine, and that He is. He is the creator, planner, and sustainer of all that exists, and we are His creation. Yet He is good and kind and loving toward us, something that may get lost in all the talk of our being incessantly sinful and on stand-by for discipline.

Even “mercy” and “forgiveness” have an undertone that suggests our failure. We have seen the side of God that deals mostly with our need to be “processed” to make us suitable for His family, and continually “updated” to help us become productive family members. But we want to understand a side of God that we have perhaps not emphasized sufficiently.

What we want to establish is that God is characterized by GRACE. Grace is defined as “undeserved favor”, which is expressed as mercy and forgiveness, for sure, but also as “kindness”. Because of God’s “kindness”, often translated as “love”, everything that happens to us as believers is designed to draw us deeper into His grace, and to get us to *accept what He wants to give us*. It’s not as though we have to talk God into giving us what we need...it’s already available...what we must do is learn to *allow God to give it to us*. It is this quality of divine generosity that we will emphasize in this chapter.

We want to look at the specific things that God gives, as we focus our attention on His love. We have studied...pretty much for ten books now...the *techniques* that grace provides to help us get ready to receive what He offers. The techniques have been encapsulated in the following categories: confession of sins, prayer, learning the Word, believing God and His Word, and growing through testing and trials. When we use these techniques, a growth process takes place that equips us to focus on God, walk in the Spirit, walk by faith, walk in the truth, and produce fruit. When we learn and use the techniques, fellowship prevails, wisdom dominates, and the Holy Spirit controls. God’s “techniques for living” are wonderful “grace” assets, even with “discipline” looming nearby.

As we look deeper into God’s gracious qualities, we see a prevailing *kindness* that assures us of this: When we faithfully use the “techniques”, God qualifies us for something special: **blessings and provision**. For us to know His kindness and access these gifts, we must *understand* His promises, and *know* what He *guarantees* to us. It is reassuring to discover that everything God does with and for us is based on His core character trait, which is “love”. *Discipline* is even included as an expression of this love...since God—like any *loving*

parent—will caringly and purposefully train us, and punish us, as needed, to improve our “behavior”.

When we understand God's nature, we will trust His techniques to improve us, and then we will embrace the gifts He wants to give us, so that we can operate fully in grace and receive its full “favor”. We *use* the “techniques” because we *know* them, and *believe* them, and—by the same token—we can enjoy the benefits of His promises, when we *know* them and *believe* them. Our objective is to *learn how to extract from the promises all that God wants us to have*. We must know three things to do this, as follows: 1) how to *qualify* for the promises, 2) how to *claim* the promises, and 3) what the promises are, so we will know *what to claim*. These will all be presented in this chapter.

Even the techniques come with promises, and—like most promises—there is a contingency in them, which is this: We must **use** the methods specified in the techniques, for the promises to be effective. Note the following conditions which precede blessings and provision: “if we confess”, “if they will heed My Word”, “if my people who are called by my name will humble themselves and pray”, and “if you believe”. Do you see the techniques in these: confess, study, pray, and trust? These are followed by promises (not quoted here) that God will extend His hand of grace in some way...“if” we do what is called for.

We will see that most promises come with contingencies...or conditions that must be fulfilled beforehand for a promise to be activated. But—assuming that we are ready (because techniques have been followed)—we will be qualified to go further...deeper. We want to find the treasure room, where all the promised blessings are accessed, and where we can discover and possess the “fullness of God”, and the “more abundant life”. [Father, help us see how to reach the depths of your grace, for our benefit as your servants, and for your glory as our God. Amen.]

Two Types of Response to the Word. There are basically two responses to the Word: 1) *acceptance* by believing it...or 2) *rejection* by not believing it. We must remember as we evaluate these responses that acceptance of God's truth is tantamount to *accepting Him*, and that rejecting His truth is *rejection of Him*. The following shows the track that these two responses take:

1. **Acceptance** of truth by *believing* it will result in these:
 - a. Techniques will be believed and followed.
 - b. Promises will be believed.
 - c. Growth of faith and fruit will occur.
 - d. Blessings will be abundant.
 - e. Promises will be fulfilled, as they are stated in the Word.
2. **Rejection** of truth by *not believing* it will have these effects:
 - a. Fellowship will not be sustained and prayers will not be heard.

- b. Faith in the Word will be absent.
- c. Faith will not grow.
- d. Cursing (discipline) will be seen and felt.
- e. Promises cannot be “claimed”, and will not be fulfilled.

Part of *accepting* truth is seeking it out and learning it. Not to pursue it by studying is a form of *rejection* of the truth. Study has many forms, as we have seen, and no one can be excused from studying God's Word.

Two Categories of “Believing the Word”. There are two aspects of “believing God's Word” that we should distinguish. One has to do with *believing the techniques*...the other has to do with *believing the promises*. Here is the difference:

1. **Believing in God's “grace techniques”** that are given in the Bible will keep us in fellowship, move us closer to God, cause us to mature, and maintain our spirituality (our walk in the Spirit). Here are the techniques:

- a. Confession of sins to God.
- b. Constant prayer.
- c. Consistent study.
- d. Believing God and His Word.
- e. Building faith through God's training.

For these to be effective, we must obviously believe that these techniques will access God's power and grace, and that they will benefit us directly. This, again, indicates that we *believe God* and *are receiving the grace* represented in His techniques.

2. **Believing in God's promises**, as given throughout His Word, gives us a right to claim what is promised. Here is where we enter God's rest. This is the Most Holy Place...the place of blessing...where we “obtain mercy and find grace to help in time of need.” When we believe the promises, we get what is promised.

The two aspects of believing God's Word work together. By exercising faith in God's grace techniques, we will be developing faith in God's promises, so the first aspect of believing the Word feeds the second one. Consistency in the first (faith in, and application of, the techniques) leads to growth of the second (faith in the promises). And faith in the promises opens the floodgates of blessing that God has promised.

Notice the “proviso” and “provision” sequence again. We have seen in the past that certain conditions are required for specific outcomes to happen. If we “delight in the Lord”, He will “give us the desires of our heart”. If we “seek His kingdom and righteousness first”...“*all these things* (provisions) will be given to us”. If we “dwell in the shelter of the Most High”, then “under His wings, we will find refuge” and “no harm will befall us”. If, indeed, we MEET THE REQUIREMENTS, then God has given a commitment to us to DO WHAT HE

HAS PROMISED. This is not our trying to hold God to His part of the bargain (we can't, of course)...this is KNOWING that He will honor His promises.

Our "Promised Land" is waiting. But we must satisfy the "preliminary" *proviso*, so that we will receive the "promised" *provision*.

Elaboration on the Two Aspects of Believing God's Word. Once again, believing the Word involves two aspects: 1) believing the techniques, and 2) believing the promises. We will provide here additional details about these two areas, as follows:

1. "Believing the techniques" is the *active* part of our faith, the part where we *apply* the methods God gives us for getting cleansed, being filled with the Spirit, praying, studying, enduring His training, and so on. This is the operation of faith that fulfills James' demand for our faith to "show". In this we see the "proviso".
2. "Believing the promises" is the *unseen* part of our faith, the place of waiting on God in stillness, the act of *not acting*—but trusting, the haven for resting and "not working", a time of surrendering to His will and not our own, and the position of comfort that comes from divine assurances that He is God...and that He loves us. When we *believe*, we will know that God will meet all our needs, and that His perfect plan is working. This is a time of quiet, steady confidence that God will provide what He has promised. This is the "provision". (For a sneak preview of some of the promises, see *Walking by Faith*, "Believing the Promises of God".)

Both the proviso and the provision are based on our belief in God's Word. When we *believe* the techniques, we follow them. By following them, we get closer to God and strengthen our connection with Him. These will keep us in fellowship and move us toward maturity. We are grateful for the techniques, and we know we can depend on them to be effective and powerful.

Then, as we move toward maturity, we learn to *believe* the promises. This is the time when we come home, because life in the security of God's promises is our destination. There is nothing more moving and compelling than embracing God's promise that He loves us...without any break or sputtering...and that every single event in our lives as His children is connected with this love. We may step back from God, but His love continues. Even as He disciplines us, His plan is to get us to return to fellowship with Him so we can share in His treasure. God is *so much* about "giving", but—after all—that's what grace *does*.

"Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground apart from the will of your Father. Even the hairs on your head are numbered, so don't be afraid; you are worth more than many sparrows." (Matt. 10:29-31). This shows how closely we are watched and guarded. If we believe His promises, God's love can surround us, protect us, sustain us, and bless us.

The promises are the parts of Scripture that will do the most to comfort and strengthen us. When we reach the point of believing the promises, we will not only please God...as He wants to *give* us "all things"...we will also find a place of joy next to Him.

Conditional Access to Promises. God's promises are firm and trustworthy. They are made by the all-powerful, all-loving God, and have all the divine impetus that this implies. The promises are more reliable than anything else in the universe. We can take them "to the bank". But there are conditions, as we continue to emphasize.

We want to set up our presentation of the promises by establishing that many of the promises are predicated on our being prepared to claim them and receive their benefits. If we are not prepared, and do not "qualify", the promises will be sealed behind a glass wall...we can see them, but we can't get to them.

You will have little trouble guessing what is required in our preparation, as we have seen so many times the steps needed in preparing for *all* divine engagements. The pillars of preparation, the major categories of our doctrinal repertoire, include confession of sins, praying, studying, trusting, and enduring the experiences God uses to train us. These enfold many sub-categories of participation in God's plan, which have been thoroughly covered in previous studies. The major *outcome* of our using the *grace assets* that He makes available (by believing and applying the techniques), is that we are able to get closer to Him and move beyond the glass. That is where the promises are fulfilled.

2 Pet. 1:3-4 has been studied from many angles in previous studies, but we want to view it now in connection with the promises. Before we can lay claim to the substance of God's promises, we must jump through some hoops. Here is what this passage says:

His divine power has given us everything we need for life and godliness through our knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and goodness. Through these he has given us very great and precious promises, so that through them you may participate in the divine nature and escape the corruption in the world caused by evil desires.

This is a comprehensive statement, telling us that God's power gives us "everything we need" for "every part of our lives", including our physical lives and our spiritual lives. Notice the term "through these he has given us very great and precious promises". Here's what this means: The **promises** come *after, and as a result of*, our adopting and following the **techniques** that will equip us for life and godliness. And the promises that arise in front of us are monumental...jaw-droppingly profound...superlative! That is why God called them "great and precious".

Here is the sequence of events in this passage:

1. When we get "knowledge of Him", we learn the techniques that equip us for "life and godliness". (cf., 2 Pet. 1:2)
2. When we employ these techniques, the promises are activated, because the conditions have been met.
3. By using the techniques and believing the promises, we are enabled to partake of the divine nature, which is a graduated form of "knowledge of Him"...this takes us deeper.

4. As a result of our knowledge of Him and participation in His divine nature, we have real “victory” in our lives...even over our own evil impulses. But there's more...
5. Because we have this knowledge, and because we are using the techniques we have learned, we can now learn and believe the promises, thus getting the *full benefit* of all that the promises offer. Put another way, the techniques qualify us to claim the promises, and faith in the promises enables us to receive the provision and blessings that the promises specify.

To *benefit* from the promises, we must *claim* them. To *claim* them, we must *believe* them. And before we can *believe* them, we must *know* them. We will see a considerable number of these promises, shortly, because we want to know them.

We must not forget: there are “strings” attached to the promises. Almost all promises are “conditional”, meaning that our claiming them is based on our spiritual “condition”. If our condition is right, then we will be prepared to receive the benefits of the promises. Until then, our first priority must be to learn and use the tactics God provides for maturity and spirituality, so that we will be prepared to get the blessings that are promised.

Reminder on the Place of Faith in Claiming Promises. Faith rests primarily on three legs: 1) spirituality, the result of fellowship, 2) wisdom, the result of study, and 3) endurance, the result of faith (endurance is also a “builder” of faith). As we have stated before, faith is the “goal-pillar”, or the place toward which all other pillars point. Faith is the outcome of the following techniques: confession, prayer, study, and endurance, and it is the thing we are always trying to *increase*. It is the key to our walk in the Spirit and the pathway to nearness to God. So it makes perfect sense that faith should be the primary variable in determining whether we receive the benefits lavishly offered in God's promises.

When we know and believe the promises, a new day has come, and our hearts and lives can open up to the riches that God wants us to have. When we get into the land of promises, we are entering a new and wonderful dimension.

The Promises

The Categories of Promises. There are many categories for separating and understanding the promises that God makes to mankind and to believers. We concentrate in this study on the promises that pertain to our daily lives and functions as God's children. The categories that we will cite include the following:

1. Promises of protection.
2. Promises of provision.
3. Promises of blessing.
4. Promises of empowerment.

We will have a number of verses for each of these categories. These are powerful assurances. We must be reminded that many promises are contingent on conditions being

met before they will be implemented, or “delivered upon”. Many verses clearly state the requirements to be satisfied before the promises they pronounce can be fulfilled, but some verses give promises without conditions being specified. But note this: Even when the condition is not given, we know well by now that the *benefits of grace* will not be accessed if the *techniques of grace* are bypassed. Our assumption is that our ability to claim God's promises...and to virtually hold Him to His word...will *always* depend on the spiritual condition that we bring to the “claiming ceremony”.

God's Promises are Trustworthy. 1 Ki. 8:56 says, “Praise be to the Lord, who has given rest to his people Israel just as he promised. Not one word has failed of all the good promises he gave through his servant Moses.” This is the standard for God's promises: Not one word fails. In discussing God's ability to fulfill His promises, Abraham knew that “God had power to do what he had promised” (Rom. 4:21). Numbers 23:19 adds the following about God's reliability in fulfilling His promises: “God is not a man, that he should lie, nor a son of man, that he should change his mind. Does he speak and then not act? Does he promise and not fulfill?”

God's promises are *covenants...contracts*. He is *able* to keep His promises, and He *will*...His Word is binding. He knew long before He made the promises what their outcome would be, so He made them advisedly and knowingly. They are not “slips of the tongue” or “convenient commitments in moments of passion”. No. These are planned...the words of the Eternal Constant, our God, and they will be done, exactly as He has declared.

Final Call to Faith. We know this, from Lk. 1:37: “Nothing is impossible with God.” We are asked to believe in a Being for whom there is no impossibility. It is within the realm of a no-limits scope that we need to look at God's *ability*—and His *commitment*—to keep His promises to us. We do not need to look at our circumstances as the baseline for anticipating our future, but our eyes must be turned toward the power and promises of God. He determines what happens, so we can have full confidence in ANY situation. If we trust what He says, He will do it.

In that vein, Eph. 3:12 says, “In him and through faith in him we may approach God with freedom and confidence.” In fellowship with Him, and by believing in Him...His techniques and His promises...we will move closer to Him, and *that's where the power is!* Even a little faith will go a long way, as per Lk. 17:6, which says, “If you have faith as small as a mustard seed, you can say to the mulberry tree, ‘Be uprooted and planted in the sea,’ and it will obey you.” It is the OBJECT of our belief that gives faith its power. When that object is a promise that God has made, it has all the power of creation. Promises are actually *targets* for our faith...giving us something “concrete” that we can direct our faith towards.

Next, we will see the promises within each category that we listed above. Open your heart, prepare to learn, and let these promises become your personal guarantees for God's gracious provision. Believe them...claim them. They are for you.

Promises of God's Love. This category is not cited with the other categories above, because it over-arches all other categories. The entire Bible is an exhibition of God's love.

He wants very much for us to know how much He loves us. Probably the biggest part of acknowledging God is opening our eyes to His love. Love is the basis for His making promises to us, and the reason His plan applies to each of us personally. Many verses and much discussion could be rendered on God's love, since it is the foundation of all our benefits from Him, but we list only one very important one here, as follows:

- Rom. 8:38-39—"For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord."

God's love is pervasive, seen as background or foreground for all promises, so we will see His love continually in the promises that follow.

Promises of Protection. These passages take us into the heart of God's commitments to us. Protection from God is based on our *spiritual condition*, but—if the conditions are met—we can know that His protective arms surround us. Here are some of the promises regarding our protection:

- Ps. 91:1—"He who dwells in the shelter of the Most High will rest in the shadow of the Almighty."
- Ps. 91:9-10—"If you make the Most High your dwelling—even the Lord, who is my refuge—then no harm will befall you, no disaster will come near your tent."
- Ps. 91:14-15—"Because he loves me,' says the Lord, 'I will rescue him; I will protect him, for he acknowledges my name. He will call upon me, and I will answer him; I will be with him in trouble, I will deliver him and honor him.'"
- Ps. 37:3-4—"Trust in the Lord and do good; dwell in the land and enjoy safe pasture. Delight yourself in the Lord and he will give you the desires of your heart."
- Ps. 27:3-5—"Though an army besiege me, my heart will not fear; though war break out against me, even then will I be confident."
- 1 Sam. 17:47—"All those gathered here will know that it is not by sword or spear that the Lord saves; for the battle is the Lord's and he will give all of you into our hands."
- Prov. 21:31—"The horse is made ready for the day of battle, but victory rests with the Lord."
- Matt. 10:30-31a—"And even the hairs on your head are all numbered. So don't be afraid..."
- 2 Thess. 3:3—"But the Lord is faithful, and he will strengthen and protect you from the evil one."

- Ps. 23:4—“Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me.”
- Ps. 3:6—“I will not fear the tens of thousands drawn up against me on every side.”
- Ps. 42:11 (KJV)—“Why art thou cast down, O my soul? And why art thou disquieted within me? Hope thou in God; for I shall yet praise him, who is the health of my countenance, and my God.” (Endnote 2)
- Heb. 13:6—“So we say with confidence, “The Lord is my helper; I will not be afraid. What can man do to me?”
- Is. 41:10—“So do not fear, for I am with you; do not be dismayed, for I am your God. I will strengthen you and help you; I will uphold you with my righteous right hand.”

Promises of Provision. Here are some passages showing what God promises to *provide* in our spiritual lives, and our physical lives, as well. Watch for conditions, such as trusting, being in fellowship, learning the Word, praying, and trusting. If these are satisfied, God assures us of the following:

- Heb. 4:16—“Let us approach the throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need.”
- James 4:8—“Come near to God, and he will come near to you.”
- John 15:7—“If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be given you.”
- Phil. 4:6-7—“Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.”
- James 1:5-6a—“If any of you lacks wisdom, he should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to him. But when he asks, he must believe and not doubt....”
- 2 Cor. 12:9a—“But he said to me, ‘My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.’”
- Phil. 4:19—“And my God shall supply all your needs according to his glorious riches in Christ Jesus.”
- Rom. 8:28 (NET)—“And we know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose.”
- 1 Pet. 3:12a—“For the eyes of the Lord are on the righteous and his ears are attentive to their prayer.”

- James 5:16b—“The prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective.”
- 1 Jn. 1:9—“If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.”
- 1 Jn. 5:14-15—“This is the confidence we have in approaching God: that if we ask anything according to his will, he hears us. And if we know that he hears us—whatever we ask—we know that we have what we asked of him.”
- 2 Cor. 4:16—“Therefore we do not lose heart. Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day.”
- Matt. 6:32-33—“For the pagans run after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them. But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness and all these things will be given to you as well.”
- Ps. 145:13b—“The Lord is faithful to all his promises and loving toward all he has made. The Lord upholds all those who fall and lifts up all who are bowed down.”
- Ps. 145:18-20—“The Lord is near to all who call on him, to all who call on him in truth. He fulfills the desires of those who fear him; he hears their cry and saves them. The Lord watches over all who love him, but all the wicked he will destroy.”
- 1 Pet. 5:7—“Cast all your anxiety on him, because he cares for you.”

Promises of Blessing. God’s blessings are for our comfort and joy. They are *good* things, things that we are delighted to receive. God wants to *bless* us, and that is what he promises. Don’t forget about the conditions, but if they have been met, bring your basket, because it is going to be filled. Here are some verses on the blessings that God promises:

- Jer. 29:11-13—“‘For I know the plans I have for you,’ declares the Lord, ‘plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future. Then you will call upon me and come and pray to me, and I will listen to you. You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart.’”
- James 4:10—“Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will lift you up.”
- 1 Jn. 3:21-22—“Dear friends, if our hearts do not condemn us, we have confidence before God and receive from him anything we ask, because we obey his commands and do what pleases him.”
- Ps. 92:12-15—“The righteous will flourish like a palm tree, they will grow like a cedar of Lebanon; planted in the house of the Lord, they will flourish in the courts of our God. They will still bear fruit in old age, they will stay fresh and green....”
- Deut. 28:1-8—“If you fully obey the Lord your God and carefully follow all his commands I give you today, the Lord your God will set you high above all the nations

on earth. All these blessings will come upon you and accompany you if you obey the Lord your God:

You will be blessed in the city and blessed in the country.

The fruit of your womb will be blessed and the crops of your land and the young of your livestock—the calves of your herds and the lambs of your flocks.

Your basket and your kneading trough will be blessed.

You will be blessed when you come in and blessed when you go out.

The Lord will grant that the enemies that rise up against you will be defeated before you. They will come at you from one direction but flee from you in seven.

The Lord will send a blessing on your barns and on everything you put your hand to. The Lord your God will bless you in the land he is giving you.”

Special Note: For the promises made to believers in the Old Testament, as well as to believers in the transition period between the Age of Law and the Church Age, there is a carry-over into our lives today. We are speaking of God—the same God now as then—tending the “righteous ones” among His children, regardless of the time, and He wants to give the chosen ones now the same blessings He gave to chosen ones long ago. There may be nuances of difference, but the blessings are basically the same. These blessings are for us, and we can claim them...“if we fully obey”.

Promises of Empowerment. The first part of “living in the *power* of God’s Word” involves *using techniques to prepare* for receiving truth, and then *applying it*. This part is active, “technical”, and preliminary (a prelude to claiming the promises). The second part of “living in the *power* of the Word” involves knowing and claiming God’s promises. This part is passive, based on simple faith. All we do with the promises is *believe* them.

Part of the “power” of the Word, then, is found in believing and following God’s techniques; the rest is couched in believing the promises. Here are some passages that promise God’s strength:

- Ps. 73:26—“My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever.”
- Ps. 46:1-3, 10a—“God is our refuge and strength, an ever-present help in trouble. Therefore we will not fear, though the earth give way and the mountains fall into the heart of the sea, though its waters roar and foam and the mountains quake with their surging.”
- Phil. 1:6—“Being confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus.”
- Phil. 4:12b-13—“I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want. I can do everything through him who gives me strength.”

- 2 Cor. 4:7—“But we have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us.”
- 2 Tim. 1:7—“For God did not give us a spirit of timidity, but a spirit of power, of love and of self-discipline.”
- Is. 12:2—“Lord Jehovah is my strength and my deliverance.”
- Phil. 4:13—“I can do everything through him that gives me strength.”

We have covered in previous studies the processes for accessing the power of the Holy Spirit. Now we are seeing *as promises* the *outcome* of the techniques that enable us to live in that power, and draw from its bounty.

Conclusion. The truth has been given. God is waiting to bless you...He has your name on numerous blessings that await your claiming them. Just wash your hands and pick them up.

Endnotes

1. *The Holy Bible, King James Version*, Ps. 145:3. Zondervan Publishing House, Grand Rapids, MI, 1977.
2. *The Holy Bible, King James Version*, Ps. 42:11.

APPENDIX A

Verses on Confession

One of the major doctrines in the Bible is “Confession of Sins”. The steps for confession are simple and straightforward...just name your sins. Shame, guilt, remorse, and sorrow can be part of confession...but these are not required for confession to occur. What *is* required is “humility” and “sincerity”...or a keen awareness of the difference between the sins that have been committed and the standards set by God. This is also known as “humility before God”. When we know God’s standards, and honestly admit our failure to meet them, confession is taking place...and forgiveness will follow. God promises to forgive our sins *every time* we confess them, so—since we sin a lot—confession should be a common occurrence in our Christian walk.

Here are selected verses that reflect either the procedures for confession, or examples of confession, as seen in the Bible:

Lev. 26:40-42	Ps. 38:3-5	Jer. 3:25	Matt. 23:25-27
Num. 21:7	Ps. 38:18	Jer. 4:14	John 13:1-17
Deut. 4:29-31	Ps. 40:12	Jer. 14:7	John 15:2-4
Deut. 30:1-10	Ps. 41:4	Jer. 14:20	Rom. 2:4
2 Sam. 24:10	Ps. 51:1-4	Jer. 18:8	2 Cor. 7:9-11
1 Ki. 8:33-50	Ps. 51:7-17	Jer. 31:18-19	Eph. 5:14
2 Chron. 7:14	Ps. 69:5	Lam. 3:39-42	1 Tim. 2:25
2 Chron. 30:9	Ps. 106:6	Ezek. 14:6	James 4:8-10
Ezra 9:6-10	Ps. 119:176	Ezek. 18:27-31	1 Jn. 1:9
Neh. 1:6-7	Ps. 130:1-4	Ezek. 20:43	Rev. 3:1-3
Neh. 9:2	Prov. 28:13	Ezek. 37:23	Rev. 3:19
Neh. 9:33-35	Is. 6:5	Dan. 9:5-7	
Job 33:8-12	Is. 38:17	Dan. 10:12	
Job 36:10	Is. 44:22	Hos. 5:15	
Job 40:45	Is. 55:6-7	Hos. 14:1-2	
Ps 32:5	Is. 59:12	Joel 2:12-14	
Ps. 34:14-18	Jer. 3:12-13	Micah 7:9	

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

William D. Gibbs, III, spent 25 years in public service as an educator and curriculum designer. He served as teacher, principal, superintendent, and curriculum developer in the public school systems of Texas. He has now taken his skills in the area of learning-program development and is channeling them into service for Jesus Christ. Much of his career in education was spent developing programs for at-risk students. His work now is targeted toward at-risk Christians (or new ones). The same way that he built systems for filling in gaps and establishing solid foundations for student learning, he has built on the foundation of the Word to provide clear studies that facilitate Christian living and accelerate the growth and effectiveness of believers.

Gibbs began an intensive study of the Word in 2010, and initiated a practice at that time of recording his findings in writing. He has written ten books since then...and has now condensed them into a survey course: *Bible Basics for Living: Essential Foundations*. This course and the books which form the foundation for it (of which this is one) are the culmination of his experiences in life, his professional career, and—more recently—his studies in the Word.

He has been surprised to discover what the Bible REALLY says about living, and is sure that you will be surprised, as well, when you work through his studies. It must be said that the central player and point in this “work” is not the author, but God. If—and only if—God is in this writing, it will be helpful and beneficial to believers who read it, and God will be glorified by its dissemination.