

JAMES AND 1, 2 PETER

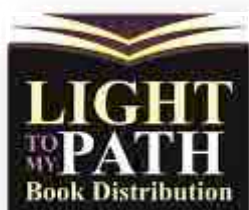
**A Devotional
Commentary on
the Epistle of
James and Peter**

F. WAYNE MAC LEOD

James and 1, 2 Peter

*A Devotional Look at the
Epistles of James and 1, 2 Peter*

F. Wayne MacLeod



LIGHT TO MY PATH BOOK DISTRIBUTION
Sydney Mines, NS CANADA B1V 1Y5

James and 1, 2 Peter

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Second edition: July 2013

Previously published by Authentic Media, 129 Mobilization Drive, Waynesboro, GA 30830 USA, and 9 Holdom Avenue, Bletchley, Milton Keynes, Bucks, MK1 1QR, UK

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Special thanks to the proofreaders and reviewers without whom this book would be much harder to read.

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PREFACE

This is a devotional commentary on the epistles of James and Peter. Its purpose is to lead the reader step by step through the epistles. The writings of James and Peter are immensely practical. They remind us that suffering and pain are very real in this life but point us to the wonderful hope we have in the Lord Jesus. James challenges us to make our faith real. He shows us how a practical faith works itself out in everyday life. Peter calls us to be watchful in a world where Satan roams looking for someone to devour. We find in these epistles many practical messages for living a life of victory.

As with the other books in this series of commentaries, I would challenge you to read the Bible portion along with the commentary. Ask the Holy Spirit to lead and direct your reflections as you read each section of the commentary. The goal of this series is to encourage average Christians in their walk with the Lord Jesus. Use it in your quiet time with the Lord. Take one section at a time, and let the Lord be your guide as you work through the book. My prayer is that you would be encouraged as you walk through these sections of Scripture. I would challenge you to share with others what the Lord teaches you through His Word. May God bless you as you read this book, and may your walk with Him be enriched. -- F. Wayne MacLeod

INTRODUCTION TO JAMES

Author:

It is quite widely believed that the writer of the book of James was the son of Alphaeus, one of the apostles. Little is known about Alphaeus. The Hebrew form of his name, however, is Cleopas. Many believe James was a cousin of the Lord Jesus. His mother was “Mary, the wife of Cleopas.” She is often seen in Scripture with Mary the mother of Jesus and Mary Magdalene (see John 19:25). His mother was likely one of the two witnesses to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus (Matthew 28:1). James would have grown up very close to the Lord Jesus.

He would become a disciple of Jesus and an important leader in the early church. He seems to occupy a leadership role in the church, presiding over the Council of Jerusalem (Acts 15:13-19). Paul called him a “pillar of the church” in Galatians 2:9. Historically, he appears to have been nicknamed “James the Less” likely because he was a small man.

Background:

Commentators believed that the book of James was written from Jerusalem to believers who had been scattered

because of persecution. James begins and ends his letter with a word about the trials they were facing and encourages believers to bear their suffering patiently, trusting in the Lord God and walking in obedience to His Word. James challenges his readers not just to believe the truth that had been passed down to them but to live it out in everyday life. For James, true faith was not just about words but also about deeds and actions. He expected that those who claimed to be Christians demonstrate this in the way they lived. He speaks plainly and powerfully to his readers about a practical Christianity that affected how they related to people around them.

The Importance of the Book for Today:

The book James is an important book because of what it teaches us about practical Christianity. Much of the battles in the early church had to do with moving people away from a “works based” faith to faith in what the Lord Jesus had done on the cross for salvation. James wants us to understand that while our salvation is based solely on the work of the Lord Jesus on the cross, those who know the Lord must also demonstrate their faith by how they live. James challenges the church of our day to action. He reminds us quite powerfully that our faith is not just a faith of words and doctrines but one of deeds and actions as well.

1

JOY IN TRIALS

Read James 1:1-4

This epistle was written by a man named James. There is some confusion regarding his identity. In the New Testament, we read of at least two important individuals with this name. The first is James the son of Zebedee, who was one of the twelve apostles (Matthew 10:2). He was a fisherman by trade. The second is James the son of Alpheus (Matthew 10:3). He also was an apostle. It is commonly believed that the author of this epistle was James the son of Alpheus, a relative of the Lord Jesus (Galatians 1:19).

In verse 1 the author simply referred to himself as a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ. It is quite important that we notice his humility. It is all too easy for us to want people to know who we are and our position in the church. The author of this letter was not interested in this. He was simply a servant of the Lord Jesus Christ, and he was very happy with this designation. We too should have this attitude. No matter what position we have in the church, we are at best servants of the Lord Jesus. Every position in the body of Christ is important. James was not

interested in people looking at him. His desire was that they see the Lord Jesus.

The fact that James presented himself as a servant of both God and the Lord Jesus Christ indicates that he saw the Lord Jesus as equal to God. He was as much a servant of God as he was of the Lord Jesus Christ. He would never have put these two names together unless he viewed them as equal. He mentioned that Jesus is the Christ. This too is important. The Greek term Christ means “anointed one.” (In Hebrew, the term is Messiah.) In this context, when James referred to Jesus as the Christ, he was telling his readers that he saw Jesus as the Anointed One from God, anointed for a very special purpose. Jesus was anointed to be the sacrifice for sin. It was through His work that humankind could be reconciled with God.

In this opening verse, James revealed something about himself but focused the attention on the fact that the Lord Jesus was the Christ, the Anointed One, the Messiah, equal with God in every way. James counted it a tremendous privilege to be a servant of such a gracious and awesome God.

This letter was written to the twelve tribes who were scattered among the nations. Commentators believe that the reason these Jews were not living in Palestine was because of the persecution that broke out after the death of Stephen in Acts 8. By referring to his readers as “my brothers” (verse 2), it is clear that James is speaking to Jews who had come to a saving knowledge of the Lord Jesus. His purpose in this letter is to encourage and strengthen their faith in a time of persecution and trial.

In verse 2 James challenged his readers to consider it “pure joy” when they faced various trials. Notice that

James reminded them that there would be trials of many kinds in this life. None of us are exempt from trials. These trials may come in the form of physical illness or in the form of persecution for our faith. Sometimes trials will come through other believers and difficult relationships in the body of Christ. Whatever the trial may be, James tells us that we are to consider it “pure joy” when we face these trials. We need to examine this statement in greater detail.

Trials, by definition, are difficult. Sometimes loved ones will be ripped away from us. Sometimes things will be said about us that are untrue and cause much harm. Not one of us enjoys the pain caused by trials. The joy James spoke about is not in the circumstances but in what God is going to do through them. In verse 3 James tells us why we are to consider these trials as occasions for joy because we know that the testing of our faith develops perseverance or patience. This perseverance, in turn, will produce maturity.

It would be wonderful if we could take some kind of spiritual vitamin and wake up in the morning spiritually mature. This is not how things work. The fact is that maturity takes time. We understand this in terms of how plants grow in our gardens or how our children grow and mature. The same principle is true in the spiritual world as well. Even Jesus had to learn obedience by suffering (Hebrews 5:8). If we want to be spiritually mature, we will need time and patience. The trials that come our way are a means the Lord uses to produce Christian character in our lives. Through these trials, our priorities are reshaped. Sin is broken and we are refined. Just as good parents must discipline their children to mature and train them, so it is in our relationship with the Lord God.

As the children of God, we can have the assurance that God will use every pain and trial in our life to accomplish His purpose and draw us closer to Himself. He is preparing us and equipping us in all our struggles to be stronger and better servants. Perhaps you are facing a difficult trial in your life right now. Realize that the Lord Jesus will use it to draw you closer. The trial in itself is not joyous, but the joy comes in the spiritual growth God will produce in you.

Let me underline one more principle from this passage. Perseverance or patience is necessary if we are to grow in Christ. Perseverance means remaining faithful during difficult times. It means not running away or seeking escape. How many times have we prayed away our problems and trials? Trials are not pleasant, but they are a necessary part of our growth. We do not need to fear these trials. While these hardships may not always come directly from the Lord, He will use them to accomplish His purposes in our lives. He will take whatever the enemy throws at us and use it to draw us closer to Himself. What a joy it is to know that the Lord Jesus is more powerful than any trial we face. He promises to use every situation we encounter to make us more like Him and deepen our intimacy with Him. Trust what He is doing in your trial today.

For Consideration:

- What does James reveal to us about the Lord Jesus in his introduction?
- What do we learn about the humility of James? What challenge does this bring to us?
- How is it possible to experience joy in the midst of trials?

- What comfort do you find in the fact that God can use every trial to draw us closer to Himself?
- What trials have you faced? How have those trials brought you closer to the Lord?

For Prayer:

- Thank the Lord that He is bigger than any trial the enemy can throw at you.
- Ask the Lord to give the kind of humility we see demonstrated in James in this passage.
- Are you facing a particular trial right now? Ask the Lord to give you joy in this trial. Ask Him to open your eyes to see what He is accomplishing in it.

2

BELIEVING FOR WISDOM

Read James 1:5-8

James began his book by writing to fellow Jewish believers about the value of their suffering. He encouraged them to consider it pure joy when they encountered various trials because God would use trials to mature them spiritually and draw them closer to Him.

Anyone who has been through trials knows that wisdom is needed during difficult circumstances. Trials don't always make sense. There are times when we simply do not know what God is doing or what He is trying to show us in these trials. As the pressure mounts, we are often tempted to give into sin and rebellion. It is very easy to become critical and fight against what the Lord is trying to do. We need the wisdom to know what God is saying. Our human understanding of life will only take us so far. Without divine insight, we cannot discern the purpose and mind of God in our specific situation.

James reminded his readers in verse 5 that if they lacked wisdom, they should ask God. It is God's purpose to train

and equip us. He is more than willing to give us the wisdom we need to face our trials. The temptation in these times of trial is to try and figure things out by ourselves. James is telling us instead to ask the Lord for insight. If we are going to ask God for His perspective of our situation, we will have to put aside our ideas and plans. Our own reasoning will only get in the way of hearing from God.

Notice what James tells us about God and how He gives His wisdom: He gives it generously. God does not ration out His wisdom as if it were in short supply. When we ask God for wisdom, we can be sure that He will give us all we need to face our trials. He will pour out His wisdom on us with generosity.

Notice also that God gives this wisdom to all. In other words, whoever comes to Him can receive this wisdom. You may not be a very intelligent person, but God will give you all the wisdom you need to face the trials that come your way. You may have nothing in this world to call your own, but you can have the wisdom of God. Even if you really made a mess of things in your life, this wisdom is still offered freely and generously to you as well. This wisdom is offered to anyone, no matter their circumstance who will come with all sincerity and ask.

Notice finally in verse 5 that God offers this wisdom to us without finding fault. I am blessed as I consider this. I have been unwise in many areas of my life. I have plenty of faults. There are many lessons I should have learned but didn't. When I come to God and seek His wisdom to face the struggle I am going through, God gives that wisdom to me without finding fault. In other words, He does not condemn me for how I misused that wisdom in the past. He does not reprimand me for my lack of personal wisdom to face the situation. What purpose would it serve to use a

particular trial to teach me a lesson but refuse to give the insight and wisdom to see what I was being taught? When you come to God for wisdom, He will give it to you without regard for your past failures or personal shortcomings. God delights to give us all the wisdom we need to face the trials that come our way. He will give generously to all who ask, without finding fault so that they can learn and become all He intends them to be.

While it is the delight of the Lord God to shower us with His wisdom to face this life with all its difficulties, there is a condition applied to the receiving of that wisdom. Verse 6 tells us that when we ask God for wisdom, we must believe and not doubt. In other words, we must come to Him with confidence that He will indeed give us the wisdom we seek. The promise is very clear. James tells us plainly that if we lack wisdom, we should ask God and He will give it to us. If we can't trust the clear promise of God to give us wisdom, how could we trust the particular wisdom He gives us to face our trial? If you can't believe that God will be faithful to His promise, how could you possibly trust the wisdom He gives?

To receive the wisdom of God, we have to be open to obeying and trusting it. This wisdom will come to us through various means. Sometimes God will give us a deeper understanding of the truth of His Word. Sometimes He will bring someone into our path who will share it with us. Sometimes He will give this wisdom by impressing thoughts on our mind through the inner working of His Spirit. What will we do with the wisdom God gives? Will we trust what God is saying? Will we receive the truth He is communicating?

The enemy of wisdom is doubt. God speaks and leads us, but we hesitate. We allow our own human understanding

to intervene and cause us to doubt what God is telling us. This is what happened to Eve in the Garden of Eden when the enemy questioned God's word to her. Eve listened to the enemy, and the result was sin and disaster.

James compared those who doubt God's wisdom to a wave of the sea that is blown and tossed by the wind. There is no stability in this wave. It is tossed from one side to another. Those who doubt God's wisdom as revealed by His Spirit and His Word are subject to the influences of human understanding and emotions. They move from one thought or solution to another, or they may become paralyzed in doubt and indecision.

God gives wisdom to those who are willing and ready to receive it and obey it. God will not give wisdom to those who do not trust Him enough to believe. He will not give His wisdom to the one who is unwilling to trust what He is saying enough to act on it in faith.

James goes on to speak about people who are "double-minded." According to James, this is something the Lord hates. The double-minded person is one who prays that God will give wisdom but is unwilling to obey it. This type of person wants to have the wisdom of God but not enough to surrender human understanding. The double-minded person struggles with the wisdom and God and human wisdom. He hears the wisdom of God but the voice of human reason gets in the way of obedience and complete trust.

God is looking for a person who will cry out to Him for wisdom to face life's obstacles. He is looking for someone who will not only seek this wisdom but also trust what He says enough to walk in obedience. God delights to give His wisdom generously to such people.

For Consideration:

- How important is it that we have God's wisdom in our trials? Why is human wisdom not enough?
- What do we learn about how God gives wisdom to His people? What is the condition for receiving wisdom from God?
- How is doubt the enemy of the wisdom? Have you ever questioned the wisdom and leading of God?
- Why is trusting God's wisdom so important? Can we have wisdom without trust?

For Prayer:

- Thank the Lord that He is so willing to give us the wisdom we need to face the trials that come our way.
- Ask the Lord to remove any doubt from your heart and replace it with absolute confidence in Him and His purpose.
- Ask the Lord to enable you to put aside your own ideas and trust Him in everything.

3

TAKING PRIDE IN OUR POSITION

Read James 1:9-11

Sometimes our trials are the result of not being content with the circumstances God gives us in life. Those who do not have much want more and those who have much fail to appreciate what they do have. James addressed this issue in this next section of his letter.

In verse 9 the apostle spoke to the “brother in humble circumstances.” This brother did not have very much in this life. He may have found it difficult to provide for his family. He may have been a slave or worked at a low-paying job. Maybe due to illness, he was unable to work. In the context in which James wrote, many believers were being persecuted because of their faith. There could have been any number of reasons causing believers to live in humble circumstances.

James told this brother that he ought to take pride in his high position. Notice that James is speaking about a

“brother” here. The assumption is that this individual is a Christian. How could a brother of humble circumstances take pride in his high position? His high position was obviously not in the eyes of this world. He may not have had the respect and honor due him in this world, but he did hold a high position as a child of God. Let’s consider this for a moment.

Many believers have little to call their own in this world, but treasures are being stored up for them in heaven. They may have a simple, run-down house that they cannot afford to maintain, but in heaven, there is a mansion being prepared for them that will never need repair. They may suffer illness and disease in their body, but their heavenly Father has invited him into His presence where there will never be another ache or pain. They may be rejected and suffer abuse in this life, but, there in the presence of their Savior, they will know full acceptance and love. This life may be full of sorrow and grief for them, but, in just a short time, they will pass through the gates of the heavenly city where they will never shed another tear. James challenged such believers to remember just how rich they really are. The Lord God has blessed all believers with an inheritance in heaven that would cause even the richest in this world to marvel.

This high position refers not only to the future. It is also something all believers have right now. The brother of humble circumstances is a child of God. His father is the Creator and Lord of all. He knows the presence of the Spirit of God in his life. He has been called to represent the Lord of lords. He lives in the power of this almighty God. He is equipped and enabled by God to face the enemy head-on. He has been given ears to hear the Lord God and eyes to see the truth. His mind has been renewed by the Spirit of God in Him. This Spirit is producing His fruit

in the life of this individual. All these blessings and many more are his right now. James challenged this materially poor brother to focus on his glorious riches in Christ.

Having said this, we need to see yet one more application of this truth. How many times do we judge those around us on the basis of what they have in this world? We may see a man dressed in rags and judge him as being less than the man beside him. This may even cause us to treat him differently. This is not how God sees the man dressed in rags. God looks at the heart, not at externals (1 Samuel 16:7). The clothes and the amount of money in his bank account mean nothing to God. This “poor” man may be richer than we think because of His relationship with the Lord God.

If you are a brother or sister in humble circumstances in life, lift up your eyes and look beyond the material things of this world. Look to what you have in the Lord Jesus. Look to the position you have in Him. Look to His promises. Remember that you are a child of God and be blessed and encouraged in this. (See Colossians 3:1-4).

In verse 10 James shifted his focus from the brother of humble circumstances to the one who was rich. This needs no explanation. This brother had all he needed in this life. His family was well provided for and he enjoyed the luxuries this world had to offer. James challenged the one who was rich to take pride in his low position. Again, we need to consider what the apostle meant here.

James reminded this wealthy brother that he would pass away like a wildflower. He reminded him that while that wildflower is beautiful and fragrant for a time, when the sun rises and brings the scorching heat of summer, its blossom falls and its beauty is destroyed. This is how the rich man

needs to see himself. He needs to be reminded that all he has could be taken from him in an instant. He has no ultimate control over how long he is going to live and for how long he will be able to enjoy the riches he has accumulated. In an instant, his life could be snuffed out. All the gold and riches he has accumulated will eventually waste away. Old age will come quickly and strip him of his ability to enjoy his wealth. One day he will stand before a holy God. God will not be impressed with all his fine clothes and bank accounts. These things will mean absolutely nothing on that day. He will stand side by side with the brother of humble circumstances. Together they will enter the presence of the Lord. His riches will not buy him a better mansion. If anything, they may have so distracted him spiritually in this life that his heavenly reward may be small.

This rich brother needs to remind himself of who he is before God. He needs to remember that he is not given a greater place of honor in the heart of God because he has money. He needs to remember that all his wealth will perish and eventually fade away. He will be stripped of all he has accumulated and stand naked before God who judges the heart.

Before God, there is no difference between rich or poor. God sees the heart and looks beyond the outward appearance. As His children, we need to see ourselves as God sees us. The temptation for the brother of humble circumstance is to feel unimportant and insignificant. This brother needs to remind himself of the wonderful position he has in the Lord Jesus. The rich man will tend to think more highly of himself than he should. He will need to remember that his riches are fleeting and will not impress the God who created the world. We need to think of ourselves as God thinks of us, not more but certainly not less either. May God enable us to find this balance.

For Consideration:

- What does a believer who has nothing in this life have to rejoice in?
- Why do the rich need to humble themselves?
- With which of these individuals can you identify the most? What challenge does this passage bring to you today?
- How important is it that we find a balanced view of who we are in Christ? What happens if we think more highly of ourselves than we ought? What happens if we think too little of ourselves?

For Prayer:

- Thank the Lord that He loves you just as you are. Thank Him that you are his child.
- Ask the Lord to remind you of your need of Him in everything.
- Thank the Lord that all you have comes from Him. Take a moment to surrender all you have to the Lord. Ask Him to use all that He has given you to build His kingdom.

4

TEMPTATION, SIN AND GOOD GIFTS

Read James 1:12-18

We have been speaking here in this first chapter about the trials that come our way as believers. While God intends to use these trials for our good, we can be sure that the enemy wants to use them to distract us and keep us from truth and maturity. As believers, we are called to endure trials with the wisdom God provides and allow them to draw us closer to the Lord. In this next section of verses, James reminded his readers that there is a blessing for those who persevere under trials.

The Lord Jesus taught that there is a blessing given to those who are persecuted for His sake. In Matthew 5:11-12 we read:

“Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way

they persecuted the prophets who were before you.”

The Lord God knows what we are facing. He will not leave us without reward for our perseverance in times of trial for His namesake. We do not always see the blessing here on earth, but we can be sure that God will be faithful to His word and reward us in the age to come.

The reward for persevering under trial is not reserved for heaven alone. The Lord draws near to those who seek Him and are willing to humbly endure trials and suffering for His name. These trials will draw us closer to God. Like precious metal in a refining furnace, our impurities are burned out, and we are purified and cleansed by fiery circumstances. We should not be afraid of difficult times and persecution. In fact, we ought to be encouraged that through them the Lord God is drawing us closer to Himself. There is an immediate blessing and also a great reward to come. In this, we ought to rejoice.

James spoke in verse 12 about the crown of life that awaits those who persevere under trial. We should not see this necessarily as a literal crown to be worn throughout eternity. We are not told anything about this reward. Some see the crown of life to refer to eternal life in the presence of God. Others see it as a special reward for those who have faced trials in life and overcome.

In this life, there will be many temptations. Trials are different from temptations. Trials can come in various forms. They may come in the form of sickness or persecution. They may also come in the form of rejection, mocking, or lies spoken against us. God will be with us in these trials and use them to draw us closer to Him. Temptations, on the other hand, are the attempt of the enemy or the voice

of our own sinful flesh seeking to cause us to turn from God and His purposes. If trials run their intended course, we are strengthened and better equipped to serve our Lord. On the other hand, if temptations run their intended course, they will lead us to disobedience and walking away from God.

As believers, we will face both trials and temptations in this life. God can use the trials for our good. He may even send us trials to refine us and cleanse us of our sin. James reminds us here, however, that God will never tempt us to do evil (verse 13). God may call us to face struggle and difficulty, but He will never ask us to sin. If you find yourself in a situation where you are being tempted to turn away from God and His purpose for your life, you need to get out of that situation. While we need to persevere under trials, we need to flee temptation.

Many of us do not make a distinction between trial and temptation. We want to flee from our trials and justify our temptations. When we flee from our trials, we are not trained by them. If we say that God is tempting us, we don't flee from our temptation and thus find ourselves falling into sin. What James tells us here is that God will never tempt us to do evil. If you are being enticed to do evil, you can be sure that what you are facing is not from the Lord God, whose desire is that you live in purity of heart, body, and mind.

Temptations also come from our sinful flesh (verse 14). The old nature feeds on sin and evil. We need to die to that old nature (Romans 8:13). We are called to flee from its lusts (2 Timothy 2:22). James tells us in verse 15 that if we listen to the evil desires of the flesh, the result will be sin. The flesh does not seek God and His ways. Its desire is contrary to God and His purposes.

If we allow those sinful thoughts, attitudes, and actions to grow in us, the result will be death. While there is a sense in which sin is the cause of physical death, what is more important is the spiritual death that occurs. Spiritual death is a separation from God. This is what sin does. It will separate us from fellowship with God.

James cautioned his readers about being deceived. In this context, they were to be careful not to allow themselves to be deceived by the flesh into thinking that God was tempting them to sin or that God would not judge sin. They needed great discernment to distinguish between their trials which God would use for good and temptations.

James reminded them in verse 17 that God's methods and purposes for our life are always good and perfect. This is an important principle for us to remember. What God gives is always good and perfect. It will lead us to obedience, purity, and holiness. This does not mean that what God's does is always easy. Sometimes God will work through difficult trials. What God does in us, however, will always lead us into greater holiness and purity. If you want to discern if what you are facing is from God, then ask yourself if it is maturing you in righteousness. Does this trial produce greater holiness of life and deeper dependence on God, or does it draw you away from God into sin and evil? What God sends will always draw us closer to Him. What He sends will always be for our good and serve to perfect us in our walk with Him.

We are reminded in verse 17 that God is a God of heavenly lights. Light represents holiness and purity. As a God of heavenly light, there is no darkness in Him at all. Never could He be accused of sin. Everything He does is perfect and holy. He will never change. We can count on Him as a holy and perfect God. We can accept without hesitation

whatever He sends our way, knowing that it will always be for our good and His glory.

In verse 18 James makes it clear that this God of perfection and light chose us and gave us birth into His family. The birth referred to here is our spiritual birth. This gift of life came as a result of God's sovereign choice. God is our Father, and He loves us as His chosen children. He cares for us and seeks only our blessing.

Notice that we were given spiritual birth through the word of truth. That word was the gospel. It was this word that spoke of a Savior who came to forgive. When we accepted that word, we were born into the family of God.

God's desire is that we be the firstfruits of His harvest. The firstfruits were the first and best harvest crops that were dedicated to the Lord God (Exodus 23:19). This is who we are. We are the first spiritual fruit of the work of Christ on the cross, dedicated entirely to the Lord God. We are the first evidence of God's new creation that is to come (2 Peter 3:10-13).

What we need to see here is that God's desire as our spiritual Father is to care for us and lead us closer to Him. He will not lead us into sin and evil. His desire is to purify us. That purifying will not be easy but it will always bring blessing. While God will use trials to strengthen and perfect us, He will never tempt us to sin. We must learn to distinguish between the trials God uses and the temptations of the flesh and the enemy that will draw away from God.

For Consideration:

- What blessings come from trials?
- Have you personally experienced how the Lord can use a trial in your life to purify and draw you closer? Explain.
- How is perseverance a test of true faith?
- What is the difference between a trial and a temptation?
- How should we deal with trials? How should we deal with temptations?

For Prayer:

- Thank the Lord that He only has our wellbeing in mind.
- Thank God that as a Father of heavenly light, there is no earthly darkness of sin and evil in Him. Thank Him that He is completely trustworthy.
- Ask the Lord to give you greater strength to persevere under your trial.
- Ask God to strengthen you to flee from temptations.

5

THE MIRROR OF GOD'S WORD

Read James 1:19-25

We spoke in the last meditation about the difference between trials and temptations. James challenged his readers to endure trials so that they could be matured in their walk with the Lord. Temptations, on the other hand, are quite different. They are intended to draw us away from the Lord and His purposes. We are to flee temptations.

In verse 19, the apostle told his readers to be quick to listen and slow to become angry. How often have we become angry with others without listening to their perspective? Could it be that the person who seemed to ignore you was under tremendous stress at home? Could it be that you misunderstood the intentions of others? How many conflicts could be avoided if we would only take the time to listen to our brothers or sisters before making a judgment? Instead of boiling over with anger, we may instead feel compassion. Instead of speaking abusive words, we may find ourselves being more patient. When

we take the time to listen, we can often avoid conflict completely.

James wrote in verse 20 that human anger does not produce the fruit of godliness. Anger is the root of many evils. When anger is allowed to produce its fruit in our lives, very often the result is disastrous. Human anger produces deep emotional wounds in families and in the church. Anger is something we need to treat very seriously. James tells us that anger can be dealt with by taking the time to listen before responding.

Remember that the context of the book of James has to do with Christians facing persecution, trials, and temptations. We can understand how easy it would be in these times to become angry with those who make life difficult for us. James reminds us, however that anger is not the soil in which the fruit of God's righteousness will grow. Instead of being angry about what was happening to them, James told His readers that they were to be joyful (1:2), steadfast (1:4), wise (1:4), full of faith (1:6) and humble (1:10). Only then could the fruit of God's Spirit become evident and flourish in their lives in the midst of their trials.

The second challenge James gave his readers in this section had to do with moral filth and evil (see verse 21). The Greek word used for filth refers to those things that defile or make unclean. It could refer to sexual immorality, but also to other moral issues such as dishonesty or disrespect for one's neighbor. There may be a connection here between the anger James speaks about in verse 19 and this moral filthiness. In our anger, we can respond inappropriately to one another. We can say things in our rage that are mean spirited and unkind. We can seek revenge by many ungodly words and actions. This is not the response of the righteous man to the trials he faces.

James told his readers to get rid of all such evil. Instead, the righteous person was to pursue purity and godliness by listening to the Word of God. Notice in verse 21 that God has put this word in the hearts of those who belong to Him. When we accepted the sacrifice of the Lord Jesus for the forgiveness of our sin, the Holy Spirit came to live in us. The Holy Spirit teaches and instructs us in the ways of the Lord. His ministry transforms us, opening our hearts to the truth and enabling us to live in that truth. James challenged his readers to listen to the truth of God's Spirit and God's Word and humbly submit to it. This was what was to guide them in their struggles. They were to reject anger and choose instead the truth of God's Word.

Notice also in verse 21 that James told his readers that this word could save them. Their hope was found in the Word of God. The gospel introduced them to the Lord Jesus as the Savior of the world. Scripture was their guide in how to live in the salvation they had experienced. Instead of being influenced by the moral filth and evil around them, they were instead to make this Word of God their guide in the struggles and trials that came their way.

It is one thing to read or listen to the Word and another thing to be obedient. You can know what the Word of God says about a particular issue, but, if you do not do what it says, that word will have no effect on your life. This is something we need to be very serious about. Our churches are filled with people who know the truth, and yet we still see sin and evil in our midst. The reason is simply that we listen to the Word but do not take it seriously enough to do what it says. We also listen to our fleshly wisdom and lusts and push the holy Word of God aside. We need to set the Scriptures as our standard of practice.

James compared the person who listens to the Word but does not do what it says to a man who looks at himself in the mirror. He sees the dirt on his face and his uncombed hair. He then walks away without doing anything about it. He knows how dirty he is, but he doesn't care. The purpose of the mirror is to show us what we look like. Similarly, when we look into the Scriptures, they teach us about ourselves. They show us the sin in our lives. They reveal these things about us so that we can repent and change our ways.

Many people open up the Word of God and read what it says. They see the sin it exposes in their lives, but they do not make the necessary changes. They continue to live as they have always lived. They do not take the Word seriously.

In verse 25 James described a man who looked intently into the Word of God. Obviously, this man was studying Scripture with a clear purpose in mind. He wanted to understand himself and know more of God's purpose and plan for his life. His desire was to make the necessary changes so that he could obey more fully.

There are two promises in verse 25 for this kind of person. The first is that obedience to the Word brings freedom. Sin and evil can only cause bondage. There are individuals who choose to disregard the Word of God. They do this in the name of freedom, but the end result is bondage. Their lusts ensnare and bind them. They are quickly controlled by their addictions and pleasures. Eventually, these activities begin to emotionally choke them and leave them with a deep sense of emptiness. Nothing this world has to offer can truly satisfy and fill the emptiness of a godless soul.

People who choose lives of obedience to the Word of God, however, experience freedom they never knew before. They experience the satisfaction of loving and serving the Creator—the reason they were created. Through the knowledge of the Word, believers are set free from the bondage of sin and evil. They are set free to become everything God intended them to be. The Word of God brings freedom.

The second promise in verse 25 for those who obey the Word of God is that they will be blessed. God chooses to bless obedience. This is evident in the Old Testament. When the children of Israel lived in obedience, they experienced victory over their enemies. When they turned from God, even their gardens did not produce the crops they needed. Imagine what our society would be like if we lived in obedience to the Word of God. Imagine the blessings that would come to our nations if we would take God's Word seriously and live in obedience. When we live in disobedience to the Lord, we hold back His blessings; but obedience will unlock those blessings.

In this chapter, James speaks about persecution and trials in the lives of the believer. We are not immune to trials in this life. The natural tendency for us when we face the injustice and abuse of this world is to become angry and resentful. James tells us that this response will never bring glory to God nor will it accomplish the purpose of God in our trial. Instead of becoming angry, we are to commit ourselves to listen to the leading of the Spirit of God and walking in obedience to the truth of God's word. Only then can we know the fullness of God's blessing and purpose in our lives.

For Consideration:

- What does James teach us about the importance of listening? Are you a good listener? Explain.
- What is the fruit of anger? How has that fruit been evident in your life?
- Is there evidence of moral filth and evil in your society? How has the church been influenced by this?
- How is the Word of God like a mirror?
- What are the blessings of obedience to the Word of God?
- What does James mean when he tells us that the Word of God has been planted in our hearts?
- What is the teaching of James about how we are to face the trials we experience in this life? What is our natural tendency? What is God's purpose for us?

For Prayer:

- Ask God to help you to be a better listener. Ask Him to help you to make the Word of God your priority in life
- Ask God to break any anger in your life.
- Ask the Lord to open your eyes and ears to hear what He is telling you in his Word. Ask Him to give you a deep commitment to walking in obedience.
- Thank God that He has not left you without a guide.

6

PURE RELIGION

Read James 1:26-27

For James, the proof of sincerity in the faith was in actions. He made it quite clear that if someone claimed to be a believer, he or she would demonstrate this in the way they lived—particularly, regarding their manner of speech and their deeds of compassion. Let's briefly examine this more closely.

James began by telling his readers that if people considered themselves to be religious and did not keep a tight rein on their tongues, their religion was worthless. The word religion has to do with the outward ceremonies and practices of faith. This particular word appears only four times in the New Testament. The first is in Acts 26:5 where Paul spoke of being a member of the strictest sect of his former religion. The second is in Colossians 2:18 where Paul spoke of those who worshiped angels. The other two uses of this word are found here in this passage of James. The use of this particular word may indicate that James was speaking to a people who had an outward show of religion but whose hearts were not really touched by the power of the message of salvation. These were individuals

who thought that they were godly because they were involved in all the celebrations of their faith. They followed the traditions without fault.

James reminded these individuals, who took pride in their religious observances, that a test of their faith was not in how much they observed these outward celebrations but in how they used their tongues. What would you think of a faithful church attendee who had a reputation of being a real gossip and slanderer in the community? What would you think of the religion of people whose word you could never trust because they were always telling lies? What good would all the outward practices of their religion be? Of all the people in the New Testament, the Lord spoke most harshly to the Pharisees. They were the most religious people of the day, yet, despite all their religious activity, they were hypocrites. Probably, the greatest damage to the church today comes from those who profess to have faith in the Lord Jesus but who do not live as Jesus lived.

James told his readers that one of the clear evidences of a changed heart is in the use of the tongue. Speaking to the religious Pharisees of his day, Jesus said in Matthew 12:34:

You brood of vipers, how can you who are evil say anything good? For out of the overflow of the heart the mouth speaks.

What Jesus is telling us here is that what comes out of the mouth is an indication of what is in the heart. When our heart is evil, the words we speak will be evil. There have been times in my life when I have spoken words I regretted. The words I spoke surprised even me. They came directly from my sinful heart. They exposed sin and evil that was lurking deep down inside.

James told his fellow believers in verse 26 that they needed to keep a tight rein on their tongues. If you have ever ridden a donkey or a horse, you will understand what this expression means. The rein is used to show a horse or donkey the direction to go. When the rider pulls back on the rein, the animal knows to slow or even stop. By keeping a tight rein, a rider can more easily control a horse. This is what James was speaking about here. The tongue needs to be controlled so that it speaks only those things that please the Lord. This requires discipline and self-control, a fruit of the Spirit of God. If your heart is truly right with God, this will be demonstrated in the way you speak.

James had a second matter to discuss with his readers. He told those who were disciplined in the outward celebrations of faith that the kind of religion that God accepted had more to do with compassion and love than it did with the strict observance of traditions. Jesus told the story of a man who was robbed and left on the roadside, badly wounded. When the religious people of the day saw him, they walked by on the other side of the road, afraid that they might make themselves unclean by touching the injured man. It was a hated Samaritan who stooped down, cared for the wounded man, and provided for all his needs (Luke 10:33-34). James was telling his readers that God would accept offerings such as those of this Samaritan, but would judge the evil of the religious hypocrites who had walked by this man in need.

James tells us that pure religion has to do with showing compassion to those in need. If you say you are a spiritual person, then you will demonstrate this in how you care for and minister to those in need. James spoke about orphans and widows in particular, but this short list should not be seen as complete. There are many other vulnerable people in our communities who are in need.

How easy it is for us to busy ourselves in church activities. As we are busy celebrating our faith, people around us are perishing. If you say you are a genuine believer, then you will minister as Jesus did. His heart of compassion will be in you as well. Your eyes will be opened to the needs around you. You will not be content to remain in your religious circle. You will not be afraid to risk getting dirty in order to reach out in compassion to those in need. If the Lord Jesus is reigning in your life and his Holy Spirit has filled you, then you will demonstrate His heart of compassion and love for those around you. You will see their needs and be compelled by the Spirit of God to move out in kindness to minister to them.

There is one final test of true religion in verse 27. James tells us that those who are truly religious keep themselves from being polluted by the world. This world has many temptations. There are many who see themselves as being religious but are caught up in the things of this world. They struggle with greed, immorality, lust, and materialism. They resort to dishonesty in their business and willingly cheat their customers. Despite this, they are faithful in the outward show of their faith. They go to church and may even serve in some capacity, but they do not have victory over the world. James tells us that all their outward show of faith amounts to nothing. The person whose faith is real will have increasing victory over the things of this world.

James told his audience that it is not enough to know the truth or even to engage in religious activities. Genuine believers will show their inner purity by controlling their tongue, helping those in need, and living in increasing victory over sin and the temptations of this world.

For Consideration:

- What does the tongue reveal to us about the condition of the heart? Have you ever found yourself saying things you regretted? What does this show you about your heart?
- Who are the needy people around you? What is the heart of Christ toward these individuals? What is your heart for them?
- How much victory are you experiencing over this world? Is there a growing sense of victory in your life?
- Why is it dangerous to judge a person's spirituality by how many times they go to church or do religious things? What is the true test of spiritual character?

For Prayer:

- Ask the Lord to give you increased control over the use of your tongue.
- Ask the Lord to open your heart more to the needs around you. Ask Him to give you His heart for those He puts in your path.
- Are there any particular sins you wrestle with in your life? Ask the Lord to give you victory over them. Surrender this part of your life to Him, and ask Him to break your attraction to these sins.

7

THE SIN OF FAVORITISM

Read James 2:1-9

The epistle of James is very practical. The apostle spoke very directly to real issues in the church. Here in this section, he dealt with the problem of favoritism. Before addressing this passage, it is important that we consider what favoritism is.

When James spoke of favoritism he was referring to the practice of judging people on the basis of their outward appearance. The person who shows favoritism is one who will look at the type of clothes a person is wearing and evaluate the person's value on that basis. Favoritism gives preferential treatment to the person who has a high position in society or has a lot of money. Sometimes favoritism is based on family background or skin color. There are many outward characteristics that can be used to judge someone.

It is important that we distinguish favoritism from the connection we naturally feel with certain individuals. For example, there are certain personalities that we may be

drawn toward. Maybe we share common interests with certain people in our church. Maybe we feel a closer tie to certain people than others do. Even Jesus seemed to have certain disciples that He was closer to than others. We can have special friendships in our church without being guilty of showing favoritism. Friendship relates to shared interests and personality traits. Favoritism is the sin of judging someone's human worth on the basis of outward appearance.

We need to understand that favoritism or prejudice is a sin. Before God, the poor man has the same value as the rich man. God does not prefer to answer the prayers of the rich more than the poor—He listens to all, regardless of social standing. When we judge people by external characteristics and respond to them out of that prejudice, we are not acting in the Spirit, but forming an opinion by worldly standards.

James made it quite clear in verse 1 that, as believers in the Lord Jesus, we are not to show favoritism. Notice the connection between the fact that we are believers in the Lord Jesus and the fact that we are not to show favoritism. As believers, we know how the Lord has treated us. If the Lord were to judge us as we often judge others, where would we be today? When we were at our worst, the Lord Jesus reached out in compassion to us. We received mercy when we did not deserve it. The Lord Jesus reaches out to both rich and poor. He reaches out to all, regardless of their outward appearance or influence in society. We who have received such grace need to be willing to show that same compassion and love for others.

James gave an example in verse 2. He speaks here of a situation in which a man comes to a church meeting with a gold ring on his finger and fancy clothes. Just behind him

comes a poor man dressed in old tattered clothes. Imagine that the person who greets them both at the door decides to treat the rich man with special favor. He leads him to the best seat in the church, near the front where he has a place of honor. Looking at the poor man, he tells him to stand at the back door or to sit on the floor.

James made it quite clear in verse 4 that if we treat individuals in this way, we are making a judgment on their value. We are revealing the evil thought that people of influence and wealth are more important than those who have little. James tells us that we are guilty of sin if we cater to the rich and shun the poor. God's values are not the same as ours. God does not look at what is on the outside—He looks at the heart. Throughout the history of the church, God has chosen those who were of little value in the eyes of the world and done great things through them. He has saved and greatly used those who were outcasts in the eyes of society.

How we need to praise the Lord today that He does not base our value on how much money we have in the bank or by our influence in society. When Jesus came to this earth, He came as the son of a carpenter. This was a lowly and common profession in His society. Mary and Joseph were not rich by any means. Jesus was born in Bethlehem, which was in many ways a despised town in Israel. When He began His ministry, Jesus chose fishermen and tax collectors to be His disciples. He forgave the woman who was caught in adultery when everyone else wanted to kill her. He reached out to the Samaritan woman when no other Jew wanted anything to do with her because of her race. There are many examples of how the Lord Jesus reached out to those who were despised by their society. He loved them for who they were. He did powerful things through

these social outcasts. These men and women became strong in faith and were very precious in the eyes of God.

James reminded his readers of how the rich were exploiting them. From a very human point of view, it was obvious that many of the rich people were evil in their thoughts and intentions. By showing partiality to the wealthy, the believers were honoring those who exploited them and dragged them to court. Many of these rich people were blaspheming the name of the Lord. They were caught up in the love of money and possessions and did not see their need of God. While the church was favoring those who were oppressing them, they were oppressing the poor whom God honored. They were not seeing people as God saw them.

Verse 8 reminds us that we do well if we love our neighbor as ourselves. We must learn to love the rich and the poor as we love ourselves. We are to minister to them as if we were ministering to ourselves. We should ask the question: How would I like this person to treat me? Having answered that question, we should then treat them accordingly. If we show favoritism, however, we sin and are guilty of breaking God's law (verse 9).

The challenge of this passage is to learn how to see people as the Lord Jesus sees them. To judge people based on their outward appearance is to be very shallow in our thinking and to behave just like the world. This is a sin that needs to be confessed before God.

For Consideration:

- What are some of the prejudicial standards we use in our day to evaluate people?
- What is the difference between friendship and showing favoritism?
- How does God judge us?
- Have you ever found yourself guilty of judging people based on outward appearance? Explain.

For Prayer:

- Ask the Lord to make you more aware of the times you have made judgments about people based on their outward appearance.
- Thank the Lord that He loved you and did not judge you because of your social standing or bank account?
- Ask the Lord to open your heart to the value of those who are social outcasts in society.
- Thank the Lord that He can use us as we are. Offer yourself to Him with all your shortcomings.

8

MERCY AND JUDGMENT

Read James 2:10-13

James challenges his readers in their relationship with God as well as their neighbors. In the last meditation, we saw how James spoke about showing favoritism. He explained that favoritism is a sin in the eyes of God. Lest his readers think that prejudice is less significant than other sins, James wrote that to break any of God's laws is to be guilty of breaking them all.

How can it be said that a person who breaks one law is guilty of breaking all? Imagine that you are singing in a choir. In that choir is a man who cannot sing in tune. No matter how hard he tries, he simply cannot sing in harmony with the other choir members. What is the result? The music is affected. What people hear is not in harmony. Because of one member, the music the choir sings is no longer pleasant to our ears. One person singing out of tune can ruin the whole song. Or imagine that you have a glass of cold water on the table before you. If someone comes alongside you and places a single drop of poison in that water, what will be the result? All the water must be thrown out because the poison affects the whole glass of water.

You cannot separate the poison from the water. Or have you ever banged your finger or stubbed your toe? Is the effect limited to just the area that has been hurt? Is not the whole body affected?

What we need to understand is that sin affects every part of us. When I turn my back on God and fall into sin, I am guilty before Him. Because I am guilty, I deserve to be punished. The Bible makes it clear that the penalty for sin is death. Just as a drop of poison contaminates the whole glass of water, so a single sin poisons my whole life and is enough to separate me from God.

We have a tendency to measure sins and rank them according to severity. God does not do this. Sin is sin. A single sin is enough to keep us from God. The holiness of God is such that even the smallest sin is an abomination to Him. John tells us that God is light and there is no darkness in Him at all (see 1 John 1:5). This means that there is not even the faintest hint of sin in the Lord God. Those sins we hardly even consider significant are still an abomination to God and will keep us from Him.

To break a single law is to be a lawbreaker. God does not rate each sin. He simply gives us his law as a whole unit and tells us that this is the standard. He will not count out your sins and compare them to the sins of your neighbor. There is one standard and one punishment for all. The one standard is the law of God in its entirety. The one punishment for breaking any part of that law is death. Anyone who breaks His law in any part is guilty enough to suffer the penalty of death.

There are many people who believe that, because they are not as much of a lawbreaker as their neighbor, their punishment will be less. This is not how God sees it. If we do

not perfectly keep the law, then we are guilty. There is no grey area here. Either we perfectly keep the law or we are lawbreakers who are sentenced to eternal death. The standard is very strict. The law must be taken as a unit. To break even one is to be as guilty as the person who breaks them all.

This places us under an impossible standard. While I may keep more of the law of God than someone else, I am still guilty of breaking the law, and, therefore, I fall short of His standard. No one except the Lord Jesus has ever been able to measure up to the standard God set out for us in the law. Each of us has fallen short in one way or other. The result of this is spiritual death and eternal separation from God. The law of God shows us that we were all sinners. If salvation came by keeping the law, not one of us would ever be saved. It is for this reason that the Lord Jesus came. He came to offer us a way to God. Through the covering of His blood, we can be forgiven. He took the penalty for our sins and died in our place.

These verses tell us that we cannot compare ourselves to someone else. We cannot look at one sin and say that it is less significant than another because any sin is enough to keep us eternally from God. How important it is that we are in Christ and know His forgiveness.

In verse 12 James challenged his readers to live as those who are going to be judged by the law that gives freedom. We have just seen that the law of God, as found in the Old Testament, placed us under an impossible standard. The law of the Old Testament could never bring freedom. James is *not* referring to the Old Testament law here when he spoke of the law that gives freedom. When the Lord Jesus came to this earth, he died so that the penalty for our sins could be paid. This was not all He came to do,

however. He also came so that the Spirit of God could live in our lives.

The Holy Spirit comes to lead us to the truth. He comes to empower us to live the life God requires. The law of God is written in the hearts and minds of those who know the presence of the Spirit of God in them. While the flesh is contrary to God and His purposes, believers live according to the leading, direction, and guidance of the Spirit of Christ who lives in them. The Spirit motivates them and leads them to understand the truths of the Word of God. James told his fellow believers to speak as those would be judged on this basis. They would be judged on the basis of their obedience to the Spirit of God in them and the truth the Spirit inspired.

James makes a powerful statement in verse 13. He told his readers that judgment would be without mercy to those who showed no mercy and that mercy triumphs over judgment. God sees how we act toward others. He knows our prejudices. How can we expect to know His blessing and mercy if we are unwilling to extend that same kindness to those around us? James reminds us that we will be judged by the same standards we use to judge others (see Matthew 6:12-14; 1 Peter 3:7).

In the larger context of these verses, James had been speaking about showing favoritism and judging people on the basis of outward appearance. Sometimes we choose to listen to the flesh and not the Spirit. In these times, we can very easily judge each other or look down on each other in the body of Christ. This verse reminds us that mercy is a more powerful tool than judgment. I have seen individuals walk away from the Lord because of a critical and judgmental spirit in a church. On the other hand, I

have seen love triumph and bring victory over sin in the life of a wanderer. Mercy can triumph where judgment will fail.

James calls us in these verses to learn to walk in the truth of God's Word and the leading of His Spirit. We are to speak and act as those who will be judged by God according to how we live under the direction of His Holy Spirit in our lives. Did we speak words that were inspired by the Spirit of God or did we speak from the sinfulness of our human heart? Did we act in ways that were led by the Spirit of God or were we motivated by sinful lusts and impulses? The Spirit of God comes to lead us in ways that will glorify the Father and honour His Word. He teaches us how to speak and act toward each other. James tells us that true faith will impact our relationship with each other. We are to be sensitive to the law of the Spirit and what He is calling us to do and say. We are to be sure that in all our words and actions we are being led and motivated by the Spirit of God and the truth of His Word. True faith is a Spirit-led faith that impacts our relationships with those we come into contact with on a daily basis.

For Consideration:

- Why is it important that we see the law of God as a whole and not as individual parts?
- How can it be said that if we disobey even one law, we are guilty of disobeying all?
- What is the law that gives freedom? How does it differ from the Old Testament law?
- What does James mean when he tells us that mercy triumphs over judgment?

- Are there people you need to show mercy to today? Who are they?
- How does speaking and acting as the Spirit of God teaches and leads impact our relationships with people around us? What difference would it make in relationships if we were all following the leading of God's Spirit?

For Prayer:

- Thank the Lord for coming to pay the penalty for our sin.
- Ask the Lord to enable you to more fully listen to the leading and guidance of the Holy Spirit in your life. Thank the Lord that by walking in tune with His Spirit, our relationships will be transformed.
- Ask the Lord to enable you to show more mercy. Ask Him to forgive you for the times you have not shown mercy to others.
- Thank the Lord that He has put His Spirit in us to lead us in very practical ways.

9

FAITH AND WORKS

Read James 2:14-26

This is probably the best-known passage in the book of James. James writes powerfully here about the connection between faith and works. His concern was to see people practice what they believed. It is very easy to say we have faith but to demonstrate that faith in real life is very different. Let's take a look at what the apostle James has to tell us here.

James begins by asking a very important question in verse 14:

“What good is it, my brothers, if a man claims to have faith but has no deeds? Can such faith save him?”

This passage has caused problems for theologians. Some see James promoting salvation by works. This, however, is far from the truth. James believed that true faith would be demonstrated by works. In other words, if people say

they believe in the Lord Jesus, this will be evident in how they live.

Imagine that you meet a man who claims to be a believer but is living in sin with no desire to change his lifestyle. As you listen to him speak, there is no evidence of a changed heart. His language, his actions, and his way of thinking all reflect a worldly mindset. What are you to believe about this individual? If there is no visible demonstration of the life of Christ in him, then would there not be a reason to wonder if he is really saved at all? What James is telling us here is that true saving faith will have a powerful transforming impact on the life of an individual.

The apostle Paul was in complete agreement with James on this issue when he wrote:

“Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come!” (2 Corinthians 5:17).

Like James, there was no question in the mind of the apostle Paul about this matter. When the Spirit of God comes to live in the heart of the believer, there will be a radical difference in the life of that individual. The Spirit of God comes to change and renew the mind and heart of the person He indwells. He empowers and equips individuals to change their way of life and thinking. It was unthinkable to James and Paul that someone could claim to have saving faith in the Lord Jesus and not experience a powerful transformation. If the faith you profess to have has not changed your way of life and thinking, then you have reason to question whether it is truly saving faith. This is what James was saying in verse 14.

For James, true faith was very practical. In verse 15 he gave an example of the difference between true and false faith. Imagine that a brother or sister in your community does not have food or clothing. What would you think of the faith of people who would wish this brother or sister well but not do anything about their need even though they had the resources to supply that need?

In our day, we think of faith in terms of belief only. James reminds us that this not the Biblical definition of faith. Faith is belief and action working together. To say you believe something and never act on it is to deceive yourself. True faith ought to cause us to act on our beliefs. If I believe that God will provide, then I will move forward in faith and let Him provide. If I believe that God will enable me, then I will be obedient in areas that are beyond my human ability to handle. If I believe that God has called me to do something, then I will step out to do what He has called me to do. Faith and action walk hand in hand. Faith with no action is not really faith at all (see verse 17). The proof of whether you or I have faith is found in what we do.

One of the objections to the teaching of James here is found in verse 18. There were those who were saying that some had faith and others had deeds. In other words, there were some people who were gifted in faith. Others were gifted in ministries of helps. James answered this objection by asking these individuals to show true faith without deeds. Is it possible for a person to have faith and not show that by their actions? Can a person have true faith and not have that faith move them or change them in some way? James believed that was impossible. True saving faith is life changing. It stirs us to action and motivates us to service and worship.

Belief and faith by themselves are of no value if they are not accompanied by action. Verse 19 reminds us that the demons of hell believe in God and know His power. These demons are more aware and confident in that power than we are. But the demons of hell will be cast forever in the lake of fire. Their belief in God and knowledge of His power is useless. If we say we believe God exists and that He is able to do all things, but do nothing about it, then our faith is no bigger than that of the demons of hell. They believe the same thing. Unless you use your faith to love and serve God, then it is of no value. Imagine putting gas in your car and never driving the car. If you never use the gas in your car, it will serve no purpose. In a similar way, faith that is not used is of no value (verse 20).

In verse 21 James illustrated what he is telling us by using the example of Abraham. One day God called him to take his only son and offer him on an altar as a sacrifice. Abraham heard the Lord and did what He said, even though it made no sense to him. God credited this to him as righteousness. God was pleased. Faith is the fuel that ignites the fire of action. In the case of Abraham, faith and action worked hand in hand (verse 22). When faith does its work, it will naturally lead to obedience. Maybe you have tried to light a fire that simply did not want to start. Imagine that you put some gasoline on that wood. What would happen then? The gasoline will ignite and set the wood on fire. This is what faith does. It ignites our stubborn hearts and minds and sets them ablaze and ready for action. Faith pushes us to action.

God delights in this sort of faith. When Abraham moved forward in obedience to what he heard, God credited this to him as righteousness (verse 23). In other words, God was pleased with his actions. Not only that, but God was pleased to call Abraham his friend.

James reminds us that a person is justified or made right with God not only by faith but also by actions. This does not mean that people can be saved by what they do, but the evidence of true faith is seen in actions and changed lives.

James illustrated this point in verse 25 with the example of Rahab the prostitute. Rahab hid two Hebrew spies who came to the land of Canaan (Joshua 2). She believed that God was going to give the Israelites victory over her own people. As a result, she chose to protect these individuals, risking her own life in the process. She believed that these spies served the true God. Her faith caused her to risk her life and turn her back on her own people. God honored that faith and protected her and her family. The power of faith is such that it will risk all for what it believes.

James concluded by reminding his readers that just as the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without deeds is also dead. For James, dead faith was useless. How we need to hear what James is telling us here. He is calling us to let true faith have its way in our life. When we open our hearts to the true faith, we will be moved to obedience and practical actions. What has God been putting in your heart? What are you hearing by faith from Him? Allow that faith to move you to obedient action. Move forward in confidence and trust and demonstrate that your faith is real.

For Consideration:

- What is the evidence of true saving faith?

- What is the difference between what the demons believe about God and His power and what Abraham believed?
- What does faith enable us to do or to risk?
- What did faith mean for Rahab?
- What is the evidence of true saving faith in your own life?

For Prayer:

- Ask God to give you a faith that will move forward in obedience no matter the cost.
- Ask God to show you what it is that keeps you from demonstrating true faith in your life.
- Ask the Lord to increase your faith.
- Thank God that He is worthy of our faith and confidence.

TAMING THE TONGUE

Read James 3:1-12

In chapter 3 of his epistle, James returns to the subject of the use of the tongue (see 1:19, 26). The apostle firmly believed that genuine faith would be evident in very practical ways in the lives of Christians. The words people say are a vivid indicator of the condition of their heart. In this passage, James speaks of the use of the tongue as a measure of true faith.

James opened this chapter with a brief exhortation to those who used their tongue to communicate truth. James reminded teachers that with much knowledge comes much responsibility. Those who want to be teachers need to live by the principles they teach. Again, this shows the practical nature of James' teaching. According to James, while teaching is an honorable profession, it would be better not to teach than to teach and fail to heed one's own instruction. James warned teachers that they would be more strictly judged by God. This ought not to frighten us or keep us from doing the will of God for our lives. Those who have been called to this position of teacher or preacher, however, need to minister with the fear of God in their hearts

and a deep burning desire to do the will of God by living what they preach.

This is not to say that those of us who are teachers and preachers are to be perfect. If perfection were a requirement for teachers and preachers, no one would qualify. James made it very clear in verse 2 that we will all stumble in many ways in our life. None of us can claim perfection. We have all fallen short of the standard God has set for us in His Word.

All of us need the mercy and forgiveness offered by the blood of Christ. While teachers will sin, they need to quickly repent and learn to walk in forgiveness and in growing obedience. They are not to persevere in any known sin but instead be restored to a right relationship with God.

James tells us that a perfect man is one who is able to keep his body in check (verse 2). He compares this to a bit in a horse's mouth in verse 3. The bit is put in the mouth of a horse to tell it where to go. We control the horse by means of this small bit.

In verse 4 the apostle used the illustration of the rudder on a ship. The ship is a large vessel that is often tossed about by strong winds and waves. What controls the direction of a large ship? It is a small rudder under the ship that, when moved to one side or another, will steer the ship in the direction the pilot wants to go.

The bit in a horse's mouth or the rudder on a ship are just small parts but capable of determining the direction of powerful objects. He who controls the rudder and the bit controls the course of the ship or the direction a horse will take. In a similar way, the flow of our lives and the direction

they take depends often on how much I am in control of my desires and appetites.

James moves on from here to show just how difficult it can be to control the use of our tongue. James reminded his readers of just how small the tongue is in the human body and also of the incredible damage the tongue can cause (verse 5). While the tongue is small, it boasts of great things. How many men and women in history have boasted of their great achievements and accomplishments? Some have even proclaimed themselves to be gods. The tongue makes great boasts. The lives and destinies of men and women can be shaped by such boasts. The tongue that makes such boasts will be held accountable for its blasphemy.

James goes on to say that even a small spark can set a whole forest on fire. The tongue has the deadly power of a little spark. This little body part can corrupt the whole person. It can do much damage to the body of Christ. The tongue can destroy our testimony. More than one ministry has been destroyed by the evil tongues of gossips and slanderers.

James went as far as to say in verse 6 that the tongue gets its destructive flames from the fires of hell. Maybe you have experienced the evil and destructive force of a hell-fired tongue. Maybe you have been the object of curses and slander. Maybe you have been the source of it.

In verse 7 James spoke of all kinds of animals, birds, and reptiles that have been tamed. Even certain fish have been tamed by humans. Throughout the history of the world, however, no one has been able to perfectly tame the tongue (except for the Lord Jesus). Our tongues have lashed out on more than one occasion in our lives to do

their deadly work. Who among us can say that they have perfectly tamed and controlled their tongue? According to James, the tongue is a “restless evil” (verse 8). Evil grows and multiplies on the sinful, fleshly tongue. It is filled with deadly poison that, when released, will damage and destroy.

It is not that the tongue can only speak evil. James was quite aware that tongues can also worship God. The same tongue that praises God, however, can at a different time, curse people, who have been made in the image of God. On Sundays, we sing the praises of our Lord, but on Mondays, we might criticize or condemn a co-worker. This is clear evidence that the tongue has not been tamed. James wrestled with the fact that out of the same mouth would come praise for God and cursing of those who were created in His image. For James, it was like a single spring giving both fresh water and salt water.

A fig tree cannot produce olives (see verse 12). Nor can a salt spring produce fresh water. For James, the evil tongue could not honor God. It needed to be checked. It needed to be bound and controlled so that it would not release its deadly poison.

This chapter warns us of the dangers of the tongue. This little member of the body is capable of tremendous evil. It can do serious damage to the body of Christ and is capable of destroying whole churches. If left unchecked it will release its poison, infecting all it comes in contact with. James does not seem to believe that the tongue could be perfectly controlled in this life, but he wanted believers to make a serious effort to do so. The tongue draws its source from our hearts. It is a reflection of what is still to be conquered in us. James tells us that if our hearts are controlled by God, then this will be reflected in the way we use our

tongues. If we have true faith, it will be demonstrated in how we speak. The man or woman of faith will make every effort to control their tongue.

For Consideration:

- What does James tell us about the responsibility of a teacher? How important is it for a teacher to live out what he or she teaches?
- What kind of damage can the unchecked tongue cause? Have you seen this damage first-hand? Explain.
- What does your tongue tell you about the condition of your heart?
- What is the connection between true faith and the use of our tongue?

For Prayer:

- Ask the Lord to help you to control your tongue.
- Ask the Lord to forgive you for the times you have not controlled your tongue.
- Ask the Lord to heal the damage that your tongue may have caused others.
- Ask the Lord to give you the courage to seek the forgiveness of those you may have offended by the improper use of your tongue.

11

WISDOM FROM ABOVE

Read James 3:13-18

In this next section of chapter 3, James expressed concern for believers to live by heavenly wisdom and not by earthly wisdom. He challenges the believer to demonstrate this heavenly wisdom by good conduct (verse 13).

Wisdom cannot be separated from conduct. To the Jewish mind, godly wisdom was the art of skillfully applying knowledge to life in such a way that God received the glory and honor due to His name.

Notice in verses 14 and 15, that James made a distinction between the wisdom of this world and the wisdom of God. James tells us that the wisdom of the world harbours bitterness and envy and is filled with selfish ambition. He went on to say that earthly wisdom is unspiritual and comes from the devil. There are some important things we need to see in these verses.

First, notice that there is a wisdom that even the unbeliever can have. The unbeliever can be wise in the things of business or dealings with fellow human beings. The key characteristic of worldly wisdom, according to James, is selfishness. Those who have earthly wisdom are concerned with how to profit for themselves. They have real skill in promoting their own interests. When earthly wisdom does not get what it wants, however, it becomes envious or bitter.

Verse 14 reminds us that earthly wisdom can also lead to boasting and pride. Maybe you have met individuals who have boasted of their achievements and accomplishments in this life. Through their own wisdom, they have built large businesses or ruled well in government. Some have built large churches and administer them well. They look back on what they have achieved and are proud and boastful. They truly believe that it is because of their great wisdom that these things have been achieved.

Second, according to verse 15, worldly wisdom is unspiritual. It is from the devil. In other words, earthly wisdom is a system of thought that removes God from its consideration. Earthly wisdom has nothing to do with God. Men and women make and carry out their own plans without consulting God or considering His purposes. The devil is quite happy to have this happen. He encourages us to live our lives from such a godless perspective. Back in the Garden of Eden, Satan used worldly wisdom to convince Eve to eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. He skillfully convinced her of the "benefits" of tasting its fruit. He continues to do this today. Many are deceived by his godless wisdom.

Worldly wisdom is not just found in the unbeliever. It can also be found in the church of our day. Often our churches

and Christian organizations are run like worldly businesses. Repeatedly, in the pages of the Old Testament, the Israelite kings would seek the Lord about whether they should go to battle. They wanted to know God's heart. This is not always the case in the church. Many churches are built by human wisdom. We set our own goals and agendas and promote our own ideas without seeking the Lord. We do this in the name of the Lord but we have not truly consulted Him and sought His will.

How important it is for us to seek the ways of God and not depend on our own reasoning. Earthly wisdom will not advance the kingdom of God. We can build big churches by means of worldly wisdom. We can draw a crowd and please people but is the kingdom of God advanced? Are we closer to God? Is He receiving the glory?

We need superior wisdom to overcome the power of evil. Satan is not threatened by our earthly skills and wisdom. His efforts are destroyed, however, by the wisdom that comes from God.

According to verse 16, earthly wisdom is by nature selfish and causes disorder. The personal ambitions, deceptions, and hypocrisy of earthly wisdom will inevitably lead to rivalries and resentment. As relationships deteriorate, disorder and confusion increase. In this demonic environment, every kind of sin imaginable is present.

In contrast to this evil earthly wisdom is the wisdom that comes from heaven. Heavenly wisdom is pure (verse 17). This means it is free from sin and defilement. There is no selfishness or bitterness in heavenly wisdom. It concerns itself with what is right and not with personal profit. There are no hidden motives in heavenly wisdom. It is sincere and selfless. Its only desire is the will of God and His glory.

Another characteristic of heavenly wisdom is that it is peace-loving. While earthly wisdom causes turmoil and misunderstanding, heavenly wisdom creates unity. The heart of heavenly wisdom is encouragement and consideration of others. This wisdom does not lift itself up above others but, like the Lord Jesus, willingly lays down its life to serve in a humble and submissive way.

The wisdom that comes from God is also full of mercy, compassion, and forgiveness. It does not return evil for evil but shows mercy to those who have wronged it. It forgives and forgets, whereas, worldly wisdom will keep an account of wrongs suffered.

The wisdom that comes from above is impartial and sincere. It is not a respecter of persons. In other words, it does not look on the outward appearance. It is honest and open in its dealings with everyone. Its concern is that truth and justice prevail.

James reminds us that the fruit of heavenly wisdom is a harvest of righteousness. If you want your ministry to count for the Lord, you need this wisdom from heaven. If you want to live a life that pleases God, then you dare not trust your own reasoning. Day by day, we need to seek the Lord and His purpose. We need to saturate ourselves in the teaching of the Word of God. We also we need to seek his leading and direction in our lives and ministries. For this, we need to enter a deeper communion with God. We need to die to our own ideas and plans and seek the Lord for His. We must learn to trust His leading more than we trust our own understanding.

For Consideration:

- What are the characteristics of earthly wisdom?
- How does heavenly wisdom differ from earthly wisdom?
- Where does heavenly wisdom come from?
- Have you ever found yourself trying to minister or live by means of your own earthly wisdom? What fruit can you expect from earthly wisdom?
- Why is heavenly wisdom necessary to produce a harvest of righteousness?

For Prayer:

- Ask the Lord to forgive you for the times when you have ignored heavenly wisdom and chosen to do things your own way.
- Thank the Lord that He is so willing to give us His wisdom.
- Ask the Lord to open your heart and mind more and more to His purpose. Ask him to give you wisdom for this day.
- Ask the Lord to give you a greater desire to seek Him and His purpose in all things.

12

FRIENDSHIP WITH THE WORLD

Read James 4:1-6

In the last meditation, James discussed the differences between the wisdom from heaven and the wisdom of this world. One of the clear differences noted between the two was that, while heavenly wisdom leads to humility and peace, earthly wisdom leads to pride, envy, and bitterness. As we begin chapter 4, James speaks about this envy and bitterness and how it manifested itself in fights and quarrels.

In verse 1 James bluntly asked the question: "What causes fights and quarrels among you?" Obviously, James was writing to believers who were struggling in their relationships. They were having problems demonstrating their faith in practical ways toward each other. James wants to address this issue.

Having asked about the cause of quarrels, James proceeded to answer this question himself. He reminded his

readers that these fights came from their own desires battling within them. These desires came from their fleshly nature. The flesh was jealous and envious when someone else was blessed. It wanted to be first.

If these believers had been listening to the Spirit, they would have been content with what they have. They would have rejoiced when someone else was blessed. They would have been happy for them and would have done their part to add even more to their blessing. They would sacrifice their own interests for the sake of their brothers and sisters in Christ.

Listening to the desires of the flesh, however, things were very different. When the flesh does not get what it wants, it becomes jealous, envious and bitter. It will quarrel and fight to get what it wants. These evil desires begin to control their thoughts and actions and become the focus of our life. How can we overcome the evil desires of the flesh? James provides some practical suggestions in this passage.

In verse 2 James stated that we do not have because we do not ask God. There is an important principle here we need to understand. James was encouraging believers to commit all desires to the Lord God. He was not implying that God would always give us everything we ask for but that we should bring our requests to Him. When we ask God about the desires of our heart, He may say "yes" or He may say "no". What is important is that we commit these desires to Him, seeking His wisdom and guidance. He will give us all we need. God should be the source of our blessing. What He chooses not to give we accept as being His will. What He does give we praise Him for His blessing. Either way, we surrender our desires to Him. If you want to deal with the desires of your flesh, the first

thing you need to do is bring them to God and accept His will with an obedient and humble heart.

The second thing we need to do with the desires that well up inside us is to examine our motives. James told his readers in verse 3 that the motivation behind these desires was not always godly. In some cases, the motivation is the satisfaction of fleshly passions and not the glory of God. On other occasions, these desires are the result of an adulterous love for the world.

We should not be misled by this into thinking that the Lord God is against our pleasure. On the contrary, He has given us many things to enjoy in this world. Sometimes these things, however, become more important to us than God Himself. God must be first in our hearts.

As we seek God about our desires, we need to ask the question: Is my motive to please and honor God, or am I only concerned about myself and my own pleasure? Am I willing to sacrifice what I desire if God asks me to do so?

In verse 4 James called believers to remember their relationship with the Lord God. If you are a believer today, you have entered a relationship with your Lord. He is your Lord and Savior. You have committed yourself to be faithful to Him. You have given your life to Him. To turn your back on him for the things of this world is to be guilty of spiritual adultery. The desires that war in our flesh must never take the place of our Lord. He must be first in our heart.

James also reminded his listeners that friendship with the world is hatred toward God (verse 4). Friendship with the world will only take our eyes off the Lord Jesus. We need to ask ourselves if our desires will cause us to be unfaithful in our commitment to serve Christ as absolute Lord. Will

they take my eyes from Him as my true friend? Just as a husband desires the full devotion of his wife, so God seeks our full attention and devotion.

James went on to tell his readers in verse 5 that the Scriptures teach that the Spirit of God, who lives in believers, envies intensely. That is to say, He is intensely jealous for our affection. How important it is that we keep this in mind as we wrestle with the desires of the flesh. No husband is happy to see his wife turn her attention to another. God is not happy when we turn our attention to the things of this world. He longs for us and our attention. His heart cries out for us with intense jealousy. When you hear your flesh cry out for satisfaction, take a moment to consider the intense love of God for you as His child. Take a moment to remember that He died for you and your salvation. His heart cries out for your love and devotion. He loves you as no one else has ever loved you. Never will you find another love like His. Let the reality of this love touch your heart. When you truly understand the intense jealousy of the Lord for you, the desires of the flesh will lose something of their appeal.

James reminds us in verse 6 that God gives more grace to the humble but opposes the proud. The context here relates to the sinful desires of the flesh. We know that the flesh is very powerful. We have all felt its pull in our lives. What James seems to be saying here is that in those times when the battle rages in us, God is willing to give more grace. His grace will be sufficient to meet the temptation of the hour. If you want to do what is right, the Lord will give you the grace necessary to resist evil and overcome the temptation. If, however, you stubbornly persist in your fleshly desires, you push the Lord aside. He gives His

grace to those who humbly want to receive it but withdraw that grace from those who arrogantly reject His purpose.

When faced with the evil desires of the flesh, James tells us to bring these desires to God and seek His wisdom. He challenges us to examine our motives. Are they for the glory of God, or are they for our own pleasures? Will these desires keep us from God or take our attention from Him and His intense love for us? For those who humble themselves and seek God and His purpose, James promised that God's grace will be manifested abundantly to them.

For Consideration:

- What fleshly desires have you had to face?
- What principles did James give us to help us deal with fleshly desires?
- What do we learn about the intense love of God for us?
- Are all desires sinful? When do our desires become sinful?

For Prayer:

- Ask the Lord to give you victory over the sinful desires of the flesh.
- Thank the Lord for His intense longing and jealousy for you.
- Ask the Lord to increase your love and devotion to Him.

- Thank Him for His promise to give all the grace we need if we will humbly seek Him and willingly walk in obedience to His purpose.

13

THE WAY UP

Read James 4:7-10

What is the way to a full and meaningful life for the believer? In this passage, James revealed how we can find true joy and meaning in life.

Submit to God

James begins this section by telling his readers that if they wanted to know the fullness of God and His blessing in their lives, they needed to submit to Him and His purpose. The word “submit” is a military term describing how soldiers arranged themselves under the command of their officers. It should be noticed, however, that this submission was voluntary. The enemy would be forced into submission, but the soldier would offer himself willingly to obey the commands of his military superiors. James was telling his fellow believers that they needed to voluntarily surrender to the Lord God.

The world looks at this and does not understand how this could possibly bring meaning and purpose to life. It is

those who want to be free from God and do their own thing who find themselves desperate and vainly seeking purpose in this world. Only in surrender to God can we discover real significance. God created us and He knows what is best for us. His ways were never meant to bind or restrict us. On the contrary, they enable us to live our lives to the fullest. The corrupt world system cannot give us what we need. Submission to God is our only hope of finding meaning and purpose.

Resist the Devil

James tells his readers next that they needed to resist the devil. Satan's desire is to cause the believer to doubt, deny, and disobey the Word of God. There is a connection between submitting to God and resisting the devil. We resist the devil by submitting to the Lord God and His ways. To resist is to hear the Lord and follow His commands. By turning to the Lord, we are turning away from the devil and his deceptions.

We resist by surrendering to the Lord in everything. This will take everything we have. It will require that we die to all our desires and seek Him alone. It will mean ridding ourselves of everything that distracts us from purity and godliness. As we continue to resist by submitting to the Lord, the promise of James is that the enemy will flee from us. The enemy hates holiness and purity of life. We must not give him a foothold in our lives.

Come Near to God

The third challenge of James is to come near to God. There is a difference between submitting to God and coming near to God. A soldier can submit to the commands of his superior officer and still not be close to that officer. A

slave can submit to his master but still remain distant. God is calling us to come near to Him as to a friend or lover. God is calling us to intimacy. We can submit to God and still not enjoy an intimate relationship with Him. There are those who live in submission to God who do not delight in Him. God is looking for those whose hearts long to draw near to Him. He is looking for people whose desire is not just to obey but also who are willing to love Him with all their hearts. When we experience this level of intimacy with God, submitting to Him is no longer a duty. It is a pleasure for those who experience this nearness. If we are going to experience the fullness of life, it must be in the context of intimacy and love for God.

Wash Your Hands

Washing our hands is a symbol of dealing with the sins that stain our lives. We have all done things we are not proud of in this life. None of us can perfectly submit to God even if we love Him deeply. We will all fall short of His standard. James is telling us that when this takes place we are to come to God, confess our sins and seek His cleansing. Only Christ can forgive those sins and make us clean again. No matter how small that sin is, bring it to the Lord God for forgiveness. If we want to understand the true meaning of life and live life to its fullest, we will need to cast off every sin that keeps us from God and His purposes. We must wash our hands and be clean before Him.

It is very interesting that James did not say to wash our hands first before drawing near to God. The reality of the matter is that we can't wash our hands until we first draw near to God who alone can make them clean. There are many who believe that they have to get everything right in their lives before they come to God. We must come to Him first. He will do the washing and cleansing.

Purify Your Hearts

Not only do we need to wash our hands by seeking forgiveness from God, but we also need to purify our hearts. It is one thing to seek forgiveness for sin but another to have a change of heart about that sin. You can be sorry that you committed adultery and no longer commit this sin while in your heart, you secretly continue to lust. When your heart is purified, you are cleansed of the desire as well as the act. God not only wants us to stop sinning. He also wants us to stop desiring sin. Don't stop halfway. Seek God about removing the desire in your heart for sin. Ask Him to purify your heart. Only when we are freed from these evil desires, can we experience the fullness of God's purpose for our lives.

Grieve, Mourn, and Wail

To grieve, mourn, and wail has to do with brokenness over sin. Those who grieve and mourn recognize that they have offended a holy God. There can be no joy and happiness in the Christian life until we learn to have a godly sorrow over sin and evil.

There is another aspect to this grieving and mourning. God does not call us to a life of ease. He calls us to do battle by resisting the enemy. This battle is not easy. There will be suffering and struggle in the spiritual battle before us. God is looking for a people who are ready to face the struggle. Those who are ready to be afflicted in the present warfare will experience blessing and renewal in this life and in the life to come. James was not calling believers to be joyless. He was calling for a serious lifestyle. This is a time of battle. Eternal rest is coming but for now, we must do battle. Only those who engage in this battle against evil and

ungodliness can know the fullness of God's purpose for them.

Humble Yourselves

James's final challenge in these verses was for humility before the Lord. Those who are humble will not lift themselves above God but surrender to Him and His will. They will recognize their guilt, confess and grieve over their sin. They will willingly surrender every selfish pleasure for the cause of their Lord.

The promise in verse 10 for those who humble themselves is that the Lord God will lift them up. They will be honored. They will know the fullness of joy and blessing in their Lord. Their life will have significance and purpose. All this comes by rejecting the world, resisting the devil, and humbling ourselves before God.

For Consideration:

- What does it mean to submit to God?
- What is the connection between submission to God and resisting the devil?
- What is the difference between submitting to God and drawing near to God? What does this tell us about what God is looking for in us?
- What is the difference between washing our hands and purifying our hearts? Are there sins you no longer practice but still desire? Is God able to purify your heart of this desire?
- What do we learn here about the difficulties of the Christian life?

- What did James mean when he said that God will lift us up? What are the conditions for this lifting up?
- Are you experiencing the fullness of life the Lord wants to offer? If not, consider what we have learned in this section. What needs to happen for you to experience deeper fullness in your Christian life?

For Prayer:

- Ask the Lord to search your heart to see if there is any place where you are not fully surrendered to Him.
- Ask the Lord to give you the grace to draw nearer to Him. Ask Him to enable you to grow in intimacy with Him.
- Ask the Lord to remove any desire in your heart for the ungodly things of this world that keep you from experiencing fullness in Him.

14

JUDGING OUR NEIGHBOR

Read James 4:11-12

James moved on to another very practical matter in the body of Christ. Here in this next couple of verses, he speaks about slandering and judging one another.

James begins in verse 11 by telling his readers not to slander one another. To slander is to speak evil with intent to harm. The idea is that the individual uses the tongue as a weapon to hurt others. The tongue is capable of great evil. It can destroy the reputations of people and bring them to despair.

Notice how James connected speaking evil of one another with judging. In order to speak evil or slander someone, we have to make a judgment about that person. Slander is verbalized judgment. We make a judgment about an individual (whether it is true or false) and then announce that judgment to others in such a way that the person is harmed. James stated that when we make a judgment about our brother or sister, we speak against the law and judge the law. This merits some consideration.

James reminded those who condemn fellow believers for breaking a law of God, that in speaking slanderous words, they were themselves breaking the law. They became just as guilty as the lawbreakers they were condemning.

The problem went much deeper than this, however. These individuals looked down on their brothers or sisters. Like the Pharisees of the New Testament, they were condemning others while breaking the law themselves. They refused to see what they were doing as sin. They justified their words by saying that they were seeking the glory of God, but in reality, they were acting in pride. By ignoring their own sin while condemning the sins of others, these individuals were guilty of choosing which laws needed to be obeyed and which ones didn't. They placed themselves above the law, interpreting it the way that suited them best. These individuals were like the people Jesus spoke of in Matthew 7:3:

“Why do you look at the speck of sawdust in your brother's eye and pay no attention to the plank in your own eye?”

James reminded his audience in verse 12 that there is only one Lawgiver and Judge. The Lord God gave the law and judges those who break it. He alone can judge righteously. He alone is perfect and worthy of judging sinners. Who are we to judge the sins of others when we ourselves are just as guilty? How easy it is for us to be like the individuals James spoke about here. We speak out against our brother because he has fallen short but ignore all the areas in our lives where we have fallen short. God does not take this lightly. He sees the hypocrisy of our hearts and will judge us.

There is one more issue that we need to consider here. If we are not to judge our brother, how is any kind of church discipline possible? Let me conclude with a few points regarding the practice of church discipline.

Jesus stated in Matthew 18:15-17 that when a brother falls into sin, we are to approach him personally and show him his fault. If he refuses to listen, we are then to take one or two witnesses with us. If still he does not listen, we are to bring him before the church. If he will not listen to the church, we are to treat him as an unbeliever. We need to notice several things here.

First, the guilty individual is spoken to privately about the sin. There is no slander here. The person who has been offended simply tells the offending brother or sister what they have done. The purpose is to restore them to a right walk with God.

Second, if the guilty individual refuses to repent, witnesses are called. Only one or two witnesses meet with the offending party. Still, the matter is private. These witnesses are brought in not only to witness the refusal of the offending person to be reconciled but also to witness the attitude of the one who has been offended and to confirm the validity of the accusation or offense. In bringing in these witnesses, the offended party allows himself or herself to be examined as well.

The issue is not brought to the church until these witnesses discern that it is necessary. The matter is dealt with privately and with humility until such time as it is discerned that the attitudes of either party will affect the whole body. The goal is always for harmony and unity in the body of Christ.

There is a difference between an individual looking down on a person in judgment and an individual who is seeking unity in the body by removing obstacles that hinder unity. By following the principles of Matthew 18, both parties involved are examined by the church leadership. There is no slander in this case but a quiet submission to the purposes of the Lord.

There are those who would use these verses in James to say that the church has no right to say anything about an individual walking in sin. They say that we should not judge anyone. The assumption is that we can do what we want and the church really ought not to say anything about it. This cannot possibly be the case. Sin must be dealt with in the body of Christ. This by nature requires a certain judgment.

What we cannot judge is the intentions of the heart of our brother or sister. God alone can discern the intents of the heart. By calling a brother or sister to repent of a sin that is clearly laid out in Scripture is not a personal judgment. The Word of God alone judges the individual. We simply challenge them to walk in the light of Scripture.

James calls us to humility and sincerity in our relationship with brothers and sisters in Christ. He rebukes those who would lift themselves up as judges and speak evil of others when they themselves are just as guilty of sin. Instead, He calls for a spirit of humility in dealing with a brother or sister in Christ who has wandered from the path of truth. Those who challenge a brother or sister about their sin must first recognize that they too have fallen short. It is our goal to encourage each other to deeper levels of commitment to Christ. To do this we challenge and stimulate one another in humility as fellow sinners seeking to walk as God would have us walk.

For Consideration:

- Who alone is worthy to be the judge? How is the judgement of God different from our own?
- Have you ever found yourself looking at others and judging their actions and intents while ignoring your own sin? Explain.
- What is the difference between judging others in pride and challenging each other to walk in the path God has set for us? What role does Scripture have here as judge? What role does humility play?

For Prayer:

- Ask the Lord to forgive you for the times you have judged your brother or sister without looking at your own sin.
- Ask God to give you more patience with those who have fallen short of His standard. Ask Him to give you love for these individuals.
- Ask God to help you to understand the difference between judging others in pride and a sincere desire for the health spiritual walk of a brother or sister in Christ?

15

BOASTING OF TOMORROW

Read James 4:13-17

James placed a large emphasis in this epistle on the use of the tongue. He reminded his audience in chapter three of the difficulty in controlling the tongue and the destruction it can cause. In the last meditation, he spoke about slandering and speaking evil of one another. Here in this final section of chapter 4, he speaks about another evil use of the tongue—boasting.

Who among us has not found themselves making plans for tomorrow? While this is not a bad thing, sometimes we fail to realize that tomorrow is not in our hands. James writes here about individuals who were making plans to go to a certain city, spend a year, and do business. Their intention was to make lots of money. While making plans is important, what we need to realize is that we do not know what will happen tomorrow. The reality of the matter is that we do not even know if we will even be alive tomorrow. James compared our lives in verse 14 to a mist that appears for a time and then vanishes.

There are so many things we take for granted in this life. We assume that we will live a long life in full health. A car accident some time ago helped me to understand that we do not have control over our lives. Our lives are in the hands of God. Our health or any other circumstance can change in an instant.

James challenged his readers in verse 15 to take the Lord into their plans. He challenged them to say: "If the Lord wills, we will live and do this or that." We often become frustrated or angry because things did not go our way. We get frustrated because we have not fully accepted the fact that God is the Lord of each day and has the right to do with each day as He pleases. We must learn to accept what He brings our way.

There is something else we need to learn from this passage. Because we are not lords of tomorrow, we need to seek God about His will and purpose for each day. How often have we planned our day as if we could do whatever we wanted? If God is Lord of each day, then we need to seek His will for each day. A servant seeks the will of the master in everything. Don't just include the Lord in your plans; make Him Lord of your plans. We don't know what tomorrow will bring, but He does. His purpose is better than ours. We must learn to be seekers of His will every day of our lives.

There is one more thing I would like to mention in this context. If we are not in control of each day and cannot determine if we will live or be in health, then we must learn to thank and praise the one who has given us each day. Every day we live and experience the blessing of God is a day for us to give thanks. God is in control of our circumstances. God pours out His blessings on us. God makes His plans succeed in us. We need to learn to be a thankful

people. Instead of boasting of what we will do and where we will go, we need to learn to submit ourselves to God in all humility and recognize that everything comes from Him.

James concludes this section in verse 17 with a powerful warning. He stated that if people know the good they ought to do and do not do it, they have sinned. James has been reminding us that we need to seek the will of the Lord in our plans for each day. It is one thing to seek the will of the Lord and another to listen to that will and obey. How many times in the course of a week have we felt the gentle nudge of the Spirit of God to do something? How many times has the Spirit of God put someone on our heart? Do we respond to what God is putting on our heart? Not to do so is to sin? James challenged believers to seek the will of the Lord, die to personal desires, and surrender fully to the Lord's purpose each day. Not to do so is to sin.

There is no room for boasting of what we will do or where we will go. As believers, we have come to realize that we are not in control of the events and circumstances of life. We surrender ourselves and each day to the Lord. As the sovereign God, He has the right to bring to our lives whatever He sees fit. He has the right to lead us or change our plans. Our purpose is to humbly submit to Him and walk in obedience to His purpose for each day.

For Consideration:

- Can we really boast of anything in our lives? Where do all blessings come from?

- Has God ever unexpectedly taken something from you? What does this teach you about who is in control of your life?
- What is your response to unplanned events that come into your day? What does this teach you about your willingness to submit to God?
- Have you surrendered your life and each day to the Lord? Are there things you still need to surrender? What are they?
- Has God been putting someone on your heart you need to see or speak to? Has God been putting something on your heart you need to surrender or do? Have you been obedient?

For Prayer:

- Thank the Lord for the way He has unfolded the events of your life.
- Thank God that He promises to work out all things for your good (see Romans 8:28).
- Ask the Lord to forgive you for the times you have not sought Him and His will. Ask Him to forgive you for times when you have become angry or frustrated because He changed your plans.
- Thank the Lord for the circumstances He has brought your way today.
- Ask the Lord to keep you from grumbling and complaining about what He brings into your life.

16

A WORD TO THE RICH

Read James 5:1-6

In chapter 5 James turns his attention to the rich. These individuals were singled out because of how they used their money and resources. We should not assume from this that money and riches, in and of themselves, are evil. These individuals, however, were abusing the riches God had given to them. James believed that true faith had an impact on how a person used his or her money and possessions.

In verse 1 James begins by calling the rich to weep and wail because of the misery that was coming to them. The judgment of God was going to fall. Again, we need to remember that this judgment was not because they had riches but because of what those riches meant to them and how they used them. There are many great saints in the Scripture who were materially blessed of God. Solomon and David were richer than any other kings on the earth at that time. Abraham had so much livestock that he had to separate from Lot in order to have adequate pasture (Genesis 13:6). Riches are not evil, but they can very quickly begin to take the place of God if we let them.

It should be noted that what is true about material riches in this passage is true for all God's blessings. While we may not be rich in material possessions, we have all been blessed of God in one way or another. What we do with these blessings is of utmost importance.

In this particular context, judgment was coming on the rich for their selfishness. Their wealth would rot and moths would eat their fancy clothes. The silver and gold they had accumulated would corrode and be of no more value to them. Their wealth was temporary and would be destroyed.

It may be helpful for us to remember that as the children of Israel traveled through the wilderness, the Lord provided manna for them to eat (Exodus 16:4). This manna rained down from heaven each morning. God's people were to take what they needed, but no more. Anything beyond what they needed went bad and attracted maggots (Exodus 16:20). This meant that the people of God could not accumulate great quantities for themselves. They had to trust the Lord for each day.

Notice in verse 3 that the corrosion of their wealth would testify against these rich people in the last days. The decay of their hoarded wealth would witness to their unfaithful stewardship. These riches were stored up but not used for the sake of the kingdom of God. James warned that this greed would have a corrosive effect on them personally as well—it would eat their flesh like fire.

There is an important lesson for us here. James stated that riches are like a fire. If you hold something very hot in your hand, you will quickly get burnt. This is how it is with our riches. God intended that wealth be used and invested. It was not meant to be hoarded. The tendency toward greed

and accumulation can be very strong. Paul stated in 1 Timothy 6:10:

“For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil. Some people, eager for money, have wandered from the faith and pierced themselves with many griefs.”

What evil has not been committed for the sake of money? Riches are a powerful tool in the hand of the enemy. For this reason, we ought not to hold onto them for long. Instead, we need to wisely invest them for the advancement of the kingdom of God.

Notice what happened to those who had been hoarding wealth in the days of James. In their love for riches, these individuals had failed to pay the wages they owed to those who worked for them (verse 4). Servants had mowed their fields and harvested their crops but were not being paid. As their riches began to control these greedy individuals, they could not part with their money to pay justly owed wages. Like an alcoholic, these wealthy people craved more and more money. They never seemed to have enough. To satisfy their lust for riches, they resorted to dishonesty and violence.

The cries of those exploited by the rich were rising up to God. He heard these cries for justice and would call the oppressors to give an account of their actions in the Day of Judgment. These arrogant and greedy rich people had failed to understand that God had blessed them with resources so that they could, in turn, bless others.

The rich whom James condemned had fattened themselves with the luxuries they had stolen and hoarded. They did not realize that their pursuit of ungodly and extravagant

pleasure was leading them to a Day of Judgment and slaughter. These wicked rich were so controlled by their greed that they would even murder in order to sustain their lifestyle. God would judge them not only for the misuse of His resources but also for what they did to others as they sought to accumulate more for themselves.

These words of James challenge us to take a serious look at how we use what God has given us. We will one day answer to God for how we have used the blessings He has given us. Will those blessings be stored up and accumulate rust and mildew or will we invest them in the kingdom of God? God is watching how we use what He has given us and we will one day answer to Him for the use of each blessing.

For Consideration:

- Are riches evil?
- How can our blessings lead us to evil?
- What blessings has the Lord given to you? How have you been using them for His kingdom?
- How can our riches and blessings be compared to fire?
- What is the place of contentment in life? How does contentment protect us from the snares of worldly riches?
- How can you better invest what God has given you for the sake of His kingdom?

For Prayer:

- Ask the Lord to open your eyes to the richness of His blessings in your life.
- Ask the Lord to help you to use what He has given you for the sake of the kingdom.
- Ask God to forgive you for the times you have spent your resources on selfish pleasures.

17

PATIENCE IN WAITING FOR THE LORD'S RETURN

Read James 5:7-12

In the last section, we saw how James spoke to the rich who were oppressing the poor. He reminded them that the judgment of God was soon to come. Here in this section, James spoke to those who were being oppressed. He reminded them the day was coming when they would receive justice.

The challenge of verse 7 was to be patient in suffering. James encourages brothers and sisters who were being oppressed to be patient and wait for the coming of the Lord. They were to remain under their burden without giving up. This was possible because of the hope they had in the return of the Lord Jesus who would bring justice and righteousness to the earth.

What a wonderful hope this is. Because Jesus is returning, believers have a reason to persevere. Jesus will make

right all that is wrong. We can face the trials of today because we know that when He comes our victory is assured.

James illustrated his point by pointing out how the farmer waits for his crop. The farmer plants his seeds in faith that, at the right time, his fields will produce a good crop. He waits patiently for the spring and autumn rains to fall, expecting that when they come there will be an abundant harvest. The farmer works hard and long because he knows that there will be a reward in the end—a harvest for him to enjoy. In a similar way, we too find hope in the fact that the Lord Jesus is coming. Like the farmer, we are willing to endure much for the sake of the Lord. The knowledge that He will return to reward His faithful servants gives us hope and strength to preserve when things get difficult.

We need to live each day in light of the coming of our Lord. We need to let the promise of His return give us the courage to face the obstacles the enemy will throw on our path. The Lord Jesus comes to take us to Himself where we will finally be free from pain and suffering. He comes to conquer and overcome the power of evil. He comes to judge. He comes to bring us to our reward. What a wonderful hope we have in His promised return. Like a good farmer, let's keep the soil of our hearts in good condition waiting for His promise to be fulfilled.

James challenged his readers in verse 8 to stand firm because of Christ's soon return. In other words, they were to be obedient and firm in faith. They were not to give up or become lazy under oppression. They were to continue in their battle.

James reminded his readers that the Judge is standing at the door. He is ready to step through that door at any time. Will we be ready? What will He find when He steps through the door? Will He find the soil of our hearts ready for His refreshing rain? Will He find that we have fallen asleep and not kept the soil of our hearts prepared for His return?

In verse 9 James focused his readers on one particular area of their lives that needed to be cultivated and prepared for the coming of the Lord. Here, in particular, he reminded his readers not to grumble against each other or they would be judged when the Lord returned. As we wait for the Lord's return we must live with our brothers and sisters in Christ. As we do so there will likely be conflict and differences between us. Satan knows the power of destroyed relationships. He knows the damage that can result from broken relationships in the church today. James reminds believers that they were to pay special attention to the relationships in the body of Christ. As they waited for the return of the Lord they were to do their utmost to maintain good relationships with each other. They were to prepare the soil of their hearts for Christ's return by maintaining a good relationship with each other so that no weed of grumbling would be found when Jesus returned. This was especially a challenge in light of the persecution and struggle these believers were enduring.

James reminds his readers of the prophets of the Old Testament. These men suffered much at the hands of the people of their day. They had to endure the insults and rebukes of the sinful people as they proclaimed the truth of God's word. Despite the persecution, these men of faith persevered to the end. James called his readers to be patient and endure hardship in the Lord's will, like these prophets. The Lord will return to judge sin and evil. That

sin and evil are not just found in the hearts of the unbeliever but it can also be found in our own heart. The return of Christ offers us great hope but it also is a reminder to us that we too will be judged for our sinful attitudes and actions as children of God. All who live in the hope of Christ's return will purify themselves so that they will be ready for that return.

There is a blessing for those who persevere in difficulty and struggle (see verse 11). James directed attention to Job who patiently endured the loss of everything he had. Because of his patience, God blessed him abundantly. In the end, he received from God more than he had at first. God is not blind to our pain and suffering. He will reward us as we persevere and are faithful to Him.

This section of the epistle reveals that those who live in light of the Lord's return will be characterized by several things. First, they will have reason to be encouraged in their suffering and difficulties. They know that, while at present things may be difficult, the Lord will come to make all things right. They have hope and purpose in life. They do not despair because their eyes are fixed on the Lord, who promises them victory.

Second, those who live in light of the Lord's return will be faithful and obedient. They want to be ready when He comes. They want to be found faithful at His return. They want to be clean and pure when they meet Him face to face. They want to be unashamed at His coming and receive their reward.

Third, those who live in the light of the Lord's return know that, while they may suffer much here below, God is not blind to that suffering. They know God is compassionate and merciful and has a purpose in their affliction. They live

trusting God's goodness and waiting for His blessing for their faithfulness.

In verse 12 James told his readers that they were not to be quick to make vows lest they fell into condemnation. In the midst of their struggle, it was quite possible for these believers to resort to making vows. For example, a man might promise God that He would do such and such if God released Him from His trial. We read about a man by the name of Jephthah in Judges 11:30-40 who made a vow to God that if He gave him victory over this enemy he would sacrifice whatever came to greet him on his return. His own daughter came to greet him when he returned and he was forced to offer her as a sacrifice to be obedient to this thoughtless vow.

How easy it is to make such vows to other people or to God in our struggles. James tells us that we are to refrain from doing this. Instead, we are to persevere in integrity and sincerity of heart until God comes to release us. The reference to our yes meaning yes and our no meaning no, reminds us that we are to be honest and sincere people, committed to doing what is right without having to resort to compromising by making deals with God and our neighbours to be released from our pain. In our struggle, we are to commit ourselves to God and His purpose. He will release us in His time. In the meantime, we are to be patient and learn what He wants us to learn through our affliction.

James was telling his readers that those who live in light of the return of the Lord live to please and honor Him. As believers, we need to live each day with the realization that Christ could return at any moment. This hope should motivate us to live patiently and sacrificially even under very

difficult circumstances. This implies that we will not compromise by making a vow or taking shortcuts. It also implies that we will do our utmost to walk in humility and integrity before our brothers and sisters. We want to be ready to stand before our Lord when He returns. We do not want to be ashamed when we stand before Him.

For Consideration:

- If you knew that the Lord was returning tomorrow what would you change in your life?
- What difference does it make when we live each day with our eyes fixed on eternity?
- Why is it important that we learn to live in harmony with our brothers and sisters in Christ?
- Have you ever been tempted to compromise in your faith in the midst of your struggle? Why is it important that we bear our struggles patiently until the Lord releases us?

For Prayer:

- Ask the Lord to help you to live each day in light of His return.
- Ask the Lord to forgive you for the times you failed to honor Him in your actions and attitudes toward your brother or sister in Christ.
- Are there any personal relationships that need to be mended? Ask God to help you to be reconciled.
- Ask the Lord to give you the patience to bear the trials He has allowed you to face in this life. Ask Him to give you the grace to come through these trials for His glory.

CONCLUDING EXHORTATIONS

Read James 5:13-20

In this final section of the epistle of James, the apostle offers a series of concluding challenges to his readers. We will break these down and examine them individually.

If You Are Troubled, Pray

The first exhortation that James offered in this concluding section was to those who were troubled or afflicted. James encouraged them to pray. Prayer is the very best thing we can do when we have to face the troubles and difficulties that come to us. By prayer, we commit our problems to the Lord and seek His strength and guidance. This ought to be our first response to trials in life. Often God wants to teach us in these difficulties. We need His wisdom to hear what He is trying to say. We need His grace to be able to persevere through these trials without sinning. By prayer, we draw on the strength and wisdom of God to face our trial as God requires.

A missionary friend of mine once said, "It's not that we don't pray; it's that we don't pray first." In other words, when we get in trouble or difficulty, we do not make prayer the first thing we do. All too often we run to our own wisdom. Although God is not always the first person we go to in our trials, He is the most able to care for us and minister to us in our needs. He is able to give us the wisdom and strength we need to face the problems we are going through. We will always find that His arms are open wide to receive us. He longs to minister to us in our stresses and sorrows.

When Happy, Sing Songs of Praise

The Christian life is not always filled with trials. There are also times when the happiness and joy of the Lord overflow in our lives. In those times, James encouraged believers to sing songs of praises to the Lord God. Music seems to be a very vital part of our human nature. It is an expression of our joy and contentment in Christ. James is not excluding this singing to happy times only. There will certainly be times in our struggle when the joy of the Lord will well up in us and we will break out in song. What the apostle is telling us is that we need to be a people of praise. When joy wells up in us, take advantage of this and offer the Lord praise. He is worthy of our praise. Let His joy bring a song to our heart and may that song be directed to Him as a thanksgiving for all His goodness. Christians need to rejoice in song.

If You Are Sick, Call the Elders

When we get sick, often the first person we call is the doctor. This is not necessarily wrong. James, however, challenged his readers to call the elders of the church. These

elders were to pray over individuals who were sick and anoint them with oil in the name of the Lord Jesus.

First, notice that it is the leaders of the church who are to be called. These individuals are to be called because of their position as shepherds of the flock and also because they are individuals whose spiritual lives should be in tune with God and His purposes. James is telling us that the church has an obligation toward those who are physically sick. The leaders of the church are responsible to care for each member. When a member is sick, they are to take an active role.

Second, notice that these elders are to anoint the sick person with oil. In Scripture oil often represents the Holy Spirit and His ministry. Kings were anointed with oil as a sign of the empowering of the Spirit of God for the ministry they were undertaking (see 1 Samuel 16:13). When the elders anoint an individual with oil, they are recognizing that they do not have in themselves any power to heal. All healing comes from the Spirit of God. By applying oil, they are committing the individual to the Lord and His healing process.

The third thing we need to notice is that elders are to anoint the individual in the name of the Lord Jesus. They come with the authority of the Lord Jesus to commit the ill person to God. Because they come in the authority of Christ, the enemy must flee. They come on Christ's behalf as His representatives to minister. It is not in their name that this person is anointed. All healing comes from Christ, of whom they are merely representatives.

Notice in verse 15 that James tells his readers that if the sickness has been caused by sin, God is willing to forgive that sin and restore health. In other words, there are some

illnesses that are the result of sin in our lives. The only way to be healed of this kind of disease is through the confession and repentance of sin. God sometimes uses sickness as a means of getting our attention. It must be understood that not all sickness is the result of sin in our life. This is why James used the word “if” in this verse. In verse 16 he challenged his readers to confess their sins to each other and pray for each other so that they could be healed spiritually and physically.

James reminded believers in verse 16 that the prayer of a righteous man is very effective. Through the passionate prayers of godly elders, illness could be healed. To illustrate the power of prayer, James reminded his readers of Elijah (verse 17). Though he was just an ordinary person, Elijah prayed that it would not rain, and God heard his prayer. For three and a half years, it did not rain. Later Elijah prayed again, and God gave rain to the land. Elijah’s prayers are an example of the power of the ordinary prayer of faith.

James went on to remind his fellow believers in verses 19-20 that if a brother or sister wandered from the truth and someone brought them back, then that person may be saving the wanderer from death. Notice that James speaks here about a “brother” who wanders from the truth (see verse 19). This leads us to believe that the individual concerned was a believer, knew the truth and was living in it before wandering.

What is the death that this individual is saved from? Paul spoke in 1 Corinthians 11:28-30 about individuals who were coming to the table of the Lord in an unworthy manner:

“A man ought to examine himself before he eats of the bread and drinks of the cup. For anyone who eats and drinks without recognizing the body of the Lord eats and drinks judgment on himself. That is why many among you are weak and sick, and a number of you have fallen asleep.”

Paul believed that there were people in Corinth who were sick and dying because they were coming to the table of the Lord without dealing with their sins. God was punishing them. More than this, God was sparing them from falling further into sin. He also spared the church from the terrible evil that these individuals would cause.

By restoring wanderers, we not only might be saving them from an early death under the judgment of God but also covering a multitude of sins. In other words, those who stray from the truth can do much harm to the cause of Christ. By reaching out to sinning believers, we prevent them from continuing on their evil path. We also save many from following their ungodly example.

We are all capable of stubbornness that may bring the judgment of God on our lives. God may use sickness to draw us back. If that does not stop us from wandering, He may even take our lives. This is a very solemn thought and one we should not quickly discount. It is a powerful conclusion to an epistle that challenges believers not only to say they have faith but to practice the faith they have. May God grant that we would take this challenge seriously and pursue godly behavior to demonstrate our genuine faith in the Lord Jesus Christ.

For Consideration:

- Have you ever found yourself forgetting to pray about a particular problem? What did James say about this?
- What did James teach about the connection between sin and sickness? Is all sickness the result of sin?
- What does James teach us about the responsibility of the believer to sing praises to God? What does this teach us about the role of music in our relationship with God?
- What is the role of the elder when a believer in the church is sick?

For Prayer:

- Ask the Lord to help you to commit all things to Him. Thank Him that He is willing to lead and direct you each day.
- Thank the Lord that He loves you so much that He is willing to do whatever it takes to bring you closer to Himself
- Consider the blessings of God in your life. Take a moment to thank the Lord for these blessings.
- Ask God to give you a song of praise to Him.

INTRODUCTION TO 1 PETER

Author:

The author of 1 Peter was a man by the name of Simon. We know little about his father except that his name was Jonah. Simon's brother Andrew introduced him to Jesus (John 1:40-42). He was married but we know nothing about his wife. It appears that he had a home in Capernaum where his mother-in-law lived (Mark 1:29-30). He was a fisherman by occupation.

Jesus called him to be one of His disciples and changed his name from Simon to Peter meaning "rock" (John 1:41). Peter, as he would be known from that time forward, enjoyed a very special relationship with Jesus. He, along with James and John, are often seen alone with Jesus.

Scripture paints a picture of Peter as being somewhat bold, impulsive and self-confident (see Mark 14:31). He was humbled when he denied knowing Jesus three times during his trial. He would later be greatly used for the cause of the gospel in the book of Acts ministering primarily to believers in the region of Jerusalem.

Background:

The first epistle of Peter was written to Jewish believers scattered because of persecution. Peter writes to encourage them in their faith and offer them assurance in the midst of suffering. He points them to the Lord Jesus as their hope and confidence and calls all who truly love Christ to persevere in faithfulness to Him. Peter reminds his readers of their position in the Lord Jesus as a holy nation, royal priesthood and a people who belonged to God (2:9). He calls them as God's servants to abstain from sin and submit to their leaders, even when they were harsh and cruel. He offers practical advice to slaves, husbands, wives, youth and to the elders of the church and encourages them to humble themselves under God's hand (5:6), casting all their anxieties on Him (5:7).

The Importance of the Book for Today:

First Peter reminds us that even believers may have to face persecution and struggles in this world. In this epistle, Peter offers hope to those who struggle by pointing them to Christ. He calls those who suffer to be strong and faithful, never compromising in their commitment to walk in obedience. The apostle reminds us that it is a privilege and honour to suffer for the name of the Lord Jesus. He calls us in these times to cast our anxieties on Christ and trust in His purposes. The book of 1 Peter gives us godly advice and comfort for times of struggle and trial.

19

A LIVING HOPE

Read 1 Peter 1:1-9

The apostle Peter wrote to a people who were facing trials in their lives as believers. He sought to encourage them in the hope they had received in Jesus Christ. Peter wanted believers to stand firm in the grace of God and persevere as strangers suffering in a hostile world.

Peter introduced himself as an apostle of Jesus Christ. This established his credibility. As an apostle, he had been called of God and commissioned to minister to the church on Christ's behalf. What Peter had to say is important not only because of his position but because he spoke on behalf of Christ to his readers.

Though Peter had not always been faithful in his life, he was God's chosen instrument. What we know of the early life of Peter is that he tended to make bold statements he could not back up. After promising never to abandon the Lord Jesus, he denied him three times. Peter is an example for those who have fallen and by God's grace been forgiven. Though he would never have forgotten his denial

of the Lord Jesus, he did not let the shame of this keep him from ministering in His name. He knew Christ's forgiveness and walked in it. God did not abandon him, but still had a purpose for his life. Maybe you are reading this today and you can identify with Peter. Maybe you too have fallen in your walk with God. Repent and move on in service for your Lord.

Peter addressed his epistle to God's elect. The Greek word means "called out ones." These individuals had been called and pursued by God who desired their salvation. These believers, according to Peter in verse 1, were strangers in the world. This world was not their home. God was preparing a home for them in heaven. It is important that we live with this understanding in our lives as well. How easy it is for us to live for this world. We have our plans and agendas. There are all kinds of things we want to accomplish in this life. Peter's words challenge us to live in the reality that we are strangers on this earth.

We are spiritual strangers in this world because our Christian ways and thoughts are not of this earth. We who have been saved have the mind of Christ. We are His children. The worldly mind in us is being changed day by day. Our priorities are being transformed. The world does not understand us. Our ways are different. Our hope is not in things below but in what God has promised us above. We do not cling to the things of this earth, for they are passing. Our inheritance and treasure are in heaven.

The believers to whom Peter was writing were scattered throughout many different places. They were living in Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia. This letter would be circulated among the churches in these Roman provinces in what is today the country of Turkey. Peter expected his letter to have a wide distribution.

Notice what verse 2 tells us about these believers. First, these believers had been chosen according to the foreknowledge of God. The reality of the matter is that not one of us would have naturally accepted the Lord Jesus. In our natural state, we were not even interested in the things of God. Without spiritual understanding, we would not even know we needed a Savior.

If any one of us was going to be saved from our sin, God alone would have to accomplish our salvation. He determined to reach out to us. His hand was on us even before we were born. He had a plan for our lives when we were in our mother's womb. He would orchestrate the circumstances of our lives to prepare us for that purpose. He would chase after us and by his Holy Spirit break our rebellious heart. In love, He would offer His salvation and forgiveness to us. If it was not for His work in my life and His choosing to reach out to me, I would never have experienced His salvation. I owe my salvation completely to Him.

While the Father chose to reach out to me, this work was done by and through the ministry of the Holy Spirit. Peter spoke of the sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit. This is the work of the Spirit of God to make me more like Jesus. My old fleshly nature is being changed by the ministry of the Holy Spirit. This is an ongoing work of God in me. Day by day, I am being transformed into the image of the Lord Jesus.

Notice also in verse 2 that God chooses and sanctifies us so that we will live in obedience to Jesus Christ. Notice too that all of this is possible because of the sprinkled blood of the Lord Jesus. It was His death on the cross that made all this possible. His death and sprinkled blood paid the price for our forgiveness and brought us into a relationship with

God. The priests of the Old Testament would sprinkle blood on an object to purify it and set it apart for holy purposes. This is what the Lord Jesus did. His blood purifies us by forgiving us and it also sets us apart as His children for His glory.

According to Peter, all believers have been chosen for salvation by God the Father. The Holy Spirit pursues them, bringing them into a saving knowledge of Christ and sanctifies them to become more like the Lord Jesus. The Lord Jesus made this work possible by bridging the gap between God and humans through His death as a payment for sin. Because of this work of God, the believer is a stranger in this world –different in terms of character and destiny.

In verse 3 Peter expressed his deep praise and thanksgiving to God for His great mercy in reaching out to give us new birth into His family. It was only mercy that made us children of God. We did not deserve this salvation. We were enemies of God by means of our sin. Our sin was an abomination to Him. His mercy caused Him to pity us in our sin and rebellion. He gave us new hope, a living hope. Even now, we are experiencing the reality of this hope in us. We are being changed and prepared for the day when we will meet our Savior face to face.

Our hope is directly connected to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus from the dead (see verse 3). Because the Lord Jesus rose from the dead, we too can have the hope of a resurrection. Death was a great enemy for us. The Lord Jesus conquered sin and death, and in Him, we too conquer death. This temporary life is not all there is. There is a life after death. More than that, however, because we have been forgiven through the blood of Christ, God has promised us life beyond anything we can ever experience

in this world. We cannot even imagine the incredible blessings that await those who have been forgiven of their sins. Paul, quoting from the prophet Isaiah, wrote in 1 Corinthians 2:9:

“No eye has seen, no ear has heard, no mind has conceived what God has prepared for those who love him.”

What God gives us as an inheritance can never perish, spoil, or fade (verse 4). Everything we experience on this earth is subject to the effects of sin. All our possessions will fade and perish in time. Our health and beauty will one day disappear. Nothing on this earth is permanent. This is not the case for the blessings God has stored in heaven for us. There in heaven, nothing will perish. We will live forever in the presence of God. Nothing will take away what God has given us. There we will experience absolute security.

What comfort this is to us who have experienced pain and loss in this life. We watch our health and strength fade away. We see our loved ones die. We watch thieves steal our treasured possessions. We experience the way in which nature can strip us of our homes and valuables through natural catastrophes. Who among us has not experienced such losses in this life? What a blessing it will be to experience the reality of heaven where no thief can rob us and no disaster can strip us of our belongings. There will be no death to take our loved ones from us. We will live in absolute assurance and security in the presence of our Lord and Savior.

All this inheritance is kept in heaven for us (verse 4). It awaits the time when we will take possession of it (verse 5). Nothing can keep the believer from this inheritance,

and nothing can disqualify the believer from receiving it. God saves us and keeps us secure by His own power through faith. This is something we can rejoice in (verse 6).

Peter challenged believers to rejoice in this sure and glorious hope even as they suffered the various trials of this life. He reminded his readers that these struggles were not without purpose. They had come to refine their faith (verse 7). Just as gold needs to pass through the fire to burn off the impurities, so too believers need to pass through the fire of trials and suffering so that sin and rebellion can be purged (see James 1).

As we endure these trials and allow them to cleanse our character and build our dependence on the Lord, we grow in our ability to give praise, glory, and honor to the Lord. As the Lord works out His purposes in us, our hearts are lifted to Him in praise. We see the reality of His power in these trials. We catch a greater sense of His love and compassion. We realize that He will never abandon us. Our hearts are lifted to a higher level of worship. God uses our struggles to prepare us for the day that the Lord Jesus will return to take us to be with Him. Like a bride being dressed for her wedding day, we are being prepared for the day He comes to take us to be with Him forever. These trials and sufferings are part of that process (verse 9).

What a day it will be when the Lord Jesus comes to earth to take us to be with Him. We have never seen Him in the flesh. We do not know what He looks like. We know, however, that He is coming for us. To this end, we endure the pain and suffering because we know that we are being prepared to meet Him. This knowledge of His return fills us with great joy and anticipation. His return is our greatest hope.

For Consideration:

- What hope do we have in the Lord Jesus? How does that hope encourage us to persevere in this life?
- What role does the Father play in our salvation? What roles do the Holy Spirit and the Lord Jesus play?
- How has the Lord God used trials in your life to draw you closer to Him?
- What impurities has the Lord been removing from your life over the last year? What evidence is there of the sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit in your life?

For Prayer:

- Thank the Lord for the wonderful hope He has given you of an eternity with Him. Thank Him for the strength and wisdom He gives as you face the trials of this life.
- Ask the Lord to open your eyes to see the work His Spirit is doing in you.
- Thank the Lord for the trials He has sent your way. Thank Him for what He will accomplish through them.
- Ask God to reveal any impurity He needs to remove to make you more like Christ.

20

CONCERNING THIS SALVATION

Read 1 Peter 1:10-16

Peter has been reminding his readers of the wonderful hope that was theirs in Christ. Many of his original readers were facing difficult trials in their lives. The apostle challenged them to take their eyes off these temporary sufferings and focus on the promises of God.

In verse 10 Peter reminded his fellow believers that the prophets of old had spoken about the grace that was going to come. The prophets spoke of a time when the Messiah would come to this earth to set His people free from their sin and bondage (Isaiah 53:4-5; Zechariah 13:1-2). These prophets searched intently to find out about this coming. They wanted to know the time and the circumstances in which all these prophecies would be unfolded. Peter wanted to encourage his readers that even though they lacked understanding about the process of suffering and glory (just as the Old Testaments prophets before them),

they could trust in God who would bring all His promises to complete fulfillment.

In this section, Peter gives some practical advice to his readers as they face the present sufferings. Here in this section, he offers four suggestions.

Prepare Your Minds for Action

Peter begins by reminding believers that they needed to prepare their minds for action (verse 13). The King James Version translates this by the phrase “gird up the loins of your mind.” This pointed to a cultural practice of the day. Because the men of that day wore robes, when they wanted to run, they would gather up the bottom part of their robe so that it would not hinder them. Peter was telling his readers that they needed to remove any mental or spiritual obstacle that would keep them from progress in God’s kingdom.

If these believers were to run the race set before them they needed to gather up any loose or sinful thoughts and attitudes that would hinder their progress. They were to remove any doubt about Christ and His purpose. They were to discipline their minds to seek the Lord and His purposes. They would have to educate their minds in the Word of God and remove the ungodly attitudes of the flesh that would only hinder their advance. If we are to overcome in this life, our minds must be devoted to Christ and anything removed from them that would only cause us to stumble on the path before us.

There is much more that could be said about preparing the mind for the work of the kingdom. Suffice it to say that we need to guard our mind from evil thoughts and attitudes and fill it with the purpose of God and His truth. If we are

to face the battle before us, our minds must be in tune with God and His purpose. Peter challenges his readers to make this a priority in their lives.

Be Self-Controlled

The second challenge of Peter was for his readers to be self-controlled (verse 13). Those who know the Savior and the reality of His salvation must discipline their bodies and minds to walk in the truth of that salvation. The Christian life is not without effort. Men and women of faith down through the ages have disciplined their bodies and minds in the battle before them. The apostle Paul spoke of this discipline and self-control in 1 Corinthians 9:26-27:

“Therefore I do not run like a man running aimlessly; I do not fight like a man beating the air. No, I beat my body and make it my slave so that after I have preached to others, I myself will not be disqualified for the prize.”

Notice how Paul spoke here about those who run aimlessly. If we are to successfully run the race before us, we need to take control of our actions. We will have to fight the flesh. We will be forced to row against the current of this world. All this will require discipline and self-control on our part. We are to discipline ourselves to be true to Christ, no matter the cost. To live for Him requires discipline and self-control in this world of temptations and distractions. The believer must be prepared to make sacrifices for the sake of the kingdom of God. They will not be able to sit in their easy chairs enjoying all the luxuries of this life. God will call for a sacrifice of time, energy and resources. We must be ready to make those sacrifices for the sake of the kingdom of God.

Hope Fully

Our walk with the Lord will at times be a very difficult one. We swim against the current. We will not be understood. There will be times when we will be persecuted for the sake of the Lord and His purposes. The enemy will attack us. Consider Job, the one whom God considered more righteous than anyone else on the earth. Satan stripped him of his family, his wealth, and his physical health. We cannot expect to do battle against the enemy without coming face to face with him or experiencing the prick of his sword.

While the battle will be fierce at times, Peter challenged believers to set their hope fully on the grace of God that will be revealed in Christ (verse 13). God has promised us victory over sin, the grave, and the devil. He has promised us an eternity in His presence where there will be no more sorrow, pain, or death. Our hearts will be continuously filled with the joy of the Lord our God. Satan wants to take our attention away from this wonderful hope. In those times of trial and sorrow, we are called to set our minds on the hope we have in Christ. We are to allow that hope to fill us and thrill our souls.

Be Holy

Finally, Peter wrote that believers need to be holy people (verses 14-16). The work of the Lord Jesus was to cleanse us of our sin. We were dirty with sin in our lives. This separated us from God. When the Lord Jesus came, He brought with Him the forgiveness of sin. We were cleansed by His blood. We need to do our utmost to maintain that purity. We must consider the old life as crucified and live in the new life we have received. To be holy is to be sepa-

rated out for the Lord. Peter called us to separate ourselves from the worldly desires of the flesh in order to live completely for the Lord.

The commitment of the believer in times of struggle is to do the will of the Father. It is easy in these times of persecution to compromise. Peter, who knew what it was like to deny his Lord, challenges believers to maintain holiness of thought and life. As soldiers of Christ, no matter what happened to them, they were to guard this holiness of life and thought. This was their goal in life no matter what happened—to glorify their Lord by living as He required. This would not always be easy. It would mean checking their words, turning from their sinful desires and attitudes and refraining from fleshly actions. The commitment of the believer, however, whether in ease or in pain, is to honour their Lord by holiness of life and thought.

There are several things we need to do in light of the wonderful salvation we have received in the Lord Jesus, which was prophesied so long ago. We are to prepare our minds for action and be self-controlled. We are to place our hope in the Lord Jesus and not be conformed to this world. Instead, we are to live fully for Him as holy people. Those who know the salvation of the Lord have an obligation to live in that salvation. The prophets sought to understand the truth of the coming salvation. The angels marveled at it. We who have received the fulfillment of this long-awaited promise have the privilege of living out and demonstrating its reality to a watching world.

For Consideration:

- How can we prepare our minds for the spiritual battle that we are now engaged in?
- What is self-control? How have you been exercising self-control in your spiritual life? Explain.
- How easy is it to compromise in the midst of trials? How easy is it to compromise in the midst of ease and prosperity?
- Peter's challenges us here to be a holy people? Are you living in this holiness or have you been compromising?
- What temptations do you face in this life? How does the hope you have in the Lord Jesus help you to face these temptations?

For Prayer:

- Ask the Lord to fill your heart with the reality of the hope you have in the Lord Jesus. Ask Him to encourage you with this hope in your struggle.
- Ask the Lord to search your heart to reveal any sin that needs to be dealt with. Seek His forgiveness and walk in victory. Ask Him to prepare your mind for the battle before you.
- Ask the Lord to make you willing to sacrifice whatever is necessary for His glory to be revealed more fully in you.
- Ask God to help you to live a life of holiness without compromise. Ask Him to forgive you for any compromises you have made.

21

PERISHABLE THINGS

Read 1 Peter 1:17-25

Peter has been reflecting on the work of the Lord Jesus for us and our response to His wonderful salvation. He continues with this theme in the final section of this first chapter.

In verse 17 the apostle reminded his readers that since they called on a Father who judges each person's work impartially, they were to live their lives in reverent fear as strangers in this world. Let's consider this phrase briefly.

Notice first, that God will judge impartially. In other words, He will show no favoritism. He will not judge you less because you are His child. He will not judge you more because of your colour, race, or nationality. Each man, woman, and child will stand before Him and be judged fairly. God will not be deceived by outward appearances. He will look deeply into hearts and examine attitudes and intentions. We will all stand before Him to give an account of our lives and service for Him on this earth. His judgement will be based on truth.

Second, Peter challenges believers in verse 17 to live as “strangers,” in this world (verse 17). Our work is for the kingdom of God and His glory. Our methods are not of this world. We do not use worldly techniques to advance the gospel. The world does not understand us, our priorities, or our ways. We are driven by kingdom values and principles. God will judge us on these values and not by worldly standards. This means that as believers we need to be careful to minister and walk as God requires. Ministries can be built on human standards, with human goals and desires as their motivation. As believers, however, God is calling us to be strangers to the world’s ways and desires. He is calling us to take our directions from Him as our captain and leader. Many “worldly successful” ministries will be judged by God because they were not based on God’s leading and direction but on human planning and motivations. God will judge us not according to how “big” or “successful” our ministry or service was, but on the basis of whether we were faithful to Him and His leading and purpose for our life.

Not only are we to see ourselves as strangers in this world, but thirdly, we are to live in reverent fear of God. This fear is not to be seen as a terror. We are not afraid of God because we have been forgiven. This fear refers to deep respect and reverence for God, His purposes and His ways. We walk in His ways. We honour Him in all we do. We understand that we will be judged by this holy God, and so we live our lives to please Him. This is motivated by our love and devotion to God and a desire that He be glorified in our lives.

The apostle Peter reminds us in verse 18 that it was not with perishable things that we were redeemed. God did not use worldly means to rescue us from sin and the devil.

God's ways are not the ways of this world. When He satisfied justice on our behalf, he did not use silver or gold. These material treasures will fade away. Salvation cannot be purchased by the things of this world. Men and women all over this world have testified to the reality of this truth. The rich are as lost in sin as the poor. Money and possessions cannot free anyone from the bondage of sin and the curse of the law.

Jesus did not use worldly methods to purchase our salvation. He bought us back not with silver or gold but with His own sinless life. This was the only currency acceptable to a holy God. One drop of the blood of Christ shed for our sins accomplished what all the wealth and riches of this world could never accomplish. It was sufficient to rescue us from sin, the devil, and death.

Let me underline this principle once again. Jesus did not use worldly methods or means to bring us salvation. Worldly systems were not sufficient to produce our salvation. In the same way, we are called to separate from the world systems and live as strangers on the earth. We are to serve and minister in God's way. To this world and even to our fleshly selves, God's ways do not always make any sense. We move forward in faith, however, trusting that God's purpose is right and will produce the fruit He desires.

We are reminded in verse 20 that the Lord Jesus was chosen to be our Savior before the world was created. Even before sin entered the world, a solution was already in place. The Lord Jesus was chosen to come to earth as our Savior before time began.

What comfort we need to take from this! God is in control of all human history. He has made a provision for all things. Nothing will take Him by surprise. Maybe you look at your

current situation and wonder how you will ever find a solution. The reality of the matter is that this solution is already in place. God is aware of your problem, and, before you were even born, he knew what you would face. In His sovereign plan, He has provided all that is necessary for your victory. Though this solution has not yet been revealed to you, wait for it by faith. In His perfect time, He will reveal it to you.

It was through the Lord Jesus, who was chosen before time, that we came to believe in God and His purpose (verses 20). We were all blind to the things of God and His ways. We were lost in our sin and rebellion. Our minds were not capable of understanding spiritual realities. But “in these last times,” the Lord Jesus came and bought salvation with His blood. (The term last times refers to the times of the Messiah, from His first coming to His second coming.) Our faith and hope are not in anything of this world or its ways. Our confidence is in God and what he did for us through the Lord Jesus. We believe that we will be raised and glorified as was our Savior (verse 21).

We did not deserve this grace, but because we have received it, we dare not keep it to ourselves. We were given new life from God that cannot perish through the living Word of God (verse 23). Our response to this, according to Peter is to love one another deeply with a pure or sincere heart (verse 22). The word “deeply” literally means “stretched to the limits.” This is a proper response to our great salvation, and it is our duty to our fellow believers. We who have such hope and who have been forgiven so much are to stretch ourselves to the limit to demonstrate this same love to our brothers and sisters.

From the day we were born, we began the process of aging, and we must all face death. The things of this world

are like grass or flowers that are here today and perish tomorrow (verse 24). The glory of this world is temporary and withering away. Peter reminds us, however, that there is one thing that will be forever. The Word of God will never change. The promises God has given us and His purpose will withstand the sands of time. This Word is our guide and hope in this temporary world. We live as strangers here because we trust this Word. We will be misunderstood and even mocked for our commitment to this Word. Our desire, however, is to be faithful to God and His ways. Our delight is to walk in obedience no matter the cost. In this Word, we find great blessing and hope.

For Consideration:

- How are we strangers in this world? What particularly makes us different?
- How have you changed since the Lord saved you?
- Is it possible to seek to serve the Lord from a worldly perspective? Can we build great ministries in human strength? What does it mean to serve as a stranger to the ways of the world?
- What does Peter tell us about our responsibility as believers to one another in light of what God has done for us? How does your relationship with other believers reflect the hope and love you have received from God?

For Prayer:

- Thank the Lord for the way His salvation has changed you personally.
- Ask the Lord to strip you of the ways of this world. Ask him to enable you to live as a stranger to the world and its ways and as a follower of the Word of God and His Spirit.
- Ask the Lord to help you to love your brothers and sisters “deeply.” Ask God to give you a greater burden for them and their needs.
- Ask God to give you a deeper passion to do things His way. Ask Him to help you to discern the difference between the ways of this world and the ways of God.

LIVING STONES

Read 1 Peter 2:1-8

Peter has been reminding his readers that they had been bought by the precious blood of the Lord Jesus and brought into a kingdom that would never perish. In light of this wonderful truth, Peter challenged his readers to live a certain way. They belonged to the Lord Jesus and were to live holy lives as His children.

Peter reminds us of the responsibilities of those who had been born again by the grace of God. He challenges believers, in light of what God has done for them to do several things.

Notice first, in verse 1 that they were to rid themselves of all malice. The word “malice” refers to ill will or a desire to injure or harm someone else. It may be the need to see others suffer for what they have done to us. As children of the king, we are to remember what the Lord Jesus has done for us. When we were His enemies, He laid down His life for us and forgave our sin. We, who have been forgiven much, need to willingly lay aside resentments and forgive

others. There is no room in the heart of the believer for any kind of anger or revenge. While this may be the way of the world, we are to learn to forgive as Jesus forgave us.

A second matter that needed to be cleansed from the heart of the believer, according to Peter, was deceit and hypocrisy. Believers are to be honest in their dealings with those around them. Christians should be truthful, faithful, and sincere in character. The word of a believer was to be trustworthy. People should be able to count on what we say and know that it is reliable. Again, dishonesty and deceit are quite common in the world. The believer, however, is a stranger to these ways. He is dependable and his or her word is worthy of trust.

Peter also challenged the believer to put away all envy and slander. Envy is a jealous desire to have what our neighbor has, instead of being content with what God has given us. Instead of looking at what others have, believers must learn to be content with God's provision for their lives. Envy is rooted in pride and cannot be content unless it has what someone else has. Envy and jealousy is fertile soil in which many other sins can grow. Peter reminds us that as believers we are to "put off" this sin. The idea is that we are to remove it from our lives and throw it away.

Peter encouraged the believers to take sin seriously. Christians are to be radical when it comes to sin. Its power must be broken, and it must never be allowed to take root in the life of the believer. Christ Jesus died to set us free from the power of sin. He put His Holy Spirit in us to empower us and give us victory over our sinful nature. Those who take this work of Christ seriously will take action to rid themselves of anything that does not please their Lord.

Peter tells us that those who have experienced the new birth should crave pure spiritual milk like a newborn baby (verse 2). The Greek word translated “crave” means “to greatly desire.” We have all had the experience of seeing a newborn child crying for milk. When newborns are hungry, there is nothing else on their minds. Their lives revolve around this one issue. Nothing else matters. Believers are to have this sort of longing for God’s Word.

The Spirit of God will put this hunger in our hearts and minds. It is by means of this Word that we grow in the Lord Jesus. Through searching the Scriptures and obeying them, we come to know the Lord Jesus and His purpose. Our desire for the Word is not simply a desire for knowledge. It is a desire for Christ and to know Him in a deeper way. The Word of God is the vehicle that brings us to the Lord. The relationship that began with our salvation grows as we surrender to the Word of God. We are to crave this Word like a newborn baby craves milk. It satisfies us because it points us to the Lord Jesus. It encourages us and blesses us because it shows us Christ and His purposes for us. It gives us meaning and direction in life as we are counseled and comforted by its godly principles.

Those to whom Peter wrote had come to know a living Stone (verse 4). A stone represents stability and strength. This is what the Lord Jesus is for us. In our weakened condition, we find refuge in the Lord Jesus. He is our rock in the storm of life. He is our protection from the fury of God’s wrath against sin. He is our firm foundation on which we build our lives.

This Stone was rejected by men and women of this world. When the Lord Jesus came to this earth, He was rejected by His own people though He was the Chosen One of God.

The hand of God was on Him. He was special in the eyes of His Father. He was God's answer to the problem of sin. Even today men and women turn their backs on Him. Though He is the only true and eternal refuge, they still do not want Him. All who come to Him and hide in His shelter will, however, be saved from the wrath of God.

While it is necessary for God to judge sin, He provides in Christ a rock of refuge. Justice and mercy walk hand in hand here. God provides sinners with a solution to their problem. He does not delight in condemning anyone to an eternal hell. God's justice demands that the penalty be paid for sin, but God's mercy and love provide salvation for the guilty. All who come to Christ, the living Stone, will be protected and sheltered from God's just wrath. We dare not turn our backs on this offer. We must run to the Rock of protection. It is our only hope.

When we come to the living Stone, we are changed. He places his Holy Spirit in us. This Holy Spirit begins to make us more and more like the Lord Jesus. We become "living stones" (verse 5). Christ takes us as living stones and uses us to build His church. Each stone is different in shape and texture, and each one is important. Our gifts and personalities are knitted together by the Lord Jesus to form a great spiritual house for His glory. We were never intended to minister alone. The spiritual house the Lord is building is comprised of many living stones. Christ has designed the church in such a way that we need each other.

Peter quoted from Isaiah 28:16 in verse 6. Under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, Isaiah prophesied that God, like a master builder, was going to lay a stone in Zion. This stone would be a chosen and very precious cornerstone on which would be built a wonderful building. The church would be built on Christ as the cornerstone. Through Him,

countless souls would be saved and added to this building. According to Peter, those who put their trust in Christ the Precious Stone will never be put to shame. This Stone is humanity's only hope. It is a privilege to surrender to the Lord Jesus and His purpose. What a wonderful honor it is to be a living stone in this wonderful spiritual building. People from every tribe and nation are being added to this magnificent structure. God is building His church despite the efforts of the enemy to stop it. You and I are part of God's work if we have surrendered to Him.

To us, the Lord Jesus, the living Stone, is very precious. He is our refuge and hope. He is our foundation and stability. He gives us purpose. According to Peter, the stone that was rejected became the capstone, that is, the final stone of the building. In other words, the Lord Jesus is both the first and last stone. To those who reject the Lord Jesus, this stone causes them to stumble and fall. This is what happened to the religious leaders of Jesus' day. While the uneducated masses came to Christ for refuge, the spiritual leaders stumbled over Him. While some found salvation, others only found death and judgment.

For Consideration:

- Peter challenged those who knew the Lord Jesus to live free of malice, deceit, envy, and slander. Are these sins in your life?
- How can the Word of God be compared to milk?
- According to Peter, each member of the body of Christ is a living stone. What is your role in the kingdom of God?

- What does the picture of Christ as the living Stone convey to you? How has He been a stone for you?

For Prayer:

- Thank the Lord for His Word and how it pointed you to the Lord Jesus. Ask Him to increase your desire for that Word.
- Thank the Lord for His goodness in your life. Be specific.
- Ask the Lord to help you to be humble enough to understand your need of other people. Ask Him to help you to minister to their needs as well.
- Ask God to clearly reveal to you your role in the body of Christ.
- Thank God that He is a Rock of protection and refuge for you. Thank Him also that upon Him you can be confident and secure.

23

ALIENS AND STRANGERS

Read 1 Peter 2:9-12

In this section, Peter continues to demonstrate the privileged status believers have because of their relationship with the Lord Jesus. Peter challenged his readers to live as children of the king in a dark world.

According to verse 9, believers are a chosen people. This choice of God is clear in two ways. First, God in His mercy reached down to us as His enemies to save us from our sin. God broke our hard hearts and caused us to surrender to His will. Second, God has chosen not only to save us also to use us in the extension of His kingdom. Jesus has put His Holy Spirit in us and given us special gifts so that we can be used for the expansion of His kingdom on this earth.

Peter went on to say that God has made believers a royal priesthood. In the Old Testament, a priest was one who led people into the presence of God. He pointed others to God and was God's chosen representative to this world. This is what God has called us to be. He has chosen you

and me to be His representatives. He has given us the privilege of leading men and women into His presence. We represent Him on this earth and minister to those around us in His name. What an honour it is to be a representative of the Almighty God and Creator of this universe.

Next, the apostle stated that believers are a holy nation (see Exodus 19:6). We are not alone in our service of the Lord Jesus. God has placed us in a great family. We minister to each other and care for each other. Our gifts complement the gifts of our brothers and sisters around us. The purpose of this holy nation is to make known the excellency of God. We are to speak forth His praises because He called us out of sin's darkness and into His light. As a nation, we serve our King and walk in His ways. We are different from the people of this world. We belong to a nation whose foundations are in heaven and whose principles are from God. Notice that this nation is "holy." That is to say, it is set apart by God for His purpose and His glory. It is a nation of people who have been forgiven and cleansed by God and whose desire is to honor Him in all they do.

At one point in our lives, we were under the wrath and judgment of God, but now we have received mercy (verse 10). We have been forgiven and cleansed from our sin. Once we were not God's people. We were lost in our sin. Now God has accepted us as His people. What a privilege we have to be called children of God. How beautiful it is to be forgiven and cleansed from all our sin. What a wonderful hope we have now that we belong to Him.

Notice how Peter speaks of believers as aliens and strangers in this world (verse 11). We are different in our way of thinking because God has renewed our minds. We are different in our attitudes and actions because God has

given us a new heart. Our goals in life are not the same as those of the world. The world cannot identify with us and our ways. We are also foreigners on this earth because our citizenship is in heaven (Philippians 3:20).

Being an alien or stranger to this world does not remove temptation. Our flesh still belongs to this world. That flesh needs to be crucified on a daily basis. The enemy is constantly throwing temptations before our flesh. Notice that Peter did not identify himself with the flesh, however. He identified with the new person that Christ had made him to be. This is how we need to see ourselves. We know the reality of the sinful flesh in us. We also know the power and presence of the Spirit of God. All too often we see ourselves only in the flesh. The challenge of Peter here is to die to the flesh. We are no longer to identify with that old fleshly nature and its desires. We are to see ourselves as the new person we are in the Lord Jesus.

We are priests and children of God, and we are to live godly lives among the pagans around us (verse 12). We are to deny the desires of our old fleshly nature and feed the new spirit within us. We ought to be thankful for the changes we see in our character and display to all around us that we belong to the holy nation of the living God. The world ought to see this difference in us. This section challenges us to live so that the world will recognize God in us and bring glory to His name. Our lives should point the unbeliever to the Lord Jesus and the work He has done in us.

For Consideration:

- What does it mean to be chosen by God? Where would you be today if the Lord Jesus had not reached out to you?
- What does it mean to be a royal priesthood? What are the responsibilities of the priest?
- In what way are we aliens and strangers in this world?
- Peter stated that we have the nature of Christ living in us. How is this reality evident in you? What does the nature of Christ produce in you? What does the fleshly nature produce in you?

For Prayer:

- Thank the Lord that He chose to save you from sin.
- Thank God for the wonderful presence of Christ He has put in you.
- Ask the Lord to give you the grace to resist the flesh and its sinful desires. Pray specifically against the sinful desires you personally wrestle with today.
- Ask the Lord to enable you to live a life of praise and glory to His name.
- Ask Him to reveal anything in you that does not bring Him honor. Ask Him for grace to cast this off.

RELATIONSHIPS

Read 1 Peter 2:13-25

Here in this final section of chapter 2, Peter spoke about the importance of maintaining good relationships with all those around us. It is true that we are aliens and strangers in this world. The unbeliever does not understand who we are or how we think. Our ways and thoughts may be different from those of the world, but we are still to do our best to live with unbelievers in harmony and respect. We need to remember that the believers to whom Peter was writing were suffering at the hands of those in authority over them. Peter challenged these suffering believers to persevere and maintain a good witness for their Saviour in the eyes of those who persecuted them.

In verse 13 Peter called his readers to submit to every human authority. These authorities had been instituted among men. These were not spiritual authorities but secular. God expects believers, however, to respect the political and civil governing authorities. We are to be model citizens. We must not give anyone the opportunity to blaspheme the name of the Lord because of our actions. What kind of testimony would we have if we lived in constant

disobedience and disrespect of the authorities that exist in our land?

The only exception to this is when those in authority demand that we disobey the higher authority of God. We have a clear example of this in the book of Acts. When the apostles were commanded by those in authority to no longer to teach in the name of the Lord Jesus they responded by saying: "We must obey God rather than men" (Acts 5:29). As believers, our allegiance to God takes priority over our obedience to civil authorities. When forced to make a decision between obeying God and obeying civil authorities the believer must obey the Lord God and be willing to face the consequences.

Notice that we are to submit for the Lord's sake to these authorities. This adds a whole new dimension to this issue of submission to secular authorities. We must submit to kings and governors in order that the purpose and plans of God would be unhindered. How does our submission to authorities accomplish the purposes of the Lord?

According to verse 15, our submission will silence the ignorant talk of foolish men. (See Luke 20:20-26.) If we are model citizens, unbelievers will see in us an example to follow. The same is true in the case of our work. By being careful to submit to those over us in our places of work, we demonstrate to them that we are reliable, honest, and respectable workers. The unbelievers around us will see that those who follow the Lord Jesus Christ are honorable people. They will see us as a people they can trust. In this, God is glorified and His kingdom purposes unhindered. If we are rebellious and disrespectful, however, we give people a legitimate reason to criticize. People see our bad example and want nothing of our faith.

In the day that Peter wrote this letter, the Jews wrestled constantly with the Roman authorities who ruled the land. The Jews did not see that they owed any allegiance to Rome because they saw themselves as under God alone. They proved to be a thorn in the side of Rome. Rome did not look favorably on them or their God. They saw the Jews as a rebellious and hostile people who needed to be suppressed. It would have been easy for believers, who came from this background, to see that their only obligation was to God. Peter challenged them to surrender also to the governing authorities for the sake of the Lord.

In verse 16 Peter told believers that they were to live as free men and women who were servants of God. There seems to be a contrast here between being free and being a servant. Can we be free and be servants at the same time? A servant is under a master's control and must obey his commands. Servants are not free to do as they please. The answer to this question lies in the nature of the freedom Peter was speaking about. This freedom was not the freedom to do as we please but the freedom that the Lord Jesus has given us from slavery to sin.

We have all discovered that the freedom to do as we please only leads to bondage. If we do whatever comes into our minds to do, we will soon find ourselves enslaved by all the deceptions of the world. Only in the Lord Jesus can we have victory over sin. When He gives us this victory, we are free. We are not bound to the sinful flesh to do its will. We are not blinded by the world around us and the lies of the enemy. Instead, we see what we were created to be. We are free to become everything that God intended for us. Peter told believers to live as those who had been freed from sin and its effects.

The apostle went on to say that believers were not to use their freedom as an excuse for evil. It is a wonderful thing to know that our sins are forgiven and that we have a place in heaven prepared for us. How comforting it is to know that not even Satan can take that blessing from us. There are those who abuse this grace, however. In this context, the individuals that Peter was speaking to believed that, because they were citizens of heaven, they did not have to obey their earthly leaders. Peter told them that they were not to use their freedom in Christ as an excuse to live in rebellion against the earthly authorities God had placed over them. They were to live with the realization that they were indeed free citizens of heaven but servants of God on earth. As His servants, they were to obey Him, and, in this case, it meant being respectful of their earthly leaders. (See Matthew 17:24-27.)

This respect was to be given not only to leaders but to everyone (verse 17). Peter commanded Christians to love the brotherhood of believers, to love and fear God, and to honor the king. When the Lord Jesus ministered on earth, He demonstrated what it meant to show respect to all people. He reached out to sinners and loved them when the rest of society wanted to get rid of them. He reached out to the lepers that no one wanted to touch. He chose a tax collector to be one of His disciples. He touched prostitutes and beggars. He did not accept their sin, but He respected each and every individual as worthy of His attention and mercy. We are called to do the same.

Even slaves were to submit to their masters (verse 18). They were to serve those masters with respect. Peter was not saying that slavery was right. The reality of the matter was that slavery was already deeply rooted in the society of that day. Although slaves had no rights in society, they

were equal to other members in the church. Peter, however, told them to remain as they were and to serve their masters with all their heart. Notice that obedience was not only commanded for slaves who had good masters but also for slaves who had cruel masters. This would not be easy, but slaves were to demonstrate, even under severe circumstances, the power of God to love, forgive, and respect their masters.

God was not blind to the things that were happening to slaves who were being harshly treated. God would reward them for their faithfulness in the difficulties they faced. It is relatively easy to serve well when things are going smoothly. It is much more difficult to serve when the circumstances are unfair or unjust. Peter told these slaves, however, that if they were beaten or judged because of something they had done wrong, they would receive no reward from God. Their reward would come by living faithfully to their master.

What we need to see here is that there are times when the Lord God will call us to face trials and suffering in this harsh and sinful world. God is not only the God of the good times but also the God of the bad times. He needs those who will demonstrate to the world what it is like to praise God in the times of blessing. He also needs those who will demonstrate that His power, peace, and joy are also present in the difficult times of life when everything seems to be falling apart. When Jesus faced the insults of His enemies, He did not return evil (verse 23). When they beat Him with the whip and crucified Him on the cross, He did not threaten them. Instead, He entrusted Himself to God and left all judgment to Him. We have His example to follow.

When the Jews killed Stephen in the Book of Acts, Stephen had this same attitude. He did not seek vengeance.

He simply looked up to heaven and committed himself to God. Even in his death, he honored God and loved his accusers (see Acts 7:60).

The Lord Jesus willingly surrendered to the purpose of God and allowed His enemies to kill Him. He did not love His earthly life more than obedience to God. The result was that God's great salvation was accomplished. Through Christ's wounds and ultimate death, we were set free from the terrible grip of sin. We had been like wandering sheep destined to perish, but Jesus, like a loving and tender shepherd, brought us back to the Father. His suffering accomplished the glory of God and our great good.

The challenge of this section is for us to be a people who live with respect for authority and for all we come into contact with. We must be humble enough to recognize the God-ordained authority of those who minister over us. We submit to authority so that we do not hinder the purposes of God. We do this so we can demonstrate to the world that God's love is in us. To give respect does not mean that we agree with the other person. David did not agree with Saul when Saul sought to kill him, but David always honored Saul as king. David would not take the life of his king because he knew that although Saul was acting in rebellion, he was still the one God had placed in authority (see 1 Samuel 26:9-11, 23-24). We need to have this same attitude. We do not always understand God's ways but we submit to Him with the knowledge that as we walk in faithful obedience, He will accomplish His purpose for our good and His glory.

For Consideration:

- Do you have a hard time loving someone? What is the challenge of this passage to you today?
- Does respecting someone mean that you have to agree with them and what they do?
- Why is it important that we learn to respect those in authority over us? How is this a good testimony for the Lord?
- What example did the Lord Jesus leave us to follow?

For Prayer:

- Ask the Lord to give you the grace to be obedient to those in authority over you. Ask Him to give you the grace to be a testimony for His glory even in the difficult times.
- Ask God to forgive you for any words spoken against those He has put in authority over you.
- Thank the Lord for the example He has set for you in obedience to the Father even in death and persecution. Ask God for grace to walk as the Lord Jesus did.

25

HUSBANDS AND WIVES

Read 1 Peter 3:1-7

We have been reviewing Peter's instruction in this epistle about the relationships we have as believers. In the last meditation, we were challenged to live with respect for those who were over us. In this section, he directed attention to the relationship between husbands and wives.

Wives

Peter began by challenging wives to be submissive to their husbands. Notice the connection between this chapter and chapter two. He told wives that they were to be submissive to their husbands in the same way that all believers were to be subject to the authorities that were over them. Again, he emphasized the fact that this was to be true for the unbelieving husband as well as the believing husband. In chapter 2, Peter made it quite clear that believers must submit, in the Lord even to unbelievers in authority over them. Slaves were to be subject to their unbelieving masters. In the same way, the Christian wife was to be subject

to her husband whether he was a believer or an unbeliever.

It is important that we note that, the Christian wife's allegiance to God takes priority over her relationship with her husband. In Acts 5:29, the apostles disregarded the command of the city officials not to teach anymore in the name of Jesus. They willingly disregarded the command of those in authority because it would have led them to disobey the clear command of the Lord. When faced with a choice between obeying her husband or obeying God, the Christian wife must clearly choose to obey the higher authority of the Lord. In all other things, however, she was to willingly submit.

Peter speaks particularly to the Christian wife married to an unbelieving husband. He challenged her to be subject to him so that, by her submissive spirit, her husband might come to believe the Word of God. What a powerful testimony it is to an unbelieving husband when his wife loves and honours him. Not only might he respect her for this, but he may also come to love the Lord who has made her the woman she is.

It is important that soldiers in the army obey and submit to their commander. If they do not do so, there will only be confusion and chaos on the battlefield. The same is true in the family. A wife is to see to it that she does all she can to work in harmony with her husband. She is to support him and honour him as the head of the home and, in so doing, win his heart and possibly even save his soul.

In our age, it is quite easy for women to focus on outward beauty. Peter did not discourage the wife from doing what she could to take care of herself. He challenged women, however, to set their hearts not so much on outward

beauty but on the inner beauty of character and spirit. Braids, gold jewelry, and fine clothes are not what makes a woman beautiful. The true beauty of a woman comes from what is inside. Her gentle and quiet spirit is of far greater beauty than any dress or fine clothes. This outward beauty will quickly fade. The inner beauty of character will grow over time. This is to be the focus of the godly woman. She is to seek the Lord about her inner person. She is to learn to live in obedience to God's purpose and plan. The inner blemishes of anger, bitterness, and jealousy need to be replaced by the beautiful fruit of the Spirit. These are her true jewels.

Let me add something else here for husbands. It is important that we see our wives from a spiritual perspective. How easy it is for men to look only on the outward beauty. We need to look beyond the outward appearance to see and nurture the inner beauty of our wives. We need to train our eyes to enjoy the loveliness of our wife's character and gifts.

The apostle Peter challenged women everywhere to follow the example of the holy women of old who submitted to and supported their husbands. In verse 6 Peter told wives that they were daughters of Sarah if they did what was right and did not give way to fear. This exhortation is somewhat difficult to understand. How are we to understand this phrase "do not give way to fear"?

One possibility is that Peter was speaking about the fear of submitting. To submit to someone is not always easy. Submission requires strength of character and trust in the individual to whom we are submitting. Soldiers in the army need to put aside fear and trust the commander and his orders. They must willingly give up the control of their lives in order to do the will of their superiors. This is a fearful

thing. Who among us has not felt a certain fear in surrendering all we have to the Lord and His control? Unbelievers often do not come to the Lord because they are afraid of surrendering all they have.

In a similar way, Peter called wives to submit to their husbands. When they married their husbands, they offered themselves to them. The woman willingly chose to put aside her ideas of independence in favor of joining her heart and life to that of her husband. Although this could cause fear, Peter challenged the wife, not to give in to this fear but to surrender to her husband. She was to trust God and step out in faith and support of her husband and his endeavours. In so doing, she would be a daughter of Sarah who willingly followed her husband, Abraham, into the unknown, leaving the land of their birth to follow the will and purpose of God.

Husbands

Up to this point, Peter had been speaking to wives. He now takes a moment to speak husbands. He challenged husbands in verse 7 to be considerate of their wives. They were to consider their wives' needs and desires as being as important as their own. This principle ruled out any sense of dictatorship in marriage. While the wife was to submit to her husband, the husband was to be considerate of his wife and treat her with the utmost respect. He was to take his wife's interests and needs into account in all his decisions. He was to seek here wellbeing in all he did.

Husbands were to respect their wives recognizing that they are heirs together of the gift of life. God has chosen women as well as men to be His children. His promises are for both sexes. His love is toward both men and women. He offered his Son to die for women as well as

men. There is no distinction as far as salvation is concerned. Women inherit the kingdom of God as well as men. We are equal partners in Christ. The husband is to live with his wife, realizing that she is an equal partner in grace. To mistreat or abuse her would be to abuse a child of God. A cruel husband will be judged by God. Notice in particular in verse 7 that if the husband does not treat his wife with this respect and consideration, God will literally turn his back on him and refuse to answer his prayers.

What we need to see here is that while there are certain roles in the family, there should be mutual respect between husbands and wives. A wife is to submit to her husband and stand behind him in his endeavours. A husband is to stand behind his wife, supporting her and encouraging her in her needs and interests. Peter appealed to both husbands and wives to put aside their own interests for each other.

The wife is to honour her husband. The husband is to honour his wife, realizing that if he does not do so his prayers will not be heard and he will be judged by God. Together they are to learn to put aside their selfish interests and desires for the sake of each other. They are to bless and stand with each other for the sake of the Lord. According to Peter, this was God's purpose for marriage.

For Consideration:

- How much of the Lord Jesus does your partner see in you? Are you demonstrating the inner beauty of the Lord in your actions and words?

- What does it mean to submit? Does submission mean that we are being controlled or dominated?
- If you are married, do you and your wife share a common purpose in life? Are you working together for a common goal or have you become divided in purpose?
- What warning does this passage give to husbands who do not respect their wives?

For Prayer:

- Ask the Lord to enable you as a wife to submit to and stand with your husband.
- Ask the Lord to help you as a husband to be more considerate and respectful of your wife
- Take a moment to ask the Lord to give you the grace to be what your partner needs you to be.
- Pray that God would bring healing to marriages of our day. Ask God to minister in your own marriage so that it reflects more clearly the heart of God for you as a couple.
- Ask God to join you and your marriage partner together in a deeper way for the glory of His name.

LIVING IN HARMONY

Read 1 Peter 3:8-12

Peter's concern in this section of his epistle is that believers live in a right relationship with those around them. He challenged his readers to respect the secular authorities that ruled over them. In the last section, we saw how he encouraged husbands and wives in their relationship with each other. Here in this section of chapter 3, he gave some general guidelines to govern relationships in the body of Christ.

Live in Harmony

In verse 8 Peter began by challenging believers to live in harmony with each other. The word translated harmony here means “to be of one mind.” It is important that we understand that this does not mean that we should all try to think the same way. There will always be differences of opinion in the body of Christ. An engine has many different parts. Each part of the engine serves a purpose. These parts do not look the same or work in the same way. If the engine is to work properly, however, all those parts must

work together in harmony. All parts work toward a common goal. This can only be possible in the body of Christ if we put the Lord Jesus and His purposes first. We cannot be seeking our own will. All must be surrendered to the Lord. We must remember that we were not intended to work independently. We must work with each other if we are to be what God intended us to be. To live in harmony means that we consider each other in all that we do. Selfishness and self-centeredness have no place in the body of Christ.

Be Sympathetic

Next, Peter challenged believers to be sympathetic to each other. To be sympathetic is to feel for each other. The person who is sympathetic feels the pain and hurt of others. When a brother or sister is facing a difficult trial, the sensitive person shares the pain of the trial. The sympathetic individual feels personal grief when others are grieved. Again, this rules our self-centeredness. The healthy church is one where people feel the pain of the individual members of the body and are not concerned about their own interests alone.

Love as Brothers

Peter tells his readers next to love as brothers. The word “brothers” indicates that they belong to the same family and as such have an obligation to protect, love and encourage each other. While we can love someone we do not know, brotherly love is directed to those in the same family. There is a closer fellowship and intimacy here.

Be Compassionate

To be compassionate is to be tender-hearted. It is to have pity on someone in their trial or need. Compassion is an action word. You cannot say you have compassion for someone if you see a need and do nothing about it. By its very nature, compassion requires that we reach out and minister to the need we see before us. Tenderhearted people feel deeply the pain of their brothers and sisters and will do whatever they can to ease that burden.

Be Humble

This word is translated by the English word courteous in the King James Version of the Bible. To be humble in this sense is to be kind, friendly, and well-mannered. It is to treat each other with respect and dignity. Humility recognizes that it owes courtesy and kindness in word and deed to a fellow human being. How easy it is to lash out. How easy it is to take those closest to us for granted. We forget to thank them. We forget to honour them and treat them kindly. To be humble is to not take these things for granted. It is to respect those we meet and treat them with dignity.

Return Blessing for Evil

Peter went on to say in verse 9 that believers were not to repay evil with evil or insult with insult. The reality of the matter is that relationships are not perfect on this earth. Sometimes, acting in the flesh, people say things they regret later. What is the godly response to this? According to Peter, when we are insulted, we are not to return the insult. Instead, we are to seek to bless the one who insulted or offended us. God calls us to forgive others and seek the spiritual well-being even of our enemies, and God will honour and comfort us in return.

Turn from Evil and Seek Good

If we wish to see good days and enjoy the blessings of God in our lives, then we must turn from evil and do good. We must resist the fleshly temptations to seek our own way or to get even with someone who has offended us. We must actively seek the good of those around us. We must learn to bless and honour our fellow human being if we want to be blessed ourselves.

Seek Peace

It is possible for us to do the things mentioned above and still have many struggles in our lives. There are people who seem bent on causing problems and division in the body of Christ. Sometimes these individuals will need to be disciplined. Our goal, however, needs to be to seek peace.

Notice in verse 11 that the apostle stated that not only were believers to seek peace but they were also to pursue it. Peace is something that needs to be maintained. If we do not constantly seek peace, it will very quickly disappear. In this world of sin, we will often have to apologize. We will often have to forgive those who have caused offense. All too many things can get between us as husbands and wives or as members of the body of Christ. We can be sure that the enemy will do his utmost to cause division in the body of Christ. Sometimes pursuing peace will be a difficult process. It is something, however, we must strive for and maintain in our relationships with our brothers and sisters.

Peter concludes his exhortation by reminding his readers that the eyes of the Lord are on the righteous and His ears are attentive to their cries. He sets His face, however, against those who do evil. The Lord sees how we treat our

brother or sister. He knows the things we have said to them and the way we have acted toward them. To dishonor a brother or sister in Christ is to grieve the heart of God. Those who love the Lord Jesus and have experienced His love in their lives seek to live in peace and harmony with their neighbour. They will not want to be the cause of disunity and division.

For Consideration:

- Do you have a brother or sister that you have a hard time respecting and honoring? What does this passage say to you personally?
- Do you feel the pain of your brother or sister in Christ? How do you respond when a brother or sister is grieving or undergoing a severe trial? Is there someone you can minister to today in Christ's name?
- Is it possible for us to have differences of opinion and still live in harmony?
- Is it always possible to live at peace with all people? What should be our response toward those who do not want to be at peace with us?
- Do you treat the people around you with dignity and respect? What is the connection between true humility and being courteous and respectful to those around us?

For Prayer:

- Are there people who have hurt you? Ask God to show you how you can bless them?
- Are there people you need to make peace with today? Ask God to give you the strength and grace to humble yourself.
- Ask God to help you to treat those you come in contact with, with respect and dignity.
- Ask God to give you the grace to be able to be at peace with those around you. Ask Him to remove any obstacle to this peace with a brother or sister.

SUFFERING FOR DOING GOOD

Read 1 Peter 3:13-17

In his letter, Peter challenges us to live such a life that people will have nothing evil to say about us. Generally, this will keep us from problems, but it is not a guarantee. Even the Lord Jesus had people speak against Him. Believers all over the world have suffered for doing good.

Peter, who was no stranger to suffering, understood that doing good and serving the Lord did not guarantee freedom from trials. He had himself suffered for the kingdom of God. In verse 14 Peter wrote that God's blessing was on those who suffered for doing good.

Notice in verse 14 that Peter commanded believers to resist fear that would inevitably come when they were facing persecution. Fear is an understandable response but it is one that will cause us to take our eyes away from the Lord. Fear causes us to forget that God is in control of our situation and sees all that is happening to us.

Peter reminds his readers that the only way believers could resist fear was to set Christ apart in their hearts as Lord. This means that we must keep Christ as the central focus of our lives and to commit our lives afresh to Him as our Sovereign God. It means recognizing that He is Lord over every situation that comes our way. The temptation is to see evil as being more powerful. The Lord, however, is greater than any evil that can happen to us. He is Lord over all circumstances and trials.

Just before Stephen was stoned, he looked up to heaven and saw the glory of God and the Lord Jesus standing at the right hand of God (Acts 7:55). The result of this was that Stephen was encouraged and strengthened in his trial. In times of our own distress, we are to fix our eyes on the Lord Jesus. We are to recognize Him as Lord. He is the sovereign God of the universe. He is the Lord over all. To Him, every knee will one day bow. There is nothing outside of His control. There is no enemy that can defeat Him. We are in His hands and we bow in submission to Him and His sovereign care in our time of need. Recognizing Him as Lord will enable us to walk in deeper peace in the midst of our trial.

To set Christ apart as Lord is more than recognizing him as being in control of all the events and circumstances of life. It also means to live in obedience to Him. It is to recognize that if He is Lord, then I need to be His obedient servant. In the midst of trials, it is very easy to compromise. It is in these trials, however, that we can truly demonstrate to the world the reality of what we have in the Lord Jesus. The world often sees the Lord Jesus in us more clearly in difficult times. They see His power to overcome. The world needs to see how Christians face trials. They need to see Christians who face their suffering with grace, joy, and faithfulness. They need to see the power of God in us to

love and forgive those who offend us. They see the grace and mercy of God demonstrated in our suffering. This could cause them to ask us why we have such hope and confidence in our struggle. Peter challenged believers to be ready to share the reason for this hope (verse 15). Our obedience to Christ and faithfulness to Him in our trials is a powerful testimony to the ever-watching world of the hope and grace God provides for all who love and walk faithfully with Him.

Notice that there is a proper way to share the hope. We are to witness with gentleness and respect. Only the Spirit of God can give us this gentleness and respect toward those who harm us. David is a clear example of this. He always respected Saul as the man God had chosen to lead Israel. Even when Saul sought to kill David, David continued to respect him as God's chosen leader. He refused to speak evil of Saul. His words about Saul and his actions toward Saul always demonstrated deep respect even though he did not always appreciate what Saul was doing to him (see 1 Samuel 26:9-11, 23-24).

In all that we do, we are to keep a clear conscience before God so that those who gossip and speak evil about us will ultimately be put to shame. They will be exposed for their lies. People will see the truth in the way we live and in the way we respond to malicious attacks. When the civil rulers of his day tried to find grounds for charges against Daniel in regard to how he conducted government affairs they were unable to do so because he was faithful in his administration (Daniel 6:4-5). This is how we ought to live our lives.

Peter concludes by reminding readers that it is better, if it is the will of the Lord, for believers to suffer for doing good

instead of evil. Things will not always be easy for the believer. There will be times when the Lord will call us to face opposition and struggle. As we face these trials in life, we need to actively commit ourselves to Christ as Lord in our hearts and continue to walk in faithful obedience to His will. We are to trust Him in our trial recognizing that He will reward us in His perfect time.

For Consideration:

- What does this passage teach us about believers suffering even when they are walking faithfully with the Lord? Does obedience to the Lord guarantee that we will never have to suffer?
- What does fear do to the believer? Instead of giving into fear, what is the Lord's will for us?
- What does it mean to set apart Christ as Lord in our hearts? How does this enable us to face the trials of life?
- How does God use trials as a witnessing tool? Have you always been a good witness in the midst of your trials?
- What did Peter say about having respect for our enemies? Have you been able to live up to this in your personal life?

For Prayer:

- Thank the Lord that He is able to take you through each and every trial you face in life. Thank Him that His blessing is available to you even in the midst of your trial.

- Ask the Lord to help you to overcome any fear you have in your life. Ask Him instead to help you to trust more fully in Him.
- Are you facing a trial today? Ask the Lord to enable you to set Him apart as Lord in your heart.
- Ask God to keep you faithful and humble in your trial so that you will be a positive witness for Him before the world.
- Ask the Lord to teach you to respect your enemies. Thank Him that they are vessels He will use to shape you in your walk with Him.

CHRIST'S WORK

Read 1 Peter 3:18-22

In the midst of trials and difficulties, Peter challenged believers to set Jesus as Lord in their hearts. Here in this final section of chapter 3, Peter reminds these believers of what the Lord Jesus had done for them.

In verse 18 the apostle wrote that Christ Jesus died for sins once for all. There are various ways of interpreting this word "all." First, when Jesus died on the cross, He died once for all time. In other words, there will never be another death required. This one death was sufficient to accomplish all that God intended it to accomplish.

Second, there is the aspect that Christ died once for all sin. His one death covered every sin we ever committed. Every sin is covered by that one death of the Lord Jesus. Hundreds of thousands of bulls and goats were slaughtered in the Old Testament period, but none of them were able to cover all sin. Jesus death forgave us for all sin.

Third, there is yet another aspect to this word “all.” That one death of the Lord Jesus Christ covered the sins of all (every person) who would come to Him. For everyone who will come to Him, there is forgiveness and cleansing.

Notice also in verse 18 that the death of the Lord Jesus was the death of the righteous for the unrighteous. As an unrighteous people, we were under the wrath of God. We deserved to be punished. Christ, on the other hand, was righteous. He had no sin nature and never sinned. He was the perfect Lamb of God who paid the penalty for our sin. We see the amazing love of the Lord Jesus for us in this passage. His love is such that He willingly laid down His life to pay the penalty for sins He did not commit so we could have a relationship with Him.

Peter went on to tell his readers that the Lord Jesus was put to death in the body, but death could not hold Him. As the sinless Son of God, he rose bodily from the grave. He was victorious over sin and death. His victory gives us hope.

Notice in verse 19 how Peter told his readers that when the Spirit of God gave Christ life He went and preached to the spirits in prison who had disobeyed long ago in the days of Noah. This verse has caused problems for many commentators and needs to be examined briefly in this context.

Why did Peter mention the story of Noah in this passage? It seems he did so to illustrate what the Lord Jesus did for us on the cross. In Noah’s day, God chose to judge sin and rebellion by sending a great flood. The flood covered the earth and destroyed men, women, children and every living creature apart from those protected by the ark. This was God’s great judgment of sin.

We were like those individuals in the days of Noah. We were lost in sin and under the judgment of God. It was into this situation that the Lord Jesus came to offer a solution. He provided for us an ark of safety. He Himself was our ark. Only through Him could we pass through the waters of God's judgment. All who remain outside of Christ, like those who remained outside of Noah's ark, will be condemned. Those who take refuge in Him, however, no longer need to fear the condemnation of sin and death. Victory over sin is in the Lord Jesus alone.

Peter compared the water that Noah's family went through to the water of baptism. Noah's family passed safely through the water that condemned those who rejected the offer of God to enter the ark. They passed through the waters safely because they were protected by the ark as a symbol of Christ. Isn't this what baptism speaks of? It speaks of the work of Christ that protects us from the raging waters of God's judgement.

Peter uses the story of Noah to illustrate further the work of Christ in verse 22. Here he reminds us that the Lord Jesus passed through the waters of death and overcame them, as illustrated by Noah's family passing through the flood. The Lord rose from death and went to be again with his Father, where today He sits at the right hand of God. The right hand represents the place of honour.

The story of Noah is a powerful illustration of the work of Jesus Christ for our salvation. In the story of Noah, the Lord God shares the message of the gospel. He revealed His anger against sin and the lostness of all who are in sin. He reveals His judgment of sin and to what extent He will go to punish the sinner. Through Noah God also shared a way of escape through His provision of an ark of refuge.

He made it clear that the only hope of escaping the judgment of God was to enter that ark. Only those who were in the ark were safe from the judgment of God. Noah's ark was a clear symbol to the people of his day of the work of the Messiah and what He would come to do.

For generations, people spoke of what happened during the flood. They saw the holiness of God and His provision for those who would trust in His means of salvation. God shared the gospel to those people in Noah's day. He reminded them that the way of salvation was narrow. There was only one door through which they could go if they wanted to be saved from His wrath. There was also a time limit. The judgment of God was very real. It would come upon those who had been warned but refused to take heed to the warning. The gospel was preached to the people of Noah's day by means of a powerful example of a family who trusted in the provision of God for their salvation.

There are those who would interpret 1 Peter 3:19 to imply that Jesus literally went to preach to the souls of Noah's day who were being held in some sort of prison until they could hear the gospel preached to them. The problem with this interpretation is that there is nothing in the rest of Scripture to support the idea that we can die as unbelievers and be given a second chance after our death to hear the gospel and be saved.

Notice also that Peter takes the time in this context to open up the illustration of the ark as a symbol of salvation through Christ in verse 21. He does this because it is the means by which the gospel was preached to these men and women who were bound in their prison of sin and rebellion against God.

Just as the ark was the only hope for Noah's family, so the Lord Jesus is our only hope. He died so that we could come to God. He died so that we could safely pass through the waters of God's judgment. How wonderful it is to know that His blood covers all our sin. We can approach God without fear. We can face our suffering without fear. Even though Jesus' obedience to God resulted in His persecution and death, He rose from the grave in resurrection victory. In Him, as our ark of safety, we too will experience that same victory.

For Consideration:

- What did Peter mean when he said that Christ died "once for all"? What encouragement do you find in this?
- What hope does the resurrection of the Lord Jesus bring to us?
- How is Noah's ark an illustration of the work of the Lord Jesus?
- What does baptism symbolize? How does the story of Noah teach us about baptism?
- How did Noah and the ark illustrate the salvation of God to the people of his day? What does this teach us about God's desire to communicate His salvation to all generations?

For Prayer:

- Thank the Lord that He did not hesitate to offer Himself to us when we were still in our sin.

- Thank the Lord for how the story of Noah and the ark illustrates God's way of salvation. Thank Him for how He conveyed this message to people in the Old Testament.
- Thank the Lord for the victory we now have because of the work of the Lord Jesus on the cross.
- Thank the Lord that His work on the cross covered all our sin.
- Ask God to help you to live in light of what He has done for you. Ask Him to help you to walk faithfully with Him trusting Him in all your trials of life.

LIVING IN THE SPIRIT

Read 1 Peter 4:1-6

Peter has been speaking about the victorious work of the Lord Jesus for God's great plan of salvation. In the last part of chapter 3, he stated that the Lord Jesus died once for all. Here in the first part of chapter 4, he took the time to explain what this meant for believers and what their response needed to be as a result.

Peter challenged believers in verse 1 to arm themselves to suffer just as the Lord Jesus suffered. There are those who preach a gospel that promises that if we come to the Lord Jesus, all our suffering and pain will cease. This is simply not the case. If anything, coming to the Lord Jesus will bring more trials into our lives. Just as the Lord Jesus suffered, so will we have to suffer. The world will not understand us and our ways. Even as Satan lashed out against the Lord Jesus, so he will lash out against those who follow Him.

Notice that this suffering is in the body. This earthly body experiences the effects of sin. We will not take this body to

heaven with us. It belongs to this earth and will perish here on this earth. Our earthly bodies will be transformed to be like Christ's glorious, resurrection body (see Philippians 3:21; 1 Corinthians 15:42-54).

Notice in verse 1 that Peter went on to explain that those who suffered in the body were "done with sin." It is important that we grasp what Peter means here. Peter has been speaking about those who have armed themselves to suffer just as the Lord Jesus suffered. He has been speaking about those who had chosen to die to themselves and seek the Lord Jesus, no matter the cost. These individuals had finished with sin in their lives. They had chosen to turn their backs on sin and seek the Lord. They were willing to pay the price. They were willing to suffer for the cause of the gospel. This is in reality where each of us needs to be in our relationship with the Lord Jesus.

Peter knew his audience. He knew what they were like before they met the Lord Jesus. They had been just like the world, living in drunkenness, immorality, lust, and idol worship. Things have not changed. Listen to unbelievers today, and you will see that verse 3 still describes their lives. They live to feed the sinful desires of the flesh.

According to verse 4, the unbeliever thinks it is quite strange when believers no longer have any desire to participate in the wicked ways of the world. Unbelievers often mock the godly ways of believers, wondering what believers do for excitement. Unsaved people do not understand the fulfillment and joy of a relationship with Christ, and as a result, they often ridicule believers.

What these unbelievers do not understand is that the day is coming when they will have to give an account of their lives to the Lord God who will judge them for their sin

(verse 5). While that judgment may not be immediate, it will be final. They will one day have to answer to the Lord God for their lewd behavior and for mocking God's people and His ways.

It is because of this judgment that the gospel is preached. Notice in verse 6 that the gospel was even preached to those who were dead at the time of Peter's writing. From the very beginning, in the Garden of Eden, the message of the gospel was preached. God promised to Adam and Eve a descendant who would crush the head of Satan. That descendant was the Lord Jesus who would come to save His people from their sin. The prophets of the Old Testament spoke in detail of the Messiah who would come to set His people free.

The message of the gospel has been preached from the very beginning of time. It is the message of a Saviour who came to die for our sins. Those who accept this message know the forgiveness of sins and eternal life in the presence of their heavenly Father (verse 6). While the life Christ offers is not always an easy life it is a life of victory and joy. Peter challenges all who know this salvation of Christ to walk faithfully in it knowing that though they may suffer in this earthly body there is great hope ahead.

For Consideration:

- Are you willing to face opposition and suffering for the cause of the Lord Jesus? Are you done with sin?
- Does the unbeliever see a difference in your life-style? Explain.

- What change has come to your life now that you have come to know the Lord Jesus?

For Prayer:

- Thank the Lord for the way He so willingly laid down His life for you.
- Ask the Lord to help you to die more and more to the flesh and its sinful appetites.
- Do you struggle with a particular fleshly appetite? Take a moment to ask the Lord for victory over this particular sin.
- Thank the Lord that, despite the present suffering in our bodies, we have a wonderful hope in the age to come.

THE END IS NEAR

Read 1 Peter 4:7-11

Peter has been reminding us that being a believer will not always be easy. As people who have accepted the Lord Jesus as Savior, we are to expect that the world will have a problem understanding us and our ways. There will be trials and tribulations for those who love the Lord, but we must not lose hope. We are to keep our eyes fixed on the Lord and His purposes.

Peter reminds his readers that the end of all things was near (verse 7). For the suffering believer, this would have been an encouraging thought. The day was fast approaching when the Lord would return. At that time, all suffering and pain would cease. On that day, the Lord Jesus will bring His people to be with Him forever. He will bring justice and peace would reign. This is still the hope of all God's people. We can face the difficulties because we know that the battle is the Lord's. Righteousness and justice will prevail.

The fact that the end of all things is near ought not only to encourage us but, according to Peter, it ought also to remind us that, more than ever before, we need to prepare for that end. In light of the fact that the end is near, there are several things we need to do.

Be Clear Minded and Self-Controlled

To be clear minded is to have a focus. All too often our focus is distorted. The world with all its attractions begins to take our focus from the Lord. The end is coming, so we need to set our eyes on the goal before us. Like a runner, we need to keep our focus and vision on the finish line. We want to be ready for the return of the Lord. We also need to be self-controlled. This means being disciplined in our actions. We should guard against concerns that distract us from godly purposes. We need to continue to be obedient and walk in God's purpose.

Notice that the reason we need to be serious and disciplined is so that we can pray. Prayer is communicating with the Lord God. Through prayer and His Word, the Lord directs and leads. When hardships increase, the need for time alone with Him will also increase. In that time of prayer, we will find wisdom and grace to face the trials and struggles that come our way. As the days of the end approach, we will need to be self-controlled so that we can pray and draw from our Lord all the wisdom and strength He has to offer.

Love Each Other Deeply

Verse 8 emphasizes the importance of loving each other. Notice that this is to be a deep love. What we need to understand is that love is an action word. To love is to serve and care for someone else. Love is not just a warm feeling

toward someone we care for. It is a commitment that stretches and strains to do good in spite of being treated with hostility.

Peter stated that love covers a multitude of sins. There are some individuals who may use this verse as an excuse to sin. There are two senses in which we can understand this verse. First, love prevents us from sinning against our brother or sister. When we love others as the Lord would have us to love, we will not sin against them. It covers sin in that it prevents us from sinning.

Second, love also has the ability to look beyond the sin of a brother or sister to the real person behind the sinful exterior. The loving mother reaches out to her child even when the child is filthy because she sees the child she loves under the dirty exterior. In a similar way, the Lord enables us to accept the failures and faults of each other and truly love.

Offer Hospitality

One way to demonstrate fervent love for one another is to be hospitable. Hospitality is much more than offering a meal to friends from your church. This command has to do with ministering to each other and providing what is lacking to those in need. Notice that this hospitality is offered without grumbling. When we offer what we have in love, we do so willingly and with a cheerful heart. It is a privilege and delight to minister in a loving spirit to others in their need. The day is approaching when the Lord Jesus will return to take us to be with Him to live forever under His eternal hospitality. In light of this, we need to open our homes and our hearts to each other.

Use Your Gifts to Serve Others

When we love each other deeply, we will use our spiritual gifts to minister and encourage each other. Each gift is important and necessary if we are to advance the kingdom in these last days. God has given to each of us a unique gift, and each is necessary if the body of Christ is to function properly. When used together in love, the gifts minister powerfully to the needs of the body of Christ.

Those who have speaking gifts are to speak as if they are speaking on God's behalf (verse 11). The prophets of Scripture heard from God and spoke that message to His people. Peter was telling those who had these particular gifts to learn how to listen to God and share His heart. As the end approaches, we will need to hear more and more from the Lord. He has chosen to use gifted servants to communicate His heart. If you have speaking gifts, the body needs them. We need to hear God's warnings and encouragements. We need God's direction and guidance. Realize the importance of the gifts that God has given you and share them with others in the body of Christ so that they will be encouraged and directed by God through you in these last days.

Speaking gifts are not the only gifts necessary in these end times. There are others in the body who have serving gifts. These individuals are able to see the needs around them and minister in practical ways to the body. This can be a very draining ministry. Serving others requires energy, wisdom, and the ability that God supplies. Peter challenged believers to use their spiritual gifts to serve the body of Christ so that the Lord would be praised. The closer we get to the day of the Lord, the more we will need each other.

These verses challenge us to prepare for the coming of the Lord by setting our focus on Him and loving and serving one another in the body of Christ. May God enable us to be ready for the Lord's return and bring Him praise and glory in all we do.

For Consideration:

- Why is it important for us to be clear minded and self-disciplined? Are you disciplined and self-controlled in your spiritual life?
- What evidence is there that the day of the Lord is approaching?
- What gifts has the Lord given you? How are you using these gifts for the Lord and the church?
- How has God been using the gifts of other believers in your life to bring encouragement and strengthening?

For Prayer:

- Ask the Lord to remove obstacles and distractions in your life so that you can focus on Him.
- Ask God to give you a greater love and devotion to the body of Christ.
- Ask God to show you how you can use your gifts for the sake of the body of Christ.

31

REJOICING IN TRIALS

Read 1 Peter 4:12-19

Peter had made it quite clear that those who desired to serve the Lord would suffer in this life. In the last meditation, he reminded his readers that the end of all things was approaching. They were to take courage in this reality. Beyond this, however, he told them that they should rejoice in their suffering for the Lord Jesus.

Peter begins this thought in verse 12 by telling his readers that they should not be surprised that they were suffering painful trials. There are people who are truly surprised that they have to face trials when they come to know the Lord Jesus as their Savior. It would be wonderful if accepting the Lord Jesus meant the end of all suffering in life, but this is not the reality.

For many, persecution begins the moment they accept the Lord. I remember some young teens in a church I worked with who, upon accepting the Lord Jesus, immediately faced opposition from their family. For these girls accepting Jesus as their Savior was the beginning of suffering.

We should not be surprised at this. The world does not accept or understand the ways of God and His purposes. A soldier involved in a battle is not surprised that the enemy shoots at him. In a similar way, those of us who have enlisted in the army of the Lord should not be surprised that we are the target of Satan's arrows. As believers, we must prepare ourselves for this opposition.

Not only are we to be aware that trials will come but we must also learn how to rejoice in suffering for Christ. According to verse 13, the reason we are to rejoice in affliction for Christ is so that we may be overjoyed when the glory of the Lord is revealed. What is the revelation of the glory of the Lord? Could it be that this is a reference to the return of the Lord Jesus? If this is the case, the believer who willingly suffers will certainly delight at the appearance of the Lord, who will end this suffering and reward His servant.

Peter provided another reason to rejoice in suffering in verse 14. Here he stated that when believers are insulted because of the name of the Lord Jesus, they know that the glory of the Lord Jesus rests on them. In other words, the world mocks and insults us because they do not like the presence of the glory of God that rests on us. We are insulted because we reflect that glory of God in our lives. What an honor it is to be an instrument that reflects God and His character. What joy this ought to bring to our hearts to realize that we are shining like bright stars in the kingdom of God.

Verses 15 and 16 make a distinction between suffering for doing right and suffering because of foolishness and sin. There are those who suffer because of their wicked actions. They may suffer at the hands of the law or of society that rejects them. This is not suffering for the sake of

Christ. To suffer for the cause of Christ is to suffer for doing what is right. It is to suffer because we live for Him and follow His will and purpose.

While those who suffer for doing something evil deserve the consequences of their actions, those who suffer for doing right suffer unjustly. There is nothing to be ashamed of if we suffer for Christ. When we are humiliated and suffer loss, we should remember that Jesus felt that same humiliation and loss. In suffering for doing good, we follow in the footsteps of the Lord Jesus.

In verses 17-18 Peter wrote that God judges His own family. He purges His family of sin through the process of trials and suffering at the hands of unbelievers. The Lord is preparing for Himself a bride. If God is severe with His own people, what will the judgment be like for those outside His family? It is better to endure the fiery purging God has ordained in this life for believers than to suffer the eternal fires of God's condemnation of unbelievers on the final Day of Judgment.

Peter concludes with a challenge to those who were suffering for the Lord Jesus. He challenged them to commit themselves to their faithful Creator and continue to do good. Notice that they were to commit themselves to a *faithful* Creator. There are times when we do not understand what the Lord is doing. In those times, all we can do is trust Him and His purposes. Our God is a faithful God who always has our best interests at heart. We can trust Him fully.

Suffering is a necessary part of this earthly life. As believers, we will have to suffer just as the Lord Jesus suffered before us. In these times, however, we should be joyful. We should not let these times of suffering get us down.

Instead, we need to learn how to rejoice in these times because the Spirit of glory rests on us, because we bear the name of Christ, because God is purging our sin, and because we have a faithful Creator who has our best interests at heart.

For Consideration:

- Have you ever suffered for doing what was right? Explain.
- Why should it not surprise us that we will suffer in this life?
- What reasons do we have to rejoice in our suffering?
- What does God accomplish in us through suffering?
- What is the difference between suffering for doing wrong and suffering for the Lord Jesus?

For Prayer:

- Thank the Lord that He is an awesome God who promises to always be with us no matter how great the trials in this life prove to be.
- Ask the Lord to help you to learn how to rejoice in your suffering and trials.
- Thank the Lord for the things He is accomplishing in you through your trial.
- Take a moment to pray for friends or loved ones who do not know the Lord. Ask God to save them and spare them from the great judgment to come.

32

A WORD TO THE ELDERS

Read 1 Peter 5:1-4

In this final chapter of 1 Peter, the apostle brought a particular challenge to elders and young men. Here in this first part of the chapter, we will look at Peter's challenge to elders.

Peter appealed to the elders as a fellow elder (verse 1). He placed himself on the same level as these elders although he was more than an elder—he was also an apostle. As a fellow elder, Peter understood the challenges of being a leader in a local assembly.

Notice that not only was Peter a fellow elder but he was also a witness of Christ's sufferings. He saw the Lord Jesus on the cross. He saw Him suffer and die. Peter had personally added to that suffering by denying the Lord three times. Peter knew, however, that he would share in the glory that the Lord would reveal in the proper time. Peter knew that he had denied the Lord, yet he also knew that the Lord had forgiven him. The apostle had the wonderful hope of eternity in the presence of the Lord God.

What was true for Peter is also true for us today. Maybe you have fallen into sin and rebellion against the Lord God. Today you wonder if He would ever accept you. This verse gives us tremendous hope. We can know the forgiveness of the Lord Jesus and the hope He offers to us as His children. Peter knew this forgiveness in his life. He looked ahead to the return of the Lord Jesus and the accomplishment of God's kingdom purposes.

In verse 2 Peter challenged the elders to be shepherds of the flock that God had entrusted to them. It is important that we understand the use of the illustration of the shepherd. Peter did not compare an elder to a king or a boss but to a shepherd. While kings have servants, the shepherd is a servant of his sheep to minister to their needs. This requires discipline and hard work.

The elder, according to Peter, was to be a willing servant. He was to consider it a privilege to serve the needs of the body of Christ. We do not honor the Lord by serving Him with bitterness in our heart. We do not glorify His name if we do not serve with a willing spirit. It is the intention of the Lord that our service for Him be a joy. This is not to say that we will not encounter difficulties in our ministry. Even in those difficulties, however, we can know the peace and joy of the Lord in service. God wants us to be willing and joyful servants.

Peter continued in verse 2 to say that the elder must not be greedy for money but eager to serve. He must delight in the work of elder to such an extent that he would do it without financial reward. This is not to say that the elder should not be paid for his service. The Scripture tells us that those who preach the Word ought to be rewarded for their service (1 Timothy 5:17). Money should not be the motivation behind the elder's ministry, however. The elder

ought to serve because he delights to do so and minister to the body because the love of Christ compels him.

There is another aspect to this ministry of elder. Peter warned the elder that he was not to lord it over the flock. To lord it over others means to demand service from them. We have briefly spoken here of the difference between a shepherd and a king. The shepherd serves the flock, and the king or the lord expects to be served by the flock. The elder is not to be like a king or earthly lord, expecting to be served. He is not to use his position to intimidate or manipulate others. I have been in churches where the elders felt that they had control over the members of that congregation. Instead, the elder is to be an example to the flock. He is to lead that flock by his personal example. Peter reminded the elders that they were under the Chief Shepherd, the Lord Jesus. The elder is to remember that he himself will answer to this great Shepherd. Those who have faithfully cared for their flock will receive a crown of glory that is eternal. It is a tremendous honor to serve the Lord Jesus as a shepherd of His sheep but we must do so with joy, humility and a servant heart.

For Consideration:

- What is the difference between a shepherd and a king?
- What does it mean to lord it over the flock?
- What should be the attitude of the elder toward his ministry?
- Are you an elder or spiritual leader in your congregation? Are you an example for others to follow?

- Are the elders in your church examples that you can look up to and follow?
- What particular ministry has the Lord given you? Are you able to exercise that ministry with joy in your heart?

For Prayer:

- Ask the Lord to bless the leadership of your church. Ask Him to help them to be everything He has called them to be.
- Thank the Lord that He is the Great Shepherd who will care for you as you care for the flock.
- Ask the Lord to help you to serve Him with the right attitude. Ask Him to forgive you for any wrong attitudes you may have had in serving Him.

A WORD TO THE YOUNG MEN

Read 1 Peter 5:5-14

Having addressed the elders in the first four verses, Peter concludes his epistle with a word to younger men. Peter did not ignore the youth but saw them as an important part of the church. These young men had tremendous potential, but they also had to face tremendous temptations. The apostle takes a moment to challenge them.

Submit to the Elders

Peter began by referring to what he had said to the elders. In the first part of this chapter, Peter told the elders not to lord it over those who were under them. Instead, they were to live humbly with a servant attitude. Here he reminded the young men that if the elders were to have a servant attitude, they too were to live with that same attitude. He challenged young men to submit to the older men and respect them for their experience and age. These older men had learned many lessons in life. One of the temptations of youth is to look down on the older generation. From generation to generation, cultural ways can change. The older

generation can be seen as too traditional and not relevant to a more modern society. Peter urged the young men to reject this idea and to respect the elder men in their midst, taking the time to learn from them.

Clothe Yourself with Humility

Young men were also to clothe themselves with humility toward one another. With the energy of youth pounding through their veins, these young men might become impatient and arrogant. This could very easily lead to competition among them. Peter called the young men to take control of this energy and channel it properly. They were not to allow their youthful energy to make them proud. Instead, they were to learn to humble themselves and respect each other. In humbling themselves they were to give room for others to advance. This would require that they submit to the purposes of the Lord and wait on His timing. They were to let the Lord work in them with His mighty hand to shape and train them. Instead of trying to advance themselves and their own cause, they were to wait for God to advance them and lift them up in His time.

There have been times in my life when I have not understood this concept of humbling myself under the mighty hand of the Lord. Youthful enthusiasm waits for no one. I have had my share of bumps from banging against closed doors. Peter challenged the young men to humbly do what God had called them to do. God would lift them up in due time as they proved faithful to Him and submitted to His direction.

Notice that God's hand is mighty. That means that it is able to accomplish all it sets out to do. Sometimes His hand will place us in circumstances we do not like. Sometimes the pressure of His hand may almost seem to crush us, but we

are to humble ourselves and accept what the Lord God is doing. Let Him accomplish the work of His mighty hand. Let Him crush or break what needs to be broken. Let Him shape us as He sees fit. This is the only way to be lifted up. We can try to lift ourselves up, but it will never work. When we do so, we are acting in pride. Only those who humble themselves and let God work can truly know His exaltation. These young men were to clothe themselves in humility and allow God to work out His perfect will in their lives by submitting to Him.

Cast Your Anxiety on Him

There is another challenge in verse 7 to the young men. Peter called them to cast all their anxiety on the Lord. Peter reminded them of the Lord's care. These young men did not have the advantage of experience to show them that God indeed did care for them in all the trying circumstances of life. The elder men had been through much more in life, and they had the advantage of seeing the Lord work out one difficulty after another. Peter urged the young men to cast their anxiety on the Lord because He cared for them. God would work out the circumstances of life. They could rely fully on Him.

It never ceases to amaze me personally how often we can fall into the snare of anxiety. There have been times in my life when I felt paralyzed by anxiety. What is the remedy for worry? We are to entrust our concerns to the Lord Jesus. We are to confidently commit ourselves and those things that cause us fear to the care of the Lord Jesus, and then we are to leave them in His mighty and capable hands. Our concerns are safe in His loving custody.

Be Self-Controlled and Alert

Peter exhorted the younger men to be self-controlled and alert (verse 8). Self-control is a fruit of the Spirit (Galatians 5:23). It is a God-given gift enabling us to discipline ourselves to live in obedience to God's Word even in difficult times. It is a Spirit-given desire to submit, whatever the cost, to the will and purpose of God for our lives. It will require that we die to ourselves and our desires. We exercise this control of self because we know the enemy is always watching for an opportunity to cause us to fall.

Peter compared Satan to a prowling and roaring lion who is seeking someone to devour. We can be sure that his eyes are on us, waiting for the chance to pounce on us. In a moment when we are least expecting it, he strikes. Peter, who knew what it was like to fall into sin, warned the young men to be alert. Peter had denied the Lord three times. He had been so confident in himself that he did not seek strength from God in his time of weakness. He fell flat on his face. Peter spoke from experience when he urged the younger men to be alert at all times. They were not to underestimate the power of the enemy.

In verse 9 Peter encouraged the young men to resist the devil by standing firm in the faith. When the enemy comes to tempt us, we resist him by standing in the truth of the Word of God. In the Garden of Eden, Satan tried to get Eve to doubt the word God had spoken. Satan will do the same today. He will try his hardest to get us to turn our eyes from the principles of Scripture. If he can do this, he will have succeeded in causing us to fall. We must cling to the truth of the Word of God. Everything must be measured by this truth. It is our life map. To turn from it is to lose our way.

We are not alone in the struggle against the enemy. People all over the world are facing this same battle. We are reminded here, however, that the Lord Jesus will restore us after we have suffered a little while. In this life, we will have to suffer. God has chosen not to take suffering out of this world but to use it to accomplish His greater purpose in us. The sovereign Lord remains in control of all things. In due time, He will restore us and make us strong and steadfast (verse 10). Our obedient suffering will strengthen our character. We want to become strong in faith, but very often we do not want to face the trials that are designed to make us strong. The God who allows us to face these trials is also able to take us through them as we trust in Him.

Peter concluded his letter by telling his readers that it was with the help of Silas that he had written to them. He considered Silas to be a faithful brother. Peter also wanted to encourage the believers who read this letter in the truth of the gospel. He challenged them to stand fast in that truth that they had heard from him and the other apostles.

Greetings are sent in verse 13 from “she who is in Babylon.” This phrase has caused much debate among commentators. If taken literally it could refer to a sister in the Lord who was ministering in Babylon. It might also refer to a church that had been established through a missionary effort in that region. Greetings are also sent from Mark whom Peter considered to be his son. As an older man, now, Peter had taken Mark under his wing to encourage and disciple.

Peter concluded by telling the believers to greet each other with a kiss of love. He blessed them with the peace of Christ as he concluded.

For Consideration:

- Why is it important that we respect older individuals among us?
- What are the particular temptations of young men?
- What does it mean to humble ourselves under God's mighty hand? Is this always easy?
- What particular anxiety do you have in life right now? Can you leave this in the Lord's hands?
- What does it mean to clothe ourselves with humility?
- Have you ever found yourself taking matters into your own hands? Why is it important that we humble ourselves under God's hand?

For Prayer:

- Take a moment to thank the Lord for the older saints in your life.
- Ask the Lord to forgive you for the times you have taken things into your own hands instead of letting Him lead and accomplish His purposes.
- Ask the Lord to give you self-control as a fruit of His Spirit so that you will be committed to walking in humble submission to His purpose and will.
- Ask the Lord to take the anxieties you face in life right now and give you peace.
- Thank the Lord that He is in control of every trial you face in life. Thank Him that He will use all your trials to accomplish His purpose in you.

INTRODUCTION TO 2 PETER

Author:

The author of 1 Peter was a man by the name of Simon. We know little about his father except that his name was Jonah. Simon's brother Andrew introduced him to Jesus (John 1:40-42). He was married but we know nothing about his wife. It appears that he had a home in Capernaum where his mother-in-law lived (Mark 1:29-30). He was a fisherman by occupation.

Jesus called him to be one of His disciples and changed his name from Simon to Peter meaning "rock" (John 1:41). Peter, as he would be known from that time forward, enjoyed a very special relationship with Jesus. He, along with James and John, are often seen alone with Jesus.

Scripture paints a picture of Peter as being somewhat bold and self-confident (see Mark 14:31). He was humbled when he denied knowing Jesus three times during His trial. He would later be greatly used for the cause of the gospel in the book of Acts ministering primarily to believers in the region of Jerusalem.

Background:

The letter of 2 Peter was written when Peter was nearing the end of his life (see 1:13-15). This seems to be the key to understanding the purpose of the letter. It appears that Peter's desire was to leave a warning and challenge to the church of his day before he went to be with the Lord. He wanted to see the believers of his day living productive Christian lives (1:8), having escaped the corruption of the world (1:4). He reminds them that he had been an eyewitness to the Lord Jesus and His words (1:17-18) and that the prophets had clearly spoken of Jesus as the Messiah who was to come (1:19-21). Peter wanted there to be no doubt as to the person of the Lord and His words. He understood that many false prophets would come after he died trying to deceive his readers (2:1-3). He challenges his readers to resist these false teachers and wait with ready and sincere hearts for the return of their Lord. Peter's great desire in this letter appears to be that the church continues in the truth of Christ's words, trusting and waiting with expectancy for His return.

The Importance of the Book for Today:

While Peter does not enter into the details of Christ's return, his challenge is for us to be ready. He knew that there would be many deceiving prophets in the days prior to the Lord's return and challenges his readers to walk faithfully in the truth. The book reminds us of our great hope in the return of the Lord Jesus. It is a challenge to us to live our lives in expectation and readiness for that return. 2 Peter also reveals the heart of an aging apostle who longed to see the truth of God passed on to those who remained after his death. Peter's dying wish speaks to us in our day. What will we pass on to the next generation?

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HIS DIVINE POWER AND PROMISES

Read 2 Peter 1:1-4

This is the second letter of Peter the apostle. He introduces himself as a servant and apostle of Jesus Christ. Peter did not look at his position as a position of authority so much as one of service to the body. This is how we need to see all our gifts and offices in the body of Christ. We are servants of Jesus Christ whom He has called to a special role.

Peter's epistle was addressed to those "who through the righteousness of our God and Savior Jesus Christ have received a faith." There are some important details we need to examine here. Notice that the righteousness of which Peter spoke is the righteousness of God. He was not speaking about our righteousness here. Scripture makes it clear that we are all sinners. As sinners, we are separated from God and His salvation. Our sinful nature has no desire for the things of God. Until the Lord opens our heart and places His Spirit in us, not one of us would

ever understand His plan or accept His salvation. The Spirit of God must first work in us if we are to know the salvation of God and experience the benefits of the righteousness of Christ on our behalf.

The second thing we need to see is that faith is a gift given to us through the Lord Jesus Christ. Peter wrote to those who had “received” faith. Maybe you remember the day when that faith was given to you. For years, you could not understand the ways of God. They made no sense to you. Then one day the Spirit of God touched your heart and gave you faith to believe. That day you knew that the Lord Jesus was God and that He had a plan for your salvation.

Peter goes on in verse 3 to say that God’s divine power has given us everything we need for life and godliness through our knowledge of Christ who called us by His own glory and goodness. Again, it is important that we examine what Peter is telling us here.

Notice that Peter spoke in the past tense. In other words, we already have all that we need for life and godliness. Many of us do not understand what we have in the Lord Jesus. When he died on the cross and placed His Holy Spirit in us, He equipped us fully for all the difficulties we would encounter in life. We have everything we need to become more like the Lord Jesus. If we stand before the Lord on that final day having fallen short of His purposes, it will not be because we did not have the resources at our disposal. It will be because we did not take advantage of all that He gave us. Satan trembles when he sees Christians coming to understand who they are in the Lord Jesus. He knows He is no match for those who rely on the strength and wisdom of Christ.

All this power is available to us through the knowledge of the Lord Jesus. It is only those who belong to the Lord Jesus who have this power at their disposal. This power is not available to the unbeliever. Only those who have trusted in the work of the Lord Jesus and received His Holy Spirit have this power and authority for life and godliness.

All of this power comes to us because Christ has called us by His own glory and goodness. His glory comes from the fact that He is God. As God, He came to this earth to offer His life as a sacrifice so that we could be set free from the penalty of sin. It was only because of His goodness (perfection) that His sacrifice was accepted. No other sacrifice would do. Only the sacrifice of a perfect lamb could atone for sin. Jesus was that perfect and glorious Lamb.

In verse 4 we notice that through the glory and goodness of the Lord Jesus, we have been given many precious promises. There are many promises we have received in the Word of God. These promises are for all who belong to the Lord Jesus. As His children, we have all that is necessary to live a godly life here below. We also have His promises to comfort us in our times of need. The promises of the Scriptures encourage us in our relationship with the Lord Jesus. Notice the reason why the Lord Jesus has given us His promises. It is His desire to make us more like Himself so that we can increasingly participate in His divine nature. His promises are intended to encourage us in our spiritual growth. It is His desire to enable us to escape the corruption of this world. Those promises are intended to give us courage and strength as we deal with our own sin and corruption in this world.

How many times in your walk with the Lord have His promises been your source of strength and comfort? How many times have you turned to the Word of God and found in His

promises the courage to continue in your battle against the world and the flesh? What a privilege it is to know that we belong to the Lord Jesus and that all His promises are true. We can rely fully on Him. He desires to make us more like Himself so that we escape the corruption of this world and partake of His glory and goodness. He has given us everything we need to mature in godliness. May God give us the grace to take hold of these promises and the power made available to us.

For Consideration:

- Can we ever be saved from our sins on the basis of our own righteousness? What is the righteousness of Christ? How can we receive this righteousness as a gift?
- According to this passage, where does faith come from? Is it something we can create by ourselves? What implication does this have for our lives?
- How much of the power of Christ have you been able to tap into in your life? What struggles do you have today? How can the strength of Christ help you in these trials?
- What are some of the precious promises the Lord has given you? How have these promises encouraged you in your relationship with Him?

For Prayer:

- Thank the Lord for His wonderful promises. Take a moment to consider His promise for your particular trial or struggle today. Ask Him to fulfill that promise in you.

- Thank the Lord that He has already given you all you need to live a godly life. Ask Him to help you to understand this power more fully.
- Thank the Lord that while you did not deserve his gift of salvation, He came to offer it to you anyway.
- Take a moment to pray for loved ones who do not understand the salvation of God. Ask the Lord to open their hearts to His salvation.
- Ask the Lord to help you to take advantage of the power and strength He has made available to you.

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ADDING TO FAITH

Read 2 Peter 1:5-11

In the last meditation, we saw how Peter spoke of the wonderful hope and promises believers have in Christ. Although we did not deserve it, the Lord Jesus gave us the gift of faith by which we came to believe in Him and became children of God. As His children, we have all we need for life and godliness. Salvation is just the beginning for us. It is quite possible to place so much emphasis on salvation that we fail to understand that the real work has just begun. Any parent will tell you that while the birth of a child is wonderful, there will be many more years required to raise that child to maturity. Similarly, believers require many years to mature in their relationship with Christ.

It is in this light that Peter explained that it is the responsibility of believers to add to the gift of faith that they have received. In this next section, Peter lists seven virtues the believer is to add to the faith given to them by the Lord Jesus. In reality, these seven virtues are the fruit of their faith in the Lord Jesus. As faith matures in us, these seven virtues will become more evident in our lives.

Goodness

Peter began by telling his readers to add to God's gift of faith the fruit of goodness (NIV). This goodness relates to moral purity of thought, action, and attitude. There is no hypocrisy in goodness. People who are good in this sense are completely sincere. They do not say one thing while thinking another. Their actions and their attitudes are in tune with the character of Christ. If there was ever a group in the New Testament that Jesus condemned, it was the Pharisees. They were religious, but they were not good or sincere. Jesus compared them to whitewashed tombs. On the outside, they were clean and white, but inside they were full of rotteness and death (Matthew 23:27). Jesus wants His people to be morally pure in motivation and deed.

Knowledge

We need to add to the foundation of faith the building block of knowledge. The knowledge referred to here is the knowledge of God, His purpose and His Word. Without this knowledge, we can very easily be distracted or fall into error. God wants His people to diligently seek Him in the way he has ordained—in the Word He has given. A vital part of maturity is knowledge of God's Word.

Self-control

Self-control is the third building block we are to place on the foundation of faith. Self-control is very closely related to knowledge. Self-control as a fruit of the Spirit is the God-given willingness to submit, no matter the cost, to be obedient to the revealed in the Word of God and His purposes. It is one thing to have knowledge of what the Word of God teaches and quite another to live in obedience. Knowledge

is not enough. Self-control is the ability to apply that knowledge to real life. God desires that His children discipline themselves not only to learn about Him and His ways but also to live in those ways on a daily basis.

Perseverance

Self-control will not always be easy. There are times when we will have to endure much hardship as we submit to the Word of God and His purposes for our lives. Perseverance is the ability to remain under pressure or trial for prolonged periods of time without giving up. The marathon runner needs endurance as well as discipline in order to finish the race. As believers, we are involved in a lifelong marathon. For many of us, our race may last up to seventy or eighty years, if God allows us to live that long. The race ends when we arrive at the finish line either through death or the return of our Lord to take us to be with Him. God is looking for a people who will not give up, no matter the cost. This may mean passing through many difficulties and trials. It means carrying a cross. Peter The struggle may be long and hard, but the race is won by those who persevere to the end.

Godliness

We are also to add godliness as a building block to the foundation of faith. Godliness relates to reverence and respect for God and His ways. The godly person is one who is taking on the character of the Lord in daily actions and thoughts. Godly people demonstrate their godliness in whatever circumstances come their way. They live and walk as Jesus did.

Brotherly Kindness

As we let God chip away the flesh and its evil desires, there will also be a change in our relationships with those around us. As we become more like Christ, we will begin to respond to people as Jesus would have us respond. As we humble ourselves and our pride is cut away, we begin to think about others and their needs. We begin to reach out with the arms of Christ to those around us. Our eyes are opened to their need, and we have a desire to reach out to them in gentleness and compassion. We should never underestimate the importance of brotherly kindness. Our faith is to be lived in community. We are not to live for ourselves alone but also for others. Brotherly kindness reaches out to minister in the name of Christ to those in need. Again, Peter tells us that those who have been given faith through the Lord Jesus will show this kindness toward their brothers and sisters. This is something we are to continually seek to develop in our relationship with the Lord Jesus. He, who loves the Lord, will show kindness toward his brothers and sisters in Christ.

Love

Love is the last virtue on this list. This is not because it is not as important. Love is a vital part of our maturity in Christ. The reality of the matter is that if we do not first get our relationship with God right, we will not be able to love as God requires. We must first learn to know and love God before we can love those around us. We must learn about His love so that we will have an example to follow. We must let Him chip away the pride that keeps us from kindness toward our brothers and sisters. We must be given the mind and heart of Christ for people before we can love them as He loves them. Genuine love comes as we are shaped into the image of Christ.

According to verse 8, this process of building on the foundation of faith is a lifelong process. We will not have all these blocks in place overnight, nor will we quickly have each of these characteristics to a full measure. As we diligently and daily seek the Lord, however, we will increasingly mature in these qualities. As each day passes, we should be growing in goodness, knowledge, self-control, perseverance, godliness, brotherly kindness, and love.

Peter had two things to say in verses 8 and 9 about these building blocks. First, they will keep believers from being unproductive. These divine qualities are all necessary if we are to become everything God wants us to become. Omit any one of these characteristics and we will fail to be productive for the kingdom. We may have great knowledge, but what good is that knowledge if we lack love or godliness? Our lack in any one area will compromise our service for the Lord.

Second, Peter stated that those who do not pursue these virtues are blind and have forgotten that they have been cleansed of their sin. Believers who do not submit to growing in the godly qualities Peter shares here are blind to what the Lord has done. He came to set them free from the flesh and the devil. He came to give them new life and hope. Why would any who have received so great a salvation return to the old ways when there is a new and greater path to follow?

In verse 10 Peter challenged his readers to be eager to make their calling and election sure. In other words, they were to do everything in their power to confirm that the salvation they believed they had was genuine. They could determine this by examining what they were building on the foundation of faith. Had they built with the blocks that Peter

had been speaking about in this chapter? As they examined their lives and saw these qualities in growing measure, they could be reassured that their faith was indeed real.

Building on the foundation of faith with these blocks would protect the believer from becoming unproductive in the kingdom of God. Knowledge would show them the requirements of God and keep them from the lies of the enemy. Self-control would keep them obedient to that Word. Perseverance would produce endurance in trials. Love would keep them generous and compassionate in their relationship with each other. These virtues are ignored at the risk of falling into sin.

As we have said, it will not be easy to build these qualities into our relationship with God and others. Those who do so, however, will receive a rich welcome into the eternal kingdom of the Lord Jesus Christ (verse 11). Not only will they be protected from falling into the devil's snares here below, but they will also see the smile of Christ's approval when they see Him face to face.

For Consideration:

- Take a moment to reconsider the various building blocks Peter mentions in this chapter. Which of these blocks needs to be more evident in your life?
- How can these building blocks keep us productive in our spiritual pilgrimage?
- How can the evidence of these building blocks in our life give us the assurance of our salvation?

For Prayer:

- Ask the Lord to enable you to grow more in the virtues Peter listed here.
- Ask the Lord to search your heart and show you which of these qualities needs to be more evident in your life.
- Thank the Lord for the evidence of spiritual maturity in increasing measure in your life.

A CERTAIN WORD

Read 2 Peter 1:12-21

It was very important to the apostle Peter that his readers not only understand the truth of the gospel of Jesus Christ but also live out that truth in daily life. Having lived the Christian life for some time now, I have come to realize how easy it is for us to forget the teaching we receive. This is especially true in the application of these truths to our daily life. It is one thing to believe that God is a sovereign God who will take care of us in our need. When trials come our way, however, we seem to forget that God is in control. We find ourselves worrying about what is going to happen to us. Our confidence in this sovereign and loving God seems to fade. It is for this reason that we constantly need to be reminded of the basic truths of the Word of God.

The individuals to whom Peter was writing were firmly established in their walk with God and their understanding of His Word. Even though this was the case, Peter told them in verse 12 that he would continue to remind them of these vital truths. Some time ago the Lord began a particular work of refinement in my life. During this period everything seemed to be put in question. An accident led to some

doubts about my physical health, and then depression set in and put a real strain on my marriage. The Lord stripped me of the greatest part of my ministry as a result of the car accident. This was a very difficult time for me and my family. I knew that God was a sovereign and loving God, but in that period of my life, I needed to be reminded over and over again of this truth. It was hard for me to see the reality of this truth in the situation I found myself in.

Peter made it his life commitment to refresh the memory of his readers concerning these basic truths. For the most part, this is the task of any pastor or teacher of the gospel. While there are times that new believers are hearing the truths of Scripture for the first time, the majority of church members have often heard these truths. The fact of the matter is that we need to hear these truths over and over because we lose sight of them. As long as Peter was alive and living in his earthly tent (his physical body), he would continue to refresh the minds of the saints with these basic truths.

In verse 14 Peter told his readers that the Lord had made it known to him that he would shortly have to lay down his life. Until that time, however, Peter wanted to continue to refresh the minds of the saints. Not only did Peter want to make these truths known to the saints of his day but he also wanted to be sure that after his departure from this world, he would leave behind for them a reminder of these basic principles. It is unclear how Peter was going to do this. It is possible that it was through these two epistles he wrote.

It should be noticed that the truths Peter was writing about in this epistle were not cleverly invented stories (verse 16). Peter assured his readers that the facts he presented to them were proven and true. Peter had been an eyewitness

of the majesty and power of the Lord Jesus. He had walked with the Lord and spoken with Him. Peter had sat by the Lord's side and listened to Him preach and teach these truths.

In verse 17 Peter reminded his readers of what happened when the Lord Jesus was baptized. The Spirit of God fell on Him and testified to those present that this man was the Son of God. There was no doubt in the mind of the apostle Peter that the Lord Jesus was the Son of God who came to save us from our sin. The Spirit descending on Jesus indicated the Father's special seal of approval on His earthly life and ministry.

In verse 18, reference is also made to a sacred mountain. This very likely is a reference to the time when the Lord took Peter, James, and John with Him to the Mount of Transfiguration (Matthew 17:2). Here on this mountain, the apostles saw the Lord Jesus transfigured. His earthly body seemed to be covered with the glory of God. This was so evident that His appearance radically changed. He shone with the glory of God. For Peter, there could be no question about what this meant. Jesus was the Son of God. He was the Messiah who was to come. He was the hope of the world.

All this evidence proved beyond any doubt that what the prophets spoke was true. Jesus was the fulfillment of their prophecies. Peter challenged his readers to pay close attention to the words of the prophets. What they spoke about the Lord Jesus came to pass exactly as they predicted. In verse 19 Peter challenged his readers to pay close attention to the facts that he had just given them.

The truth about the Lord Jesus and His work was like a bright light shining in a very dark place. This truth was not

a creatively invented story but the hope of the world. The truth about Jesus and His work would carry believers through the darkness and difficulties that would come their way. Like a light, this truth would keep them until the day came when the Lord Jesus returned to take them to be with Him forever. The truth of Jesus and His work will keep us and strengthen us in the trials we have to face. It is a bright hope in a dark world.

Peter stated in verses 20-21 that true prophecy has nothing to do with a prophet's personal ideas or desires. True prophecy has its origin in the will of God, as revealed to the prophet through the Spirit of God. Peter wanted to assure his readers that the words of Scripture and even his own words were absolutely trustworthy. Their truth had its source in God Himself who cannot lie.

For Consideration:

- What proof did Peter give here to the truth of what he was writing?
- What is the difference between believing truth and living that truth out in daily life? What particular truth do you have problems living out today?
- Are there individuals around you who need to be gently reminded of the truth of God in their trial? Is it possible that God would have you to encourage them with a reminder of the truth of God?

For Prayer:

- Thank the Lord for the fact that He has given you His Word to encourage and guide you in this life.
- Take a moment to praise the Lord for His presence in your life. Thank Him that He is with you right now?
- Ask the Lord to forgive you for the times you have failed to apply the truth of His Word to your life situations.
- If you are facing a trial right now, ask the Lord to open your eyes to His love and sovereign care. Ask Him to give you the grace to trust Him and His promises.

FALSE PROPHETS

Read 2 Peter 2:1-19

Peter's message was about the Lord Jesus and His salvation. It concerned the truth of God's plan for His people. It was the same message the prophets of old had spoken by divine revelation. Peter reminded his readers, however, that there were false prophets among them who wanted to pervert this message of salvation in Christ. These false teachers tried to secretly promote religious lies and went as far as to deny the Lord Jesus who bought them. This hypocrisy would result in swift judgment.

There are some details we need to examine in this verse. Notice first that these false prophets introduced their doctrines secretly. Satan does not always announce his presence. Certainly, these counterfeit leaders did not want people to see them as being false. They wanted respect, and so they made their way slowly into the hearts and minds of people. Sometimes doctrinal differences are so subtle that they go unnoticed. Peter challenged his readers to be very cautious of teachers who had a message different from that of the apostles.

Notice second that these false teachers claimed to be believers but went as far as to deny the Lord Jesus they claimed to worship. We can always tell a false prophet from a true prophet by what he or she believes concerning the Lord Jesus. Peter wrote in verse 1 that these heresies were destructive. They were destructive in the sense of what they could do to the church and the individual believer. These heresies could distract the believer and turn attention away from the truth of the Lord Jesus. The church could be weakened or even destroyed by these lies. These deceivers could not be left alone to do their destructive work.

Peter warned his readers that these false prophets would gather a following (verse 2). Many would fall prey to their lies, which might be cleverly clothed in logic and reason. Their heresies appealed to the sinful nature and proclaimed a pleasing but false message. These counterfeit believers mocked the ways of the Lord and His people by belittling the truth. The shameful ways of the false teachers brought disgrace on the church.

The false teachers that Peter spoke of were greedy. They were not serving out of love and compassion for the people of God. They were seeking money and reputation. They were in ministry for selfish gain and not for the purpose of spreading the truth of the gospel.

Peter went on to say that these false prophets made up imaginary stories. They were creating their own idea of God and His purposes and leading people to an imaginary god. Their false doctrines came from their own imagination and not from the truth of Scripture.

For their evil, God had already judged these evil prophets. Their condemnation was hanging over them, ready to fall

at any moment. They thought that God was not watching their evil. They believed that they could get away with what they were doing. God's judgment, however, was not sleeping. It was very much awake and preparing to pounce on them at any moment. They were destroying the faith of many and would be held accountable to God for this.

In verses 4-10, Peter gave Old Testament examples to show that God does punish evil. According to verse 4, God did not spare the evil angels when they sinned. This seems to be a reference to the demons who were at one time angels of God. These demons fell into sin and were judged by God. He sent them to hell, locking them in darkness until the day of final judgment. God did not spare these angels from this terrible judgment. He punished them severely. Their final doom is certain and terrible. If He did not spare these evil spirits who were angels of heaven, will He spare humans who destroy the faith of His children by lies and deceit?

In verse 5 Peter spoke of the day of Noah when the Lord chose to destroy the world by a flood. Noah preached righteousness before God, but the people of his day refused to listen. This resulted in a judgment of God in the form of a worldwide flood. Only Noah and his family were saved from that destruction. If God did not spare His creation in the days of Noah, will He hesitate to judge those who preach ungodliness or who deny the Lord Jesus?

While God did destroy Sodom and Gomorrah, he rescued Lot, who was a righteous man (verse 7). Unlike the other inhabitants of these cities, Lot was distressed by the filth and lawlessness that he saw all around him. Day after day Lot was tormented in his soul by the terrible sin he witnessed. God saw Lot's heart and how he grieved over sin in his society. For this reason, God chose to spare Lot from

the terrible judgment He sent on the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah. God mercifully sent His angels to escort Lot out of the city before judgment fell. While the judgment of God is certain to fall on those who live in evil, God knows how to rescue those who are His. God sees their righteous heart and spares them. What a comfort this is for those of us who do love the Lord and seek to serve Him in an evil world.

Peter continued to describe the false teachers as individuals who followed the corrupt desires of the sinful nature (verse 10). This nature is contrary to God and His purposes and separates us from Him. When the Holy Spirit came to live in our hearts, he came to give us a new nature. As believers, we know the reality of two natures living in us: the old sinful nature and the new spiritual nature of Christ. We are called throughout Scripture to die to that old nature of the flesh and to live according to the new nature of the Spirit (Romans 8:5-8). These false teachers were not guided by the Spirit but by their sinful nature. True servants of God would seek God and His purposes first and be led by the Spirit in all they did.

Peter also spoke of these false teachers as being individuals who despised authority. The true servant of God would be willing to submit to authority as ordained by God, but these prophets didn't want anyone telling them what to do. They were bold and arrogant. They could not admit when they were wrong and pushed forward in their disobedience.

As an example of their arrogance, these false prophets even slandered celestial beings—something that even the angels in heaven do not do. The identity of these celestial beings is uncertain. Jude verse 9 states, however, that the archangel Michael did not even dare to bring a slanderous

accusation against the devil during a dispute. It is true that the devil is evil and stands against God and His purposes. This, however, did not give Michael the right to slander and speak evil of him. Michael refused to resort to slander, even when it came to speaking of Satan, himself. These false prophets, however, were slandering whatever they did not understand. We must leave all such judgment to the Lord. This is not to say that we agree with what the enemy is doing. We must fight for truth, but we must not do so using the tactics of the enemy. We will never defeat Satan by using his tactics. We can only defeat him by fighting him with the fruit of the Spirit and with trust and confidence in God.

Peter did not have a very high opinion of these false teachers. He spoke of them in verse 12 as beasts who were born to be killed. They had no value in the kingdom of God. Their whole purpose was to turn people away from the Lord and His truth. God would pay back these individuals for the evil they had done.

Peter's impression of these false prophets was based not only on the fact that they were teaching error but also on their sinful lifestyle. Notice in verse 13 how he accused them of being pleasure-seekers. Their idea of pleasure was to engage in immorality in broad daylight. They were blots and blemishes. That is to say, they were unclean, unholy and unfit for ministry among the family of God. They lived for their evil pleasures while putting on a front of spirituality. Their eyes were filled with adultery. They seduced those who were not firmly established in their faith and relationship with God. They were enemies of the gospel.

Peter wrote that these individuals had left the way of truth and followed after Balaam, who loved the wages of wick-

edness. Balaam was a false prophet who was hired by Balak to curse the people of God (see Numbers 22). The riches he was offered tempted him to pronounce a curse on God's people. God rebuked him for this through his own donkey, which proved to be more obedient to the Lord than Balaam. Peter compares the false prophets of his day to Balaam. Worldly riches tempted them to wander from the truth. They had nothing of any value to offer the people of God. They were springs without water, failing to provide the refreshment they promised (verse 17).

Peter also compared the false prophets to mists driven by a storm. They were obsessed by their fleshly, wicked passions and tossed about by the storms of these evil desires. The blackest darkness was waiting for these false prophets where they would be severely punished for their evil.

The mouths of these counterfeit leaders were empty (verse 18). In other words, they had nothing of importance to say. They spoke boastful words that appealed to the lusts of the flesh. They were unconcerned about the principles of righteousness. They were motivated only by the desires of their sinful flesh. Peter's heart was particularly burdened because these false prophets were tools in the hands of Satan, preying on new believers who were just escaping from the error of this world. The false teachers promised freedom, but they themselves were slaves of sin.

Peter is not slandering these false prophets here. He speaks the truth about them with a heart that earnestly seeks after God and His purpose. He warns believers of the tremendous dangers of following these false teachers and falling into their ways. There is intensity in the words of Peter. We must do everything in our power to keep false teachers from destroying the flock of God. Peter is very

forceful because he knows the damage these false prophets can bring.

For Consideration:

- Why do you suppose false teachers always seem to be able to gather a following?
- What motivates the false teacher?
- How do we recognize a false teacher, according to Peter? Answer in terms of their doctrine and life-style.
- What did Peter say about the judgment of false teachers?
- What should be our response to false teachers in our day?
- What is the difference between slandering and warning people of the danger of those who are destroying the work of the church?

For Prayer:

- Ask the Lord to give you a clear understanding of the truth so that you are not led astray by false doctrines.
- Ask the Lord to protect your church from false teachers.
- Do you know some false teachers personally? Ask the Lord to open their heart to the truth of the Word of God.

38

ENTANGLED AND OVERCOME

Read 2 Peter 2:20-22

While this passage really belongs to the section we discussed in the last meditation, it is important that we take the time to deal with it separately. Peter has been speaking about false prophets and their work. These false prophets had turned their backs on the Lord Jesus and were leading young believers astray from the faith.

Notice here that Peter speaks in verse 20 about a people who had escaped the corruption of the world by knowing the Lord and Savior Jesus Christ but who again become entangled in sin. Let's take a moment to consider this in greater detail.

Notice that these individuals had escaped the corruption of the world. The corruption that is being referred to here is the sin and ungodly ways of this world. The world in which we live is contrary to the things of God. It does not know God or have any desire to know Him. This speaks to the lifestyle of these individuals. They lived a good life and

walked in tune with God's Word and His ways, rejecting the ungodliness of the world around them.

The individuals of whom Peter wrote also had knowledge of Christ. They understood that He came to set them free from the bondage of their sin. In fact, Peter tells us that this knowledge of Christ was what enabled these individuals to escape the corruption of the world around them. This was not just an intellectual knowledge of Jesus but this knowledge had an impact on how they lived their life.

Notice, however, that they become entangled again in the world's corruption and were overcome so that they were worse off in the end than they were in the beginning. What is Peter telling us here? There are several things we need to say about this verse.

To understand this verse, we need to recognize that it is quite possible for an individual to escape certain sins in life through the power of Christ and still not be truly a child of God. Such individuals can have knowledge of Christ and be healed or touched by Him but never be true children of God. Like the seed growing in the stony ground in Jesus' parable in Matthew 13, these individuals grow for a time but when difficulties and temptations come their way, they fall away, proving that they were never truly children of God.

Notice also how Peter states that those who had this basic knowledge of the Lord Jesus and had turned their backs on it were worse off than they were in the beginning. The apostle Paul told Timothy that God showed his mercy toward him when he was persecuting the church because he had acted in ignorance and unbelief.

Even though I was once a blasphemer and a persecutor and a violent man, I was shown mercy because I acted in ignorance and unbelief. (1 Timothy 1:13).

There is one thing worse than persecuting the church and blaspheming the name of the Lord Jesus, that is, to do so in full knowledge of who Jesus is and what He has done. Paul did not understand the work of God at the point in his life when he persecuted the church. When he met Christ, things radically changed. He bowed to the ground in surrender and offered his entire life to him. To sin in ignorance is bad enough, but to sin knowing full well what you are doing is even worse and will receive a much stricter judgment.

There are individuals today who have knowledge of the way of salvation. These individuals have even experienced the power of God in one way or another. They may have been healed from a certain sickness in their lives or experienced wonderful victory from the Lord over an addiction or evil habit. In fact, some of these individuals have ministered in the name of Jesus. Listen to what Jesus said about such individuals in Matthew 7:22-23:

Many will say to me on that day, "Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and in your name drive out demons and perform many miracles?" Then I will tell them plainly, "I never knew you. Away from me, you evildoers!"

Remember here that Peter has been speaking in this context about men and women just like these Jesus spoke about in Matthew 7. He has been speaking about false prophets who come in the name of the Lord. These individuals claim to speak on His behalf. They deceive people

with their good lifestyle and fine words but they are in reality still trapped in sin and overcome. Peter uses a proverb of his day to speak of these individuals: "A dog returns to its vomit," and, "A sow that is washed goes back to her wallowing in the mud" (verse 22).

It is the nature of a pig to get dirty and to wallow in the mud. It is the nature of a dog to eat its own vomit. If God's people were truly watching these false prophets, they would see sooner or later the error of their ways. Their true nature would be revealed in time. They would become entangled by their sins. They would be revealed for who they were. Not everyone who comes in Jesus name truly belongs to Him. Not everyone who has experienced Christ's touch is His child.

Peter reminds us that the end for those who had knowledge of Christ and His ways but turned from it was worse than if they had never known him. Their judgement would be worse than the judgement of those who had never claimed Christ at all. As there are rewards in heaven for faithfulness, so it seems from this passage that there is also degrees of punishment for those who have rejected the salvation He offers.

For Consideration:

- Can an unbeliever experience the presence of God and His blessings? Can we minister in His name without really knowing God?
- What is the difference between sins of ignorance and deliberate sins?

- How can we recognize a false prophet? Is it possible for a false prophet to look like a true believer?
- What do we learn here about the judgment to come?
- Are you truly a child of God? How can we know if we truly belong to the Lord Jesus? What is the difference between true salvation and a religious lifestyle?

For Prayer:

- Thank the Lord for revealing the truth to you. Ask Him to give you the grace to live in the reality of that truth each day.
- Ask the Lord to help you to be discerning in regard to the teaching you hear around you. Ask Him to help you to discern truth from error.
- Are there false prophets in your community? Take a moment to pray that the Lord would give them knowledge of the truth. Ask the Lord to bring them to Himself.

WHERE IS HIS COMING?

Read 2 Peter 3:1-10

Peter warned his readers about the reality of false prophets and the danger of falling away from the truth of the gospel. Satan was quite active in his distortion of the truth of the Word of God. Peter's burden was that his readers understand the truth of God and resist the false teachings that abounded in their day. Peter wanted to stimulate his readers to wholesome thinking (verse 1). The word "wholesome" has a sense of pure, sincere, and untainted by unholy or worldly thinking. This was what the apostle was seeking from his readers. He wanted their thinking to be pure and knowledgeable enough to avoid false teachings.

Probably more than ever before, we are being bombarded with the world's ideas. Through television, internet, radio, literature, and many other means, the world is seeking to promote its ideas. Many of these ideas are contrary to the clear teaching of the Word of God. Even Christians fall prey to this faulty thinking. Peter's call was to know the truth and remain faithful to it. He wanted his readers to distinguish between truth and error and remain unblemished in thought and mind before God.

Notice in verse 1 that it was Peter's intention to stimulate his readers to wholesome thinking. The truth of the Word of God will always be under attack in this sinful world. There will be times when we will experience doubt. In this world, there are many things that stimulate unholy thoughts and attitudes. In those times, we need to turn to God and trust His word. Wholesome thinking is thinking that focuses on God and His purposes. The believer must learn to set his or her mind on these things.

In verse 2 Peter gave an example of unholy thinking. He spoke of scoffers questioning the words of the prophets and apostles concerning the second coming of the Lord. These ungodly people chose to follow the evil and fleshly desires of their hearts and did not want to believe that the Lord would return and judge their sinful lifestyles.

These individuals ridiculed true believers for their belief in the return of the Lord: "Where is this 'coming' He promised?" (verse 4). Many years had passed since the promise was made, yet the Lord had not returned (see John 14:1-3). Many believers in Peter's day were suffering persecution. They longed to see the Lord's return. False teachers used this to mock and persuade people that the Lord would not keep His promise. They falsely stated that "everything goes on as it has since the beginning of creation." In other words, God was not particularly interested in what was happening.

Peter contradicted this thinking in verses 5-7. He pointed out that these false teachers deliberately ignored the teachings of the Old Testament about creation and the flood. By the word of God, the heavens and the earth were formed. By that same word, the waters of the earth caused the flood of Noah's day. That flood destroyed life on earth.

It would be by that same word that the earth and the heavens would be destroyed by fire on the Day of Judgment. Though this was not immediately evident, the final and fiery judgment will come. The word of God that formed the earth and caused the flood would bring it to pass. By the word of His mouth, God would punish the sin of those who turned their backs on Him.

The scoffers of Peter's day doubted the word of the creator God because He delayed in fulfilling His word. They forgot that the Lord has His own schedule. The Lord is an eternal God. Time has no effect on Him. Neither He nor His promises are weakened by years. He does not grow weary. One year or a thousand years are the same to him (verse 8). Nothing causes Him to rush. He has no deadlines. Eternity is before Him.

How different it is for us as human beings. We are creatures of time. Our lives revolve around time. We live for a few years and perish. We grow weak with age. We only have a few years to accomplish our purposes and plans. God does not have these limitations. His delay in returning does not mean that He will not return.

Peter reminded his readers in verse 9 that the Lord is not slow in keeping His promises. It may seem that He is slow, but this is only because of our own concept of time. What are a few years compared to eternity? They are so small compared to eternity that they can hardly be counted.

What is important for us to understand is that God's delay is the result of mercy and grace. If God returned right now, how many people would be ready for His return? This delay is for the benefit of humankind. During this time, the gospel is going forth and the kingdom expanded. Countless individuals are being touched by that message and

accepting the Lord Jesus. The Lord is going to return, but we do not know when. What we do know is that this period of time before His return is our last chance to be made right with God and be forgiven of our sin.

Peter announced in verse 10 that the Lord would return like a thief. That is to say, He will come when we least expect it. If you knew that the thief was coming at a certain time, would you not lock your doors and prepare for his coming? The Lord has purposely not told us when He is coming so that we will be motivated to live holy lives. He could come at any moment. We need to be always ready.

The God of creation has spoken. He does not lie. His word will be accomplished in its proper time. The day is coming when the heavens will disappear with a roar and the earth will be completely destroyed by fire. Everything that has been stained by sin will be destroyed. Nothing of this old life will remain. Only what is pure and holy will endure.

Although the Lord delays, Peter assures us that His promises will be fulfilled. What an awful day that will be for those who have doubted the word of the creator God! May we be a people who are always ready for His return by living for Him in thought and deed.

For Consideration:

- Peter challenged believers to think wholesome thoughts. What are the enemies of wholesome thinking?
- What do we learn in this passage about God's timing?

- What do we learn about the word of God? Can we trust that word and His promises?
- Why does the Lord delay His coming (see verse 9)?
- Are you personally ready for the return of the Lord? What would change in your lifestyle if you knew that Jesus was returning tomorrow?

For Prayer:

- Ask the Lord to cleanse your mind and fill it with wholesome thoughts. Ask Him to remove any desire for worldly thinking and worldly ways.
- Thank the Lord for the assurance we can have that His word is absolutely true.
- Thank the Lord for the fact that He promised to return for us.
- Ask the Lord to help you live each day in light of His return.

WHAT KIND OF PEOPLE?

Read 2 Peter 3:11-18

Peter had been reminding his readers that the Word of God was going to be fulfilled. The day was coming when the Lord Jesus would come to judge the earth. Peter tells us that this earth will one day be destroyed by fire. False teachers of Peter's day had been scoffing at the idea of the Lord's return and judgment. They lived a sinful lifestyle with no concern about the coming judgment. They believed that because the Lord delayed, He was not actually coming, nor was He going to judge the earth. Peter reminded them of the foolishness of this position. He challenged his readers to always be ready for the return of the Lord.

Here in this final section of chapter 3, Peter asked the question: "Since everything will be destroyed in this way, what kind of people ought you to be?" (verse 11). If Jesus is coming to judge the earth as He promised, how are we to live? We will examine Peter's answer to this question in the final verses of this chapter.

You Ought to Live Holy and Godly Lives

In light of the second coming of the Lord to this earth, Peter tells us that we ought to live holy and godly lives. If children knew that their father was coming home, would they not do their best not to be caught in an act of disobedience? Common sense alone would tell us that if the Lord Jesus is coming, we should be found living in obedience to His Word. We ought to be living in such a way that we would have nothing to be ashamed of at His appearing. Our lives are to be holy and godly in every detail.

Notice in verse 12 that by their being ready for the return of the Lord, they would actually speed it along. Jesus told His disciples in Matthew 24:14 that only when the gospel was preached to the ends of the earth would the end come.

And this gospel of the kingdom will be preached in the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come. (Matthew 24:14)

There is a work to be accomplished before the Lord returns. There are a number of souls that still have to come into the kingdom. It is our responsibility, knowing that the day of the end is coming, to reach out to those lost in their sin and bring them into the fold.

Look Forward to the Fulfillment of His Promises

The second response we need to have, knowing that the day of the Lord is drawing near, is that we need to be a people who look forward to the fulfillment of His promises. Sin has caused much suffering and pain. It has stripped us of our vitality and energy. It has taken away our loved ones

by death. It has caused tears of sorrow and suffering. For the believer, in particular, it has caused rejection and persecution. As the day of the Lord's appearance draws near, we will need to set our eyes more and more on the promise of a new heaven and a new earth. What a comfort this will bring us. On that day nations will no longer wage war with each other. Cyclones, hurricanes, earthquakes, and famine will cease. There in that new heaven and new earth, the Lord Jesus will be honored and glorified. We will all bow before Him in a place where pain and suffering will not exist. This new heaven and earth will be the home of righteousness. Sin and evil will be banished forever.

The promise of a new heaven and new earth ought to give us comfort and encouragement. Here on this old earth, we will suffer persecution and trial, but this is not the end. Beyond is the fulfillment of a wonderful promise of eternal life with the Lord Jesus in a new heaven and earth. As believers, we need to keep this bright future central in our thoughts.

You Ought to Make Every Effort to Be Spotless

Third, the apostle Peter stated in verse 14 that as believers looking forward to the return of the Lord, we ought to make every effort to be found spotless, blameless, and at peace with Him. Believers ought to strive to be free of defilement and guilt. This will not come without effort. It will require discipline on our part. Peter reminded his readers, however, that the Lord was very patient with them.

In verses 15 Peter wrote that the patience of the Lord had meant salvation for many of them. Had the Lord Jesus come earlier, many of them would never have come to the knowledge of the Lord. The Lord is waiting until the full number of believers come to the knowledge of the truth.

In verse 16 Peter pointed his readers to the teachings of the apostle Paul. Peter recognized that God had given Paul great wisdom and that his writings were inspired by God. Some people accused Paul of being very hard to understand, and many even twisted the meaning of his teachings. Paul and Peter agreed fully that as believers, we need to live lives that are ready at any time for the Lord to return.

Peter told his readers that they were to be on guard so that they would not get carried away by false teaching and fall from their secure position. What is this secure position that Peter spoke of here? In the context, that secure position is directly connected to resisting false doctrines. The truth of the Word places us in a position of strength and security in the battle with the enemy. By the Word of God, we can resist the lies of the devil. Where can we go when he bombards us with his lies? The only secure retreat for the believer is in the truth of the Word of God.

By feeding on the truth of the Scriptures, we are able to grow strong in our walk with the Lord. By following the principles that God laid out in His Word, we are able to have a powerful impact on the world. Through the preaching of the truth of that Word, the power of the enemy is broken in the lives of those who hear and believe. If we want to be spiritually strong and healthy, we need to understand the Scripture and obey its truth. Our position of strength and security against the enemy is only in obedience to the Word of God. It is for this reason that Peter warned his readers against the teachings of the false prophets of their day. A believer who is ignorant or disobedient to the teaching of the Word of God is weak and powerless. Peter wanted believers to be knowledgeable and bold in the Lord God. For this to happen, they needed to be diligent in

learning the Word and resisting the false teachings that were around them.

Peter concludes his letter with a challenge to his readers to grow in the grace and knowledge of the Lord Jesus Christ. Notice that there are two aspects to this statement. Believers are to grow in the knowledge of Christ. This knowledge comes through the Word and the teachings of the apostles. We need to study the Word to understand the character and purposes of God. We must spend time in the Scriptures, letting the Holy Spirit teach us about the life and work of the Lord Jesus.

Peter also told his readers that they were also to grow in the grace of the Lord Jesus. Grace refers to the way in which God blesses and equips the believer in ministry and relationship with Him. We are not only to grow in knowledge about the Lord Jesus but also in our ability to receive His grace in every aspect of our lives. The mature believer is one who is able to draw from the supply of God's grace stored up for him. He is able to use the gifts and strength the Lord provides to minister and serve in His name.

God is looking for a people who not only know Him but also are able to minister and live in His strength. May He help us to be this kind of people as we await His return.

For Consideration:

- Peter stated that the Lord will destroy this earth and replace it with a new heaven and new earth. What

encouragement do you receive from this? What kind of challenge does this give you?

- How does the truth of the Word of God keep us in a position of security and strength?
- What is the difference between growing in the knowledge of Christ and growing in His grace? Why is it important that we grow in both?

For Prayer:

- Ask the Lord to help you to live each day with the hope of His coming.
- Thank the Lord for how His death conquered sin. Take a moment to praise Him for the wonderful hope of a new earth where sin will be no more.
- Thank the Lord for the truth of His Word. Ask Him to keep you obedient and faithful to that Word. Thank the Lord for the security and strength we find in this Word.
- Ask the Lord to help you not only to grow in the knowledge of Him but also the ability to walk in the strength and grace He provides.

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