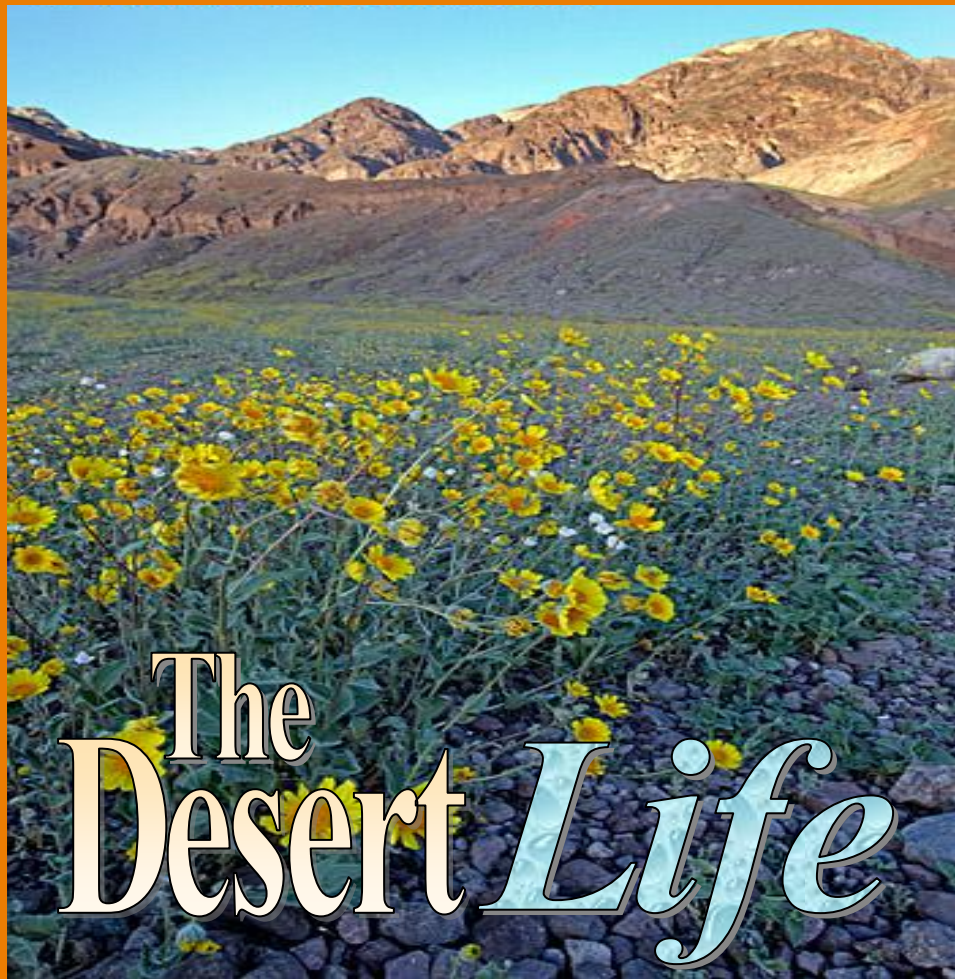
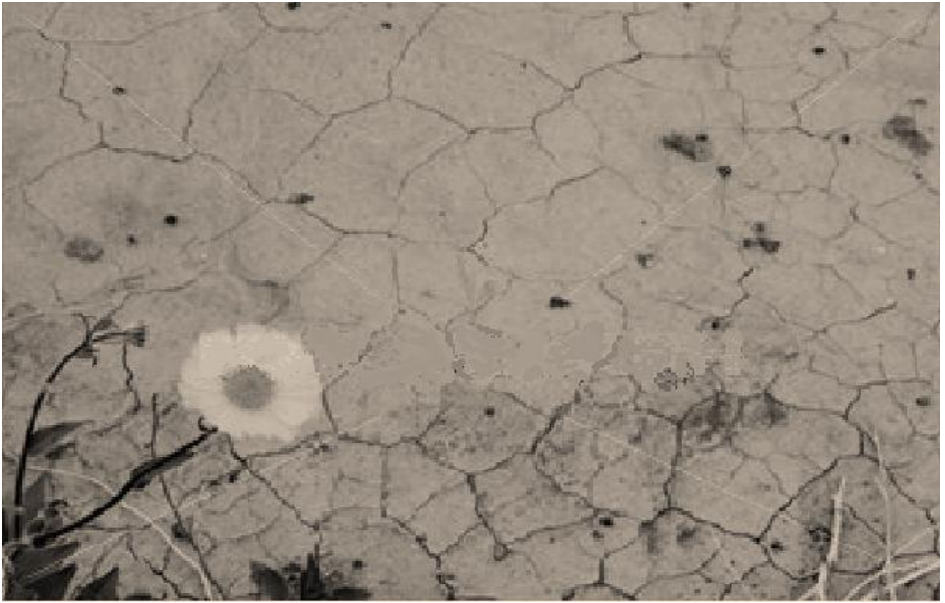

In the Journey There is Hope...



Finding God in the Wilderness

KEN AND HILDA KORPI



About the cover:

This picture was taken in the southwest desert of the United States during the El Niño effect of 1999.

“Although it is an annual event, the wildflower season is never the same from one year to the next. Weather conditions play an integral role in the outcome of each wildflower season. If the winter has too much or little rain, or if the temperature is too warm or cold, the seeds of desert annuals will remain dormant or bloom in fewer numbers. Only when the conditions are near-perfect will you witness a spectacular wildflower showing, a time when an abundance of aromatic colors fill each landscape with a breathtaking effect.

A decade may pass with less than fruitful wildflower displays, but when the conditions are just right, the wildflowers fill the landscapes in a phenomenal riot of color.

It is difficult to pinpoint the best time to visit the desert during the spring wildflower season, which generally occurs from March through June. But rest assured, no matter when you visit the desert, there are always plants in bloom.”

Lynn Bremner, *The Desert USA*
<http://www.desertusa.com>

The Desert *Life*

Finding God in the Wilderness

By

Ken and Hilda Korpi

**All Scripture used by permission of Zondervan Bible Publishers
www.biblegateway.com The Zondervan Corporation, L.L.C.*

**Unless otherwise noted, All scripture from the Holy Bible are from the NIV, New International Version, of the International Bible Society; The IBS-STL Global is a non-profit organization headquartered in Colorado Springs, Colorado. Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984, 2010*

**Other paraphrased quotes, The Message, by Eugene H. Peterson; The Message, The Bible in Contemporary Language. Colorado Springs: NavPress, 2002.*

**Other English translations quoted from:*

*The King James Version (KJV) Public Domain
The New King James (NKJ) Thomas Nelson Publishers
The New American Standard (NAS) The Lockman Foundation
Darby Bible Translation (DBY) Public Domain
Young's Literal Translation (YLT) Public Domain*

**Strong's Exhaustive Concordance (and its indexed number system) is also used extensively for cross-referencing of original words in the Greek and Hebrew. www.blueletterbible.org Search Tools*

**Note: unless otherwise stated, references quoted in this study may or may not be in total agreement with the values and beliefs of the authors. Care and discernment should be considered when reviewing conflicting philosophies and doctrines, but should not be totally discounted because of such differences.*

The Desert Life

Version 3, not Edited

January, 2011,

Kenneth and Hilda Korpi,

Gnarled Oak Publishing 1540 Temperance Rd, Franklin, KY 42134

*God has given, freely receive. The **Desert Life** may be copied and distributed provided there are no modifications from the original material and no profits are made from such copying and distributing.*

Foreword:

When one speaks of the desert, many things may come to mind. Most think of that barren, dry, sandy place that's void of life except for cactus and scorpions. Not many want to go there, much less expect to find something valuable for life in the midst of these harsh circumstances.

If you have picked up this book, you may have been going through some difficult periods of bewilderment, testing, apathy, and searching. Often times the best way to describe the *bewilderment* is to say it is a *wilderness* journey. But don't panic! Many have walked this path already and have laid down some giant guideposts for us to follow. Look at it as an opportunity! God may be gently nudging you in the direction of *profound and wild* discovery.

In this book we are attempting to show a relationship between the seemingly barren circumstances one may find themselves (often portrayed and described as a desert), and the discovery of some important Kingdom principles that one may totally miss otherwise.

God has used the physical and emotional wilderness throughout history to teach His servants some important truths about Himself and the way that His servants should react and interact among His people, plan and ultimate purpose—which is the *Kingdom of God*. God, *or Elohim*, recorded many of these events in the Bible so that we could glean some hope in our circumstances, in a way that only our Father, *or Abba* could reveal to us by means of these difficult circumstances.

*For most of us, we must make our way through
this journey.*

What we attempt here is to blaze a firm, foundational path from our own desert experiences and those recorded in the Bible, so that you come to realize it is important to look for the individual and

highly personal teachings that come from God through the desert experience.

We do not claim to have all the truth, nor all the answers. But what God has shown us through the Holy Spirit has changed our lives beyond anything we could have hoped or imagined. And if anyone can put aside all of the man-made distractions and listen, the Spirit will reveal amazing things about our relationship and purposes as children of God.

We won't lie to you. It's a difficult journey. It's a tough road to walk, much less to have the will to press forward, and be willing or able to learn something completely different than what you are familiar. It's tough enough just to survive! But it's the way of the desert.

As your calling teaches you to look and listen...in your search you'll learn to rejoice. *Yahweh Elohim, El Shaddai (The Lord God Almighty)* is here. And wherever *El Elyon* is (The most Highest God)...and in whom we also have the privilege to call *Abba*, there is life in such abundance, you'll scarcely have room enough to receive it!

This is why we call it: **The Desert Life!**

Ken and Hilda

-----✕-----

Table of Contents

Part I An Introduction to the Desert

Chapter 1: Entering the Desert Zone.....14

The bewildering situation of the desert experience

- A. The Twilight Zone?14
Discovery of entering the spiritual wilderness
- B. The Questions17
Questions in times of barrenness
- C. The Answers18
What God may be doing in times of testing
- D. The Rally Cry20
God wants to teach us without distractions

Chapter 2: A Visitor’s Guide to the Desert 22

What to do when you find yourself in the desert

- A. You are here 22
Feelings you may have when in the desert
- B. Our journey starts here 23
God loves you and wants the very best for you
- C. God wants to encourage us 25
Separated to teach you great truths

Chapter 3: Paths that Lead to The Desert..... 27

Exploring the different paths that lead one to the desert

- A. Losing our first love27
Caught up in doing rather than loving
- B. Feeling useless 28
No outlets for your gifts and talents
- C. Being hurt by the organized church 29
Emotional trauma and struggles in the church
- D. Temptation..... 30
Falling for the lure of the world

E. Pain	31
<i>Leading one to think they are being punished</i>	
F. Spiritual Thirst	32
<i>Seekers of God are often brought to the desert</i>	
G. The Reality Check	32
<i>Is this the end?</i>	

Chapter 4: The Significance of the Desert35

God reveals the desert both physically and spiritually

A. The physical desert	36
<i>The physical abundance of life in the desert</i>	
B. The spiritual desert	39
<i>Biblical imagery of the desert</i>	

Part II The Teaching of the Desert**Chapter 5: Embracing God's Love49**

Understand God's immeasurable love

A. God's Punishment: Is this what it's all about?	50
<i>Does God punish us if we are not in His will?</i>	
B. God's Message: Refuse to live in fear!	52
<i>Focusing on our sin is the spirit of fear.</i>	
C. God's Law: The old order and the new freedom ...	62
<i>God has not given us the spirit of fear, but love</i>	
D. God's New Covenant: in Spirit and in Truth	64
<i>The transformation: being made perfect in love</i>	
E. God's Perfection: The fear has been eliminated! ...	68
<i>Focusing on a God of mercy, grace, and love</i>	
F. God's Holy Life: Christianity is not Morality	71
<i>Christianity is a relationship</i>	
G. God's Trouble: Jonah and the Prodigal Son	72
<i>The trouble God's children bring on themselves</i>	
H. God's Love: Don't make light of Discipline	74
<i>Sometimes God may discipline us in love</i>	
I. God's Essence: The love of God is no small thing...76	
<i>To view God apart from love is to mock Him</i>	

Chapter 6: Letting go of Religion79

Understanding and opposing institutional religion

A. Tradition and culture80
Paths of legalism, liberalism, and indifference.

B. Our personal disappointments 81
Disillusionment with the organized church

C. The most important principles of the Kingdom ... 82
Love God with all your heart, mind, and soul

D. A Study in James 83
In order to be first you have to be last

E. The pollution of the world 85
Understanding base human reasoning

F. The issue of pride87
Devastating relationships and ministries

G. Stuffing God in a Box 88
Bound, tamed, or explained by man’s reasoning

H. The practice of shooting our wounded 93
Shunning because of moral expectations

Chapter 7: Letting go in Worship 96

Exploring true worship as taught to us by the Holy Spirit

A. Beginning to understand Worship 99
Issues when trying to decipher worship

B. Spiritual Worship 100
Overcoming cultural fears of worship

C. Principles of Worship 103
Biblical illustrations of worship

D. The Good, The Bad, The Ugly in Worship 106
Comparing good and bad worship habits

E. Communion with God in Worship 107
Pure worship is communion with God

F. Encouraging Corporate Worship 109
An integral part of the corporate assembly

G. Gifts and Talents used in Worship 110
Participation guidelines for every believer

H. What is True Worship? 114
Worshipping in Spirit and Truth

Chapter 8: Letting go of Ministry 116*Accepting change: a history lesson of the prophet Elijah*

- A. Elijah's Situation 116
The process of gaining a new perspective
- B. Elijah's Cry 118
"I'm no better than my ancestors!"
- C. Elijah's Run 119
Why did Elijah run?
- D. Elijah's Lesson 123
God's faithfulness and ways of doing things
- E. Elijah's Understanding 125
Elijah's reaction to what God was doing
- F. Elijah's Example 128
Elijah learns God's ways are not our ways

Chapter 9: Letting go of the Past 130*Self-examination of what makes me who I am today*

- A. Those were the 'good old days' 130
My culturally formative years
- B. Culture, Tradition, Christianity and Clashes 134
My personal cultural clash within the Church
- C. Cultural Conformity 138
I trusted a tradition more than God.
- D. Culture Crash: Going off the Deep End 142
Being stripped of everything I held dear
- E. Christianity is a relationship with God 144
Misunderstanding the nature of a believer

Part III Paths out of the Desert**Chapter 10: Serving God 148***Learning to love to serve, instead of self-serving*

- A. Lifting the veil of self 148
Hindrances that cause us to miss great truths
 - B. The misinterpretation of obedience and blessings ... 151
Does 'Obedience = Blessings'?
-

- C. Further clarification of faith and obedience 155
Issues of faith, obedience, and works
- D. What is impossible with man IS possible with God 158
Lessons in faith with servant motivation

Chapter 11: Following God162

Difficulties and mysterious paths help us learn and grow

- A. God's ways are not our ways 162
We endure hardships because we are loved
- B. A catastrophe in confidence 163
Lessons from the history of the Israelites
- C. Why did God bring us out here to die!?! 166
The Introduction of God to the Israelites
- D. The Blessings of Rephidim 176
God is with us in trials and tribulations
- E. Moses and the spoken Word 179
The power of speaking God's truth
- F. The cursing of Meribah 188
Unbelief reaps the fruit of destruction

Chapter 12: Waiting on God 194

Don't get ahead of what God may be doing in your life

- A. To Wait is to Have Hope 194
The real meaning of the word "wait"
 - B. Why must We Wait? 198
Questions we all ask while waiting
 - C. Learning to Wait is our Gain 201
Trusting God that He knows what He's doing
 - D. Listening to God 203
Rediscovering the art of listening to God
 - E. Limiting God 206
Trying to limit God with our puny intelligence
 - F. God's plans are Perfect 211
Good reasons for waiting
-

Chapter 13: Living in Yeshua haMeshiach213

Living out Truth in the Spirit, producing righteous fruit in Christ Jesus

A. The Journey 213
The desert wandering in search of Truth

B. The Deception 214
Building on tradition rather than Yeshua

C. The Truth 223
Truth, as revealed by the Spirit of God

D. The Bias of Understanding 224
Cultural bias distorts Truth and understanding

E. Living out Righteousness 229
Faith produces the fruit of righteousness

F. Be Encouraged 232
Pressing forward and forgetting the things of the past

-----✕-----

Part I

An Introduction to the Desert

Chapter 1

Entering the Desert Zone

The Twilight Zone?

What an odd place!

It wasn't that long ago that you were merrily living your life, counting your blessings, and admiring all the good things you had done for God, and the many things in which God had blessed. You were making all the right moves, speaking all the right phrases, and faithfully checking off your priority list of spiritual things to do for the church.

Then something somewhere went off course. You're not even sure what it was.

It may have been a subtle shift in attitude. It might have been a slight change in your emotional outlook. It may have been something that shattered your confidence that what you were doing was nothing short of being out of the will of what God wanted. But after what seems like a shattering of your own faith, you decided to take a good, hard look around your spiritual landscape.

Maybe you weren't surprised to you find yourself in the middle of demoralizing apathy. Then again, maybe you were. After all, you used to be a champion of the faith!

The best description you can come up with for your life at the moment is: "It's nothing more than going through motions." You come to realize that what you are familiar with doing is nothing more than a ritual. It's not where you imagined you would end up, or even think possible.

So how could this be?

Bewilderment may set in when you discover you don't have much left in you to want to work in this so-called, "*ministry*" any more. You're tired of playing the game, and to top it all off—all that's left of your former self is an *empty soul*.

When you start searching for answers and instinctively look for a way out, you find no path to escape your demise. There are no

familiar truths or spiritual catch phrases that move you to the feeling of well-being in this place.

It's a very odd place!

You may even cry out to God with desperate prayers and questions, maybe even raising your fist to God screaming, "What in the world is going on here!?"

You've been taught all your life that the Christian journey is supposed to be in abundance here on earth—filled with contentment, blessings, wealth and joy in the things of the Lord. Yet here you find yourself in the middle of "spiritual barrenness", a term you find hard to define.

Questions rage: "How did I end up here with all this emptiness when I was doing all the right things?" "What happened?" "Did I do something that God didn't like?" "Is God punishing me?" "Is it because of past sin?"

The questions may go unanswered. Your days may go by agonizing slow. With each tick of the clock, it just further emphasizes the antithesis of your so-called spiritual joy. How can a child of God find one's self in such gloominess?

You've entered the desert zone!

There you were—a fine example of what it means to give your life to God. You began your Christian journey with lots of excitement, energy, and hope. But after years and years of the same old, day in and day out routine, somehow you started to get bogged down with the process of just trying to live everyday life. You got so involved with the failures, the rejections, and the business of "doing good" that you somehow lost sight of the original goal of Spirit dependency. Very subtly you found yourself depending on your own strength, abilities, knowledge, tradition, and other people's opinions rather than God and the Word of Truth. You continued doing the best you knew how. You tried to remain faithful—even when you didn't feel productive.

In the beginning, it's almost as if you were dancing beautifully, step by step together with Jesus. There you were waltzing

effortlessly with the music, letting yourself get caught up in the moment. Round and round you twirled and swayed, closing your eyes and getting lost in the beautiful music and dance thinking, “What a wonderful world!” “I’ve made it to the big dance!”

God blessed and you could do anything . . . and be successful!

After a while you open your eyes and discover—you seem to be dancing alone!

When did that happen?

When you take a look around at the circumstances, to your amazement you aren’t even in the ballroom anymore with all the adornment and prominent people.

Instead of dancing, your life has turned into wandering. You find yourself searching aimlessly through the endless paths of the monotonous routines of daily life, looking for that original wonderful bliss. Church life and all of its activities do not appeal to you anymore. It’s boring and predictable. It’s a routine and ritual. It has no spiritual vigor. To top it all off, you realize you’re dying...dying a slow death of spiritual thirst!

You’ve entered the desert zone!

One day, or maybe after one long night, you come to the realization that all the things you’ve been taught and believed in building up the church body no longer seem to be ringing true with your inner spirit. In your private time, the Spirit keeps whispering that there is a whole lot more to being a Christian than what you are doing. When you try to adjust your ministry to the newly discovered insight that God is revealing, you find yourself at odds with the “system” and with your fellow believers. You feel like you are stuck in the mire, not being able to move forward. Like quicksand, the more you struggle the deeper you sink in frustration. Life begins to feel like it’s closing in on you. It’s stale. It’s arid. It’s empty. Besides—it’s really lonely! Most do not understand what you are going through. You continue doing the things God wants you to do, despite over-whelming feelings of scorn, but the tide of opposition finally drives you into isolation.

In the church, where you once sought refuge from the world, you discover that it is nothing more than a social club, where people jockey for power and position. The gathering of yourselves together to encourage one another tends to be more along the lines of entertaining one another, rather than seeking God.

You ask yourself, “How could this be?” “Where is the example of the early church of Acts?” Questions continue to pile up. You cry out to God.

There’s a signpost stuck in the sand. It says...

“You’ve entered the desert zone!”

The Questions

. These are familiar scenarios we are coming across over and over again in the lives of Christians we meet. The devastation and surprise that tags along with these scenarios demand an investigation as to why we as Christians have sometimes ended up in what appears to be spiritual ruin and despair, groping for answers to this seeming abandon.

As Hilda and I searched for some guidelines and help with our own spiritual barrenness and some of the despair that drowns modern Christianity, we didn’t find much written on the subject. We waded through agonizing harsh criticism and endless intellectual babble between those searching and proposing change in the way we do things, and those wanting to hold fast to traditional surroundings. We found no real ministry to those *dying in their faith*.

There was much in abundance found about “mountain top” experiences in the traditional view of today’s church leaders. But in this society where much of the success stories are described in terms of “*successful slaying of the dragon*”, there was little to be found or even wanting to mention an embarrassing issue that may imply “*weariness with the dragon*” from our traditional Christian leaders.

The whys and wherefores of the situation and sympathetic help in these times of trouble were meager. We kept asking ourselves, “Is this something that God ordained for us to go through?”

Quite frankly, the answers that some have tried to defend are often surrounded in mystical and uncharted terrain. To those of us who experience this journey, it almost feels like we are being spiritually and emotionally torn apart, tested beyond what seems bearable.

Some insight about what God may be doing in the lives of His children is the much-needed “Balm of Gilead” that we desperately seek. It seems to us as if there are just too many Christians passing through some kind of spiritual barrenness in their walk with Christ—more so than what we are led to believe—to just ignore the subject and let our spiritual life hang in the balance of intellectual and philosophical controversy.

Hilda and I prayed earnestly to God to help us in our time of need. We agonized with our search and wondered if there was any hope for the famished Christian. We were frustrated with the general non-personal approach to struggling souls in most realms of the “Christian” church. We were told that Christians were victorious, joyful, and did not question authority. We were expected to toe traditional denominational lines and not rock the boat. We were gripped in the feelings of guilt for our struggles and feared retribution from the established devout. Still our struggles intensified and we found ourselves still groping for honest answers that were no longer explained away with traditional psychobabble.

The Answers

We now realize that only God could really explain what was going on in our individual spiritual lives. For every individual, it is a deeply personal journey, and it is nothing to take lightly. James 1:2-5 says,

“Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know the testing of your faith develops perseverance. Perseverance must finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking in anything. If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask of God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to him.”

In our own personal interpretation here, what we see is that to anyone who may be facing some difficult trials (whether it be circumstances, persecution, or seeking truth), there is a work going on in us that is for our maturity and completion in our spiritual insight into the purpose and Kingdom of God. We are actually becoming the person God wants us to be. This is where we need to start looking for answers. It is an invitation to come to the throne of God and ask for Him personally to show us what we need to know.

James goes on to say, *“But when he asks he must believe and not doubt.”* This is especially interesting when we look at it from the standpoint of looking for truth. For if we read further it says, *“He [God] chose to give us birth through the word of truth...so that we might be a kind of first fruits of all he created.” (1: 18a)* Although this specifically was addressed to the *“Jewish Tribes scattered throughout the region”*, what we believe this to mean for us in general is that God has given us a mind and quickened spirit (a reasoning spiritual capacity that nothing else in creation has) to humbly accept God’s teaching and grace through “The Word” that He has *“planted in you...” (1: 21b)*. We know that Jesus Christ is the Living Word (*Jn 1*). Couple this with the promise of the Holy Spirit —“The Spirit of TRUTH” (*John 14:17*)—to be our counselor and guide to the Word of truth (*John 16:13*), it’s not too hard to see what James is trying to get at here.

Let us not take lightly the “Word” that God wants to reveal to us through our experiences, the Holy Spirit, and the Scriptures (The God breathed historical writings that are chalked with wisdom and useful for teaching...) *2 Tim 3: 15-17*. “Let us not turn away from the truth...” (*2 Tim. 4:4*). GOD will teach us what truth is. We must not doubt God (*James 1:6*). He gives us “Wisdom” to understand

what He wants us to hear. We must be, “*Quick to listen* (ready and willing), *slow to speak* (forget your philosophical mumbo-jumbo and traditional spiritual rhetoric), *and slow to become angry* (don’t be so quick to be angry at what brought you here) (1:19). One last thing...let’s not just “*listen to the Word*”...but let’s, “*DO WHAT HE SAYS!*”(1:22)

The Rally Cry

Come with us for a moment and let’s look to those who have wandered this desert trek before us. They have discovered some amazing truths about God and have some interesting things to say to us. Let’s examine what God has revealed about this journey. Let’s study past and present perspectives. There are answers here. There may even be some hidden answers in our pleas and prayers to a seemingly far away God, for a deeper understanding and relationship with our Creator. Then again, maybe all of this turmoil is because of our unjustified expectations of what Christianity is all about.

What we strive for in this book; what we pray for each believer that encounters these struggles; and what we earnestly desire for all who dare walk the path of the desert with us—is that they will ultimately and humbly receive “spiritual clarity” and the true Wisdom from God—and *God alone*. Those of us who have been through this journey, and those of us who still may have much more to learn, have some interesting perspectives on this revelation from God and this soul-searching pilgrimage.

This is what we would like to believe is the beginning of a spiritual turning point in the Body of Christ (*The Real Church*) and her relationship with the Creator. As veteran missionaries and lay workers, this is our humble viewpoint on precepts that God has taught us through our own desert journey that we would like to share with anyone struggling within a difficult crises. We write to mature Christians who cling to their faith and will not let go of God, but find themselves in a bazaar place struggling with their circumstances or issues that seem to fly in the face of traditional perceptions. We write

to those new in the faith to learn of God that which He has to teach them through the Spirit of Truth and the washing of the Word *before* tradition and culture has a chance to sink their claws into the fresh faith of a new born believer.

One other thing, this is not a “how to” book on getting ourselves out of the spiritual doldrums. This is actually a “*rally cry*” to persevere, cling to the faith, and look to *God alone* as orchestrating a great life changing perspective. Together we will discover that there is real life in the spiritual desert. This is the place of God’s excavation. Here is where God chisels away at us, forming us into *living stones*, useful to the Master, and perfectly fit into the Body of Christ! God is building His house, and He wants us to be part of it!

“...You also, like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.”

1 Peter 2:5

-----✕-----

Chapter 2

A Visitor's Guide to the Desert

↳ *You are Here* ↵

You are looking out your spiritual window and all you see is...sand and rock. It's a barren wasteland out there. It's hot. It's dry. It seems lifeless. You are slowly dying of spiritual thirst. The path was winding and slow to get here, but here you are nonetheless on the road to what you feel is "nothingness".

You know you were meant for something more meaningful, something with grandeur written all over it. Somehow, God seems cruel and unjust.

Living in guilt and despair, you realize you seem to be carrying a burden. What that burden is, is not clear. Life is barren, rocky and meaningless. Everything you were once familiar and comfortable with is now lost in the sands of time and just an echoing memory of what once was.

This is an unfriendly, lonesome place. There are "wild animals" here!

...*Welcome to the desert!* So, what do you do now?

Some of us in utter frustration will throw our hands up, give up, and walk away—vowing to never return to any spiritual resilience. Some of us in fear of reprisal and expulsion will continue on living day in and day out behind the mask of Christian faithfulness to a man-made Church machine. While hiding behind smiles and empty phrases, we are hoping and praying no one ever finds us out to be a phony, not really believing that the system we are stuck in is of God. Some of us in defeated humiliation and deep depression will find no hope for tomorrow and consider spiritual suicide. Some of us will look for ablative alternatives from outdated programs, or search to discover new ones. Some of us will seek to fill the void left from a

broken spirit with worldly things. Whatever dreams we once had of a thriving, vibrant ministry have now all been dashed to pieces!

...*Welcome to the desert!* So, what do we do now?

Questions about God swirl with endless repetition. "Why is God so cruel?" "Where is the victory?" "What did I do to make God so mad at me?" "Where is the joy?" "Why does God reject me so?" "Where is the Promised Land?" "Why did God banish me here to the desert?"

Questions about truth and traditional perspectives rock the very foundations of our faith. "What is the true path of righteousness?" "What is the true meaning of a Christian?" "What is real worship?" "Why are we so afraid of being wrong?" "Why do we doubt our church's doctrine?" "What is faith?"

...*Welcome to the desert!* So, what do we do now?

Our Journey Starts Here

May we make a suggestion here? Let's start with what we really do know. Search your heart and we believe you will find these truths to be self-evident and obvious, although now it may just be a whisper.

First of all, *God loves us*. That's a good place to start.

1 John 4 does a really good job of illustrating that. It says, "*God is Love!*" It goes on to say, "*Herein is love. Not that we loved God, but because He first loved us!*" (1 John 4:8b;10a;) Read it. Drink it in.

Secondly, we also know that God is omniscient. He knows everything! (1 John 3:20b) Hebrews 4:13 also says that "*there is nothing in creation that is hidden from God's sight.*"

So with these facts in order, remember that if we're groping around in the desert, it hasn't escaped the knowledge of God. Also,

because we know He loves us, it means that *whatever* He may allow us to go through is strictly for our own good benefit (*Rom. 8:28*).

With these things in mind let's begin to look at some of the circumstances surrounding our situation, and see what that may reveal to our hearts.

When we find ourselves in the barren desert of spirituality, we may be perplexed as to how and why we are here. Circumstances may be confusing and reasons may seem far away, but trust us, it is a good place to be. God will use the desert to focus our mind and heart to be receptive to the things we need to hear. The desert strips away any obstacles or hindrances that distract us from hearing the Spirit of Truth.

"Count it all joy" brothers and sisters, to know that God loves us enough to set us aside in a sort of sanctification process, to let us in on some good news about the Kingdom. It's more than likely that it will be something refreshing; it will be something really exciting: something we may have heard all our life but haven't really grasped a hold of just yet.

2 Thessalonians 2: 13 says that we have been chosen from the beginning *"to be saved through the sanctifying work of the Spirit and belief in the truth."* Most likely we have been set apart in the desert as a direct results of the Spirit who wants to reveal to us truth—truth about who God is and who we are!

How do we know this? Because the Scriptures (*the God-breathed historical records*) describe to us many stories of God revealing Himself in truth to saints in the desert. In these Scriptures, God will reveal the things we need to know.

Let's think about this one tremendous aspect for a just moment. He not only chose us, He also saved us. He did it through the sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit and belief in the truth. What is the truth? The Word is Truth! For the Word is God! (*John 1:1*). The Word became flesh (*1:14*) and we have seen that Glory, and His name is *Yeshua (Jesus)*¹, God's Son. (*1:29*). *"For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten son, that whosoever believes in Him, shall not perish but have eternal life!"* (*Jn. 3:16*) That is truth in a nutshell.

Getting back to our 2 Thessalonians thought...it says in verse 14 that the reason God chose us was that we “*might share in the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ!*” Once again, keeping all these truths in mind, look at verse 16:

“May our Lord Jesus Christ himself and God our Father who loved us and by His grace gave us eternal encouragement and good hope, encourage your hearts and strengthen you in every good deed and word.”

Since we have been chosen and separated from the beginning, and have been blessed to be encouraged and strengthened—let’s lift up our head and see that the Lord is good. Let us sing with the psalmist, “*The LORD has done great things for us, we are filled with joy. Restore our fortunes, O LORD, like streams in the Negev.*” (You have probably guessed already that the Negev is the southern desert region of Israel.²⁾)

This desert is a good place to be. God wants us to be here for a very good reason.

God Wants to Encourage Us

So we may have found ourselves in the wilderness, be encouraged...rejoice! It is a good thing to know that God STILL loves us! He always has! He always will!

Isaiah. 65:10 says, “*Sharon will become a pasture for flocks, and the Valley of Achor a resting place for herds, for my people who seek me.*” This valley of Achor (which means trouble³) in which we find ourselves will become a Valley of Hope. (Hosea 2:14-15). And God will make this desert wilderness a comfortable resting place for all His people who seek Him.

Isn’t it just like the Rose of Sharon, the Lily of the Valley to meet us in the desert to make it a place of refuge and strength? Has our hearts not already been stirred and encouraged to know that *Yeshua (Jesus)* wants the VERY BEST for us?

Remember Psalms 23: “*The Lord is my Shepherd. He makes me lie down in green pastures. He restores my soul.*” If we would for

a moment think like a sheep (and you can probably say we resemble them in many ways), it must be somewhat frightening and frustrating for the sheep to be separated from the rest of the herd so that the shepherd can administer healing or grooming. Not knowing what is happening can be upsetting.

Now look at our situation in these same eyes and see how God wants to give us some personal attention. Don't be frightened, dismayed or angry. *Yeshua* is the good Shepherd.

God has not left us or forsaken us in any way. He has led us here for a purpose not many will be exposed to. We have been set aside to be taught some great truths about God. We have been separated by God's staff so that we may learn how gentle and kind the Good Shepherd is.

Be encouraged! The Desert is our refuge...*for God is here!*

-----✕-----

Notes:

1. *Yeshua is the Hebrew name of Jesus. It's a contractual form of Yehoshua (Joshua) which means Yahweh saves. See names of Jesus, www.hebrew4christians.com*
2. *From Wikipedia, <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Negev>*
3. *Achor - trouble, a valley near Jericho, so called in consequence of the trouble which the sin of Achan caused Israel (Josh. 7:24,26). The expression "valley of Achor" probably became proverbial for that which caused trouble, and when Isaiah (Isa. 65:10) refers to it he uses it in this sense: "The valley of Achor a place for herds to lie down in;" that is, that which had been a source of calamity would become a source of blessing. Hosea also (Hos. 2:15) uses the expression in the same sense: "The valley of Achor for a door of hope;" that is, trouble would be turned into joy, despair into hope. This valley has been identified with the Wady Kelt.*

This entry incorporates text from Easton's Bible Dictionary, 1897, with some modernization.

Chapter 3

Paths that lead to the Desert

To learn more about the journey that we face in the desert, in our minds it is good to retrace our steps to how we got here in the first place. There are many paths that may bring us to the desert. No one path is the same for every Christian. Churches, ministries, cultures, circumstances, and situations are all different. But there are a few things that ring true in most of these situations. Here are a few examples of how the road may turn toward a direction we may have never thought it would go.

Do any of them sound familiar?

Losing our First Love

One of the most common themes is that many times our lives are so full of programs and responsibilities, trying to be all things to all people, we lose sight of the original intent or our first love—God.

Christians at one time or another serving in some kind of capacity in the church or ministry will find themselves in this place of apathy, where they thought we would never be.

We look back to when we first became Christians and revel in the joy and elation of a new found faith and forgiveness. We swear like Peter that we would never forsake our first love, and would die first before we brought shame to the name of Christ, or *haMeshiach*.¹

But we look around and find ourselves in the hot, barren, dry terrain of what seems to be spiritual ruin. Time seems to stand still and the blessings of God seem far, far away. Friends have no words to comfort. Things that once brought satisfaction, now only bring pain. Unbelievably, we are tempted to “curse God and die”.

It gets to be an endless cycle of doing things, pleasing people, and being dependable. All of the “ministry madness” just becomes business as usual. Forget about the ministry—it just isn’t there—or so it seems. But we keep telling ourselves that IT IS ministry because

we are doing so well and being successful in our “doing things” and “being busy”.

But deep down we know we are just going through the motions. It’s all dry and barren to us and provides no spiritual vigor for our souls. We retreat behind the mask of everything is OK, and God is still good and in control. We even try and reassure ourselves that because we are busy doing an ordained program of some sort, God will bless.

It may even be behind the camouflage of praise music and hallelujahs that we are still groping for answers to a meaningless order of worship and activities that drive us further down the highway of despair.

We tell ourselves that what we do actually matters in the Kingdom, even though we feel like our life is a sham. Our spiritual life is a dusty trail of weary activities and road signs that tell us our promised land is getting further and further from our path.

We arrived in the desert in a spiritual trance, not knowing how we got here or even what brought us here.

But here is where we will begin to find ourselves...or better put—find God!

Feeling Useless

The desert may come through a feeling of uselessness. We may be a person of many good gifts and talents from God. We know these gifts are from God, and really when it comes down to the bare truth: we only want to use these talents to further the Kingdom.

Yet it seems that every time we try to use them, there just doesn’t seem to be any steady outlet or fruitful success from our gifts. Doors close; ministries move on to other talent; contacts and opportunities dry up.

We may end up in meaningless jobs that belittle our self worth, and do not let us use our creative skills. We may begin to feel frustrated, rejected, worthless, untalented, and unhappy.

The thought of using our gifts and talents that once brought us such joy and satisfaction now only brings pain. Chucking it all onto the garbage pile is very tempting; and we find ourselves barely clinging to a hope that God will still find us useful someday!

And yet here is where we find what it means to completely give everything back to God and stop using His talents for our own glory.

Being hurt by the Organized Church

Hilda and I have been running into people from all walks of life that have left their ministry or church, sharing their story of being emotionally traumatized, hurt, and frustrated by the organized church.

Granted, there are always two sides to every story, but more and more we find people who are struggling because of what they feel were unjust political upheavals in the church, power struggles between congregations, and leaders and pastors that have caused massive damage and trauma in the organized church.

It is not the aim of the book to point fingers and place the blame on any one thing, organization, or traditional church; but one point of this book is to explore the many issues that may cause someone to wander the desert in search of answers for their troubling questions of why these things must happen in institutions that are supposed to represent Christ.

One can find answers if we are willing to listen to what God has to say.

Many have been down this path of church splits and ugly control issues that have ripped us apart emotionally. Perhaps, we all have felt the sting of selfish ambition in the church from those who feel they must lord over everyone with their limited views of God, and force everyone to conform to their own cultural bias and traditional slant.

Hilda and I have been down this path and realized how devastating it was to our faith and how it radically changed our view

of organized religion. This path is treacherous! We learned that there can be no unity in the Body of believers until love is firmly lifted supreme in all that we say, do, and promote. Christ must become the true head of the Body.

As we struggle with these issues of *what* the church is really meant to be, and *where* the church needs to be in our ever changing society, we need to realize there are no simple answers to these issues that have herded us off into the sands of the desert. It is important to note that only God can lead us into the valleys of greener pastures and true ministry, through the power of the Holy Spirit.

But for now...*here in the desert is where God can begin to teach us, and show us the true path of keeping in step with the Spirit.*

Temptation

We may find ourselves in the desert after wandering down the path of temptation.

We may have been weary and weak, and consequently fell into the charms of the world. Finding ourselves disgraced and no longer approved by our peers, supporters, or congregation, we may have ended up resigning from our ministry.

The once prominent position we enjoyed is no longer accessible to us. We awake to find all the blessings we had learned to depend on in the traditional Christian world have evaporated into the desert sun. Finding an oasis seems hopeless.

Maybe a circumstance befalls us in which we have had no control, and we feel unjustly selected for chastisement. We can find no comfort in the Church or in fellow believers. Our once faithful friends abandon us. We may feel ostracized, criticized, and scrutinized.

The path is rocky and we find no comfort or consolation from God. If only God would just provide a little shade from the hot, burning sun, life would be a little more bearable. But there are no places to hide from the blazing sun that mercilessly dries up any hint of refreshing shade.

We may search for anything that will dull the pain and make us forget about our situation. We stumble down the path of what others say are “ways to forget”...but we don’t forget. Our circumstances remind us every day, every hour, every minute that we are in the desert! We entertain thoughts of being the poster child of “losers” in the game of Christianity.

But interestingly enough, we find ourselves still clinging to the only hope we have—God!

Still holding on for dear life—here we are in the desert. *And here we find a God who loves us and wants to teach us about abiding in His love.*

Pain

Maybe it’s an endless cycle of pain and health issues that push us onto the desert path. After countless tests, drugs and diets, we still are not well. Chronic pain grips our body and will not let us go.

“Why must we suffer so?”

We cry out to God, but receive no answers to our torture. We feel betrayed by our doctors, but guilty for not having enough faith for God to heal us.

“Why won’t you heal us, God?”

We begin to wonder if all this time the sickness was an imaginary trick of the brain, and we end up shaking our fist at God demanding an antidote.

“Surely God can heal our bodies!?”

But the torment slowly drags on day after day.

“How long, O God!?”

Our path is dark, dim, and pounded with the excruciating slowness of the ticking of the clock. Trying to move on, we find ourselves standing still within our misery in this timeless, forbidden place.

God’s words, “My grace is sufficient” is not enough to ease the pain. It just seems to facilitate more agony.

Here we are—in what looks like an endless desert. *But here is where we learn what it means to trust in God’s will for our lives. God always has a reason!*

Spiritual Thirst

Still some of us may wander up a steep path of spiritual thirst, only to find what we thought was the pinnacle of divine ecstasy is nothing but a desert wasteland. It is an uphill climb that is driving us to a more profound relationship with God. We earnestly desire a face-to-face encounter with the eternal Creator, the *Yahweh* of Mt Sinai. But the difficult path leads us not to a glorious and shining audience with the Lord, but to a destitute place of silence and dryness.

We cry, “Why God?” “Why are you so silent?” “Why won’t you grant me my prayer?”

All we hear is the deafening silence of the desert.

The presence of God eludes us, or so it seems.

It is here in the desert that we find out about ourselves and our true motives of wanting God.

The Reality Check

OK. This is a reality check. It’s time to face the issues.

It looks like there may be no way out of where these paths have brought us. Is this the end? Is this where we cast off our cloak of religion and look for other answers to our growing questions and uneasiness about God, our ministry, the church, or ourselves? Is this the end of the line for our own spirituality and doing things for the sake of the call? Is this where most of us end up—throwing our lives, our desires, and our dreams on the rubble pile of unworthiness and forsakenness? Is this where we cry, “I’ve had enough!” “I’m no better than anybody else before me!”

YES!

This is actually the very moment we need to literally do these things! It's very hard to explain; it's not that easy to grasp; and in no way can we always understand the mind of God. But we must try to understand what we are going through, and why it is *crucial* for our spiritual well being to continue to see this spiritual journey through.

The desert will call all who would seek to know God. Those who want to understand who God is, what He wants from us, and who need fresh enlightenment from His Word may indeed need to thoroughly walk these paths set before us. It is not an easy journey to pass through the desert, but pass through it we must, if we want to truly lose ourselves and find what it means to live a life in total abandonment for God, sitting at the feet of *Yeshua*, and learning to hear and obey His voice.

Through this desert journey, the Holy Spirit yearns to teach us about things in our own life that needs to be stripped away before God can reveal Himself and His Kingdom to us in the way it was intended.

The ministry of the desert encourages us to see and hear clearly the voice of the Spirit of Truth who will guide us in all things and teach us in all things that which we should know about God and His Kingdom (*John 16:12-15*).

The Desert Life is filled with heart and soul searching. It requires the stripping away of all preconceived notions about God, Christianity, religion and the institutional church. The man-made image of God may hinder us in our knowledge of a majestic, awesome, and holy God. The cleansing power in the teaching we receive through the illumination of the Holy Spirit and the washing of the Word in the desert prepare us to serve our wondrous God with love and humility.

It is a difficult journey.

To cut loose *the very familiar and religious things* that hinder us from growing and surrendering to God in the knowledge and understanding of the Word of Truth is quite excruciating.

“Must we all take this difficult journey through the desert if we are to be used of God?” “Must God test our resolve, our hearts and our flesh to see if we are worthy?”

Only God can answer these questions. But from what we read in His Word...we are in good company with all who would travel this pilgrimage.

Have you ever noticed that most of the patriarchs and spiritual leaders of the Bible went through some sort of “desert” experience in their narratives? It must have been for good reason that they did. The Scriptures painstakingly recount this theme, time and time again.

So rejoice! God is near! He’s been leading us here to teach us something of profound importance.

Be still and listen! Then you will know—that He is God!

-----✕-----

Notes:

1. *haMeshiach* is the Hebrew term for Messiah, or the anointed one. Christ or Cristos is the Greek term used for the anointed one, or in English, “Messiah”.
http://www.hebrew4christians.com/Names_of_G-d/Yeshua/yeshua.html see also
<http://www.en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Christos>

Chapter 4

The Significance of the Desert

“Why do we call this journey, *the Desert Life*?”

“Why is it called being in *the Wilderness*, when we are wandering and searching for truth?”

If one was to study the etymology of the words for desert and wilderness there is an interesting correlation to the Garden of Eden, which seems to indicate that anything outside of the Garden is considered “the wilderness”.¹ Because of the Fall of Adam, this would relatively place us all outside the Garden, wandering in the wilderness searching for our given place back in the garden, where it all started. In Hebrew, Eden can also be translated as the “*delight*” of God.

Keep that concept in mind, because we believe that in the spiritual realm God is leading us all back to the original intent of creation and back to where it all began: that is dwelling together in the house of God within the Garden.

“For we know that if the earthly tent we live in is destroyed, we have a building from God, an eternal house in heaven, not built by human hands.”² Meanwhile we groan, longing to be clothed instead with our heavenly dwelling,³ because when we are clothed, we will not be found naked.⁴ For while we are in this tent, we groan and are burdened, because we do not wish to be unclothed but to be clothed instead with our heavenly dwelling, so that what is mortal may be swallowed up by life.⁵ Now the one who has fashioned us for this very purpose is God, who has given us the Spirit as a deposit, guaranteeing what is to come.”
2 Corinthians 5: 1-5

“Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and strangers, but fellow citizens with God’s people and also members of his household,²⁰ built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ

*Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone. ²¹ In him the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord. ²² **And in him you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit.**” Ephesians 2: 19-22*

In our physical realm, the desert is an interesting place when seen from different perspectives. To most it is a vast wasteland where evil resides and punishment is the due course of all who go there. To others it is a spiritual oasis of learning about life. To some it is an allegorical reference to the world in which all sojourners find themselves on the journey to heaven.

For those who study Ecosystems, the desert provides a stimulating education. Still to others, they would call it home.

However you may see it, the desert is vivid in creation as well as in revelation. Ecologists tell us, “Deserts currently cover over one third of the Earth's land surface.”²

When we explore the scriptures, one can see that a great deal of writing is given to desert imagery and desert experiences. According to Charles Nienkirchen of Tyndale Seminary:

“God has written two “books”: that of creation (Ps. 19:1) and that of His revelation in the Bible. Both show an abundance of desert imagery.”³

We would do well to pay attention to the desert and what it might mean to us in light of the way God has revealed it, both physically and spiritually. For here is where we just may find out where we are going and why we are here!

The Physical Desert

Some may not want to explore some material aspects of the desert, and to some it may be deemed a waste of time. But it is important to realize that what we may perceive, as to what the desert really is, may not be anything like what our mental image may conjure

up. So, if we may, let's take a quick look at the desert in the physical realm, where we may learn something of importance.

The Environmental Literacy Council has an excellent summary of the desert that is fascinating to discover:

The single factor that distinguishes desert ecosystems from other biomes is the minimal amount of rainfall received annually (no more than 10 inches). While most deserts are very hot during the day and cool at night, desert biomes are also found in arctic, icy regions. The severity and range of temperatures depend on the location- altitude and latitude- of the desert.

Unlike most other biomes, one desert may look very different from the next, depending on its location. The differences are usually accounted for in moisture, temperature, soil drainage, topography, alkalinity, and dominant plant species.

There are a few deserts around that world that are too dry to support plant life; deserts support a variety of plants that are well adapted for dry conditions. To conserve water, most desert plants have reduced leaves or no leaves at all. Many of these reduced leaves have further modified into spines or sharp needles, which act as a deterrent to herbivores. Others plants shed their leaves for most of the year to prevent water loss, and grow them only during brief moist periods. Most plants have a very shallow root system, as well as deep tap roots (up to 100 feet) to access rainfall and groundwater. Plants found in the North American desert that exhibit these adaptations include cacti, yucca, Joshua trees, and sagebrush.

Desert animals are diverse, but all have adaptations to avoid overheating and to conserve water. During the heat of the day, many desert animals, such as kangaroo rats and rattlesnakes, remain under ground or return to shade periodically. Most desert animals are small and often nocturnal, meaning they hunt or forage only at night. Kangaroo rats and other rodent species can extract water from the seeds they

eat. Camels are the largest desert dwelling mammals and have evolved to store large amounts of water as a reserve.”⁴

The fascinating part is to see how God in creative determination provided life also to a part of the earth that many call “cursed”. Even in the midst of what might seem to be desolation—if one chooses to do so, they can find life. It is not just small tokens of biological life...but large ecosystems that thrive in what we would call “harsh conditions”.

Although the desert can represent a hostile territory, to the ones who live there, it can also represent a sense of community and a “living presence”. These Arabic people have a very significant domicile view of the desert.

“For many Arab poets, the desert is a convenient trope for the failure of fulfillment, just as it has been for many Western poets. The tragedy of war, human alienation and isolation, the absence of inspiring natural forces, and the inability to find a way to truth are all imaged as desert. Yet the poets who created these images were raised in or accustomed to city life. The desert takes on a far different meaning for those poets for whom the desert is not alien or foreign, feared and to be viewed from afar. There are poets for whom the desert is home.

The desert is how you live it. For Arab poets, the desert in its presence or absence is power, but this power takes different forms. For city dwellers, the desert is death and decay, a sign of destruction, forced exile, and a reminder of the absence of a homeland. For Bedouins, desert dwellers, the desert is a living presence, a place for establishing community, connection, and identity. In all cases, the desert is a context, whether a life threat or a life, and it has a voice.”⁵

Life in the desert can be considered quite normal to some who find a way to survive and thrive. It seems to be a matter of one’s

perspective. Our perspective can be changed by our circumstances or by what we have experienced. What's important is what we have been taught through that experience.

The Spiritual Desert

When we turn to revelation and what God has allowed for us to glimpse and glean in his working with man, we find a sorted array of stories and allegorical references to the desert.

As a matter of fact, *"Within the Bible, the desert is an ever-present reality. One only needs to consider the geography of Israel, to think of the Arabian Desert to the East, and the Negeb, Sinai and Egypt to the South."*⁶ There is no way to get away from it. As we look at this aspect of the desert, there begins to emerge a wide variety of meaningful insights as to just what the desert may represent spiritually.

Most often the desert is seen as a wilderness, where it is pictured as cursed and demonized: *"A place of desolation, loneliness, and danger; where frightening, ravenous animals lived"* (cf. Isa 13:20-22; 34:8-15).

Job 12:24-25 states that *"[God] deprives the leaders of the earth of their reason and sends them wandering through a trackless waste."* (Psa 107:40) Jeremiah 17:5-6 says *"Cursed is the one who trusts in man...He will dwell in the parched places of the desert, in a salt land where no one lives."* The *eremos* in Mark 1:4 was a desert region traditionally viewed as the haunt of evil powers (cf. Matt. 12:43; Luke 8:29; 9:24).⁷

This view is widely accepted as the "norm" when thinking about the spiritual significance of the desert. That is probably why we hear it so often that one may say they are "in the desert" when their circumstances and spirit life are in turmoil and/or stagnation. Or we may have heard it said, "I feel like I've been wandering in the desert for so long!"

In this case, the desert is usually a place where one does not want to be.

However, when we study scripture we can also find the desert as a place of refuge and protection. David used the desert to his advantage when hiding from King Saul. (*1 Sam. 23: 14*)

Look what he penned in *Psa. 55: 6-8*:

“O that I had the wings of a dove! I would fly away and be at rest—I would flee far away and stay in the desert; I would hurry to my place of shelter, far from the tempest and storm.”

In *1 Kings 19*, we see Elijah running to the desert to avoid confrontation with either himself or Jezebel. (We shall study this further.) But in the desert, he is nourished by an angel; then sent on a trek of 40 days and 40 nights to Mt. Horeb (the mountain of God...also known as Mt. Sinai, *19:8*); and there met by God himself, not in the storm, not in the earthquake, not in the fire, but in the “still small voice”. Here is where he is consoled and given instructions of what to do next (*19: 9-18*).

Let’s move back in history a little and take a look at the father of all the desert trekkers himself, Abraham. Now Abraham and his wife Sarah had to travel through the desert from Ur of the Chaldeans, then Heran and finally to the Promised Land of Canaan. (*Gen 11: 31 – 12:5*)

We find it interesting that actually the land of Canaan is considered an arid region in itself. Yes, there are pockets of fruit producing areas and valleys suitable for herding sheep and goats scattered throughout the land (especially towards Jordan), but if you’ve ever been there, we think you would agree that most of it would be considered desert-like.

The Hebrew words used for desert are varied, but for the most part a common word found in the Pentateuch passages of Genesis and Exodus is *midbar*, and actually means “pasture-ground; an open tract for pasturage and more correctly translated as “wilderness” where it is used of the country lying between Egypt and Palestine. The word denotes “a country without settled inhabitants and without streams of water, but having good pasturage for cattle.”⁸ The different parts of

the wilderness often were described here by their names, which in turn described the degree of harshness of the area.⁹

The other interesting mention in Genesis 13 is when Abraham and Lot decide to split up and move out from under each other's feet. It is stated that quarreling between the herdsmen was already festering (13:7). So Abraham, being the man of faith that he was, gave Lot a choice as to where he wanted to go.

Lot looked out over toward Jordan and saw that it was well watered. Genesis even says it was like the "Garden of the Lord." It must have been beautiful.

But the thing we want to really take notice of is that Abraham was obviously left with the "not so well watered land". That was the land of Canaan (13:12). That was the land God said He would give to him and bless him in.

We find this very interesting. This semi-arid, desert-like wilderness area was the "promised land".¹⁰

There is a verse or two in Hosea that rings true to this theme. Hosea 2:14- gives this tender invitation to Israel:

... "Therefore I am now going to allure her; I will lead her into the desert and speak tenderly to her. There I will give her back her vineyards, and will make the Valley of Achor (Valley of Trouble) a door of hope. There she will sing as in the days of her youth, as in the day she came up out of Egypt." . . .

Take notice something with us here if you would. Take a close look . . . It says, "*THERE [in the desert] I will give back her vineyards.*" Notice that the Valley of Trouble would become the "Door of HOPE!"

If you look at the desert from this perspective, we think you would agree that the desert is not always pictured as a cursed, demon possessed, uninhabitable trackless waste. It is also a place of refuge, solace, instruction and blessing.

The desert can be a place of tremendous spiritual blessing and hope if we would just take the time to listen, study, explore, and drink in the wondrous things God wants to teach us.

In Isaiah, chapter 35: 1, it says, "*The desert and the parched land will be glad; the wilderness will rejoice and blossom.*" In Isaiah 43:18ff it says, "*Forget the former things; do not dwell on the past. See, I am doing a new thing! Do you not perceive it? I am making a way in the desert and streams in the wasteland... to give drink to my people, my chosen, the people I formed for myself that they may proclaim my praise.*"

When we look at the spiritual significance of the desert, it really becomes a magnificent picture of the goodness of God. Think about it. What was needed to get to the Promised Land?

In Abraham's case it was faith—faith in God's promises, and faith in God's goodness!

In Israel's case, when they came out of Egypt, the scriptures tell us that GOD led them through the desert (*Ex 13: 17-18*). It was for good reason.

First of all, we read that God didn't want them to face war just yet, or they might change their minds and return back to Egypt.

Secondly, He also wanted to take care of Pharaoh's army by drowning them in the Red Sea.

Thirdly, we read in Exodus 14:17 that the underlying reason for the entire desert trek was so that GOD would gain glory through all of it. The desert trek was a means for God to receive His rightful glory and honor for the great things He was doing for Israel. Above all, He wanted Israel to know that it was God who was doing these things.

This is a picture perfect snapshot of the ways of God!

Was it for the benefit of Israel? Yes. Was it for their spiritual good to see this happen? Yes. But most of all—GOD received glory for who He is and for what He had done.

Consider the Hebrew word *B'Midbar*. It is a familiar term to the Rabbinic tradition meaning "*being in the wilderness*" in order to receive the teachings of God.

The Rabbis discussed why God spoke to Moses "in wilderness." (Numbers 1:1.) Raba taught that when people open themselves to everyone like a wilderness, God gives them the Torah. (Babylonian Talmud Nedarim 55a.)

Similarly, a midrash taught that those who do not throw themselves open to all like a wilderness cannot acquire wisdom and Torah.

The Sages inferred from Numbers 1:1 that the Torah was given to the accompaniment of fire, water, and wilderness. And the giving of the Torah was marked by these three features to show that as these are free to all people, so are the words of the Torah; as Isaiah 55:1 states, "everyone who thirsts, come for water." (Numbers Rabbah 1:7.)

Another midrash taught that if the Torah had been given to the Israelites in the land of Israel, the tribe in whose territory it was given would have said that it had a prior claim to the Torah, so God gave it in the wilderness, so that all should have an equal claim to it.

Another midrash taught that as people neither sow nor till the wilderness, so those who accept the yoke of the Torah are relieved of the yoke of earning a living; and as the wilderness does not yield any taxes from crops, so scholars are free in this world.

And another midrash taught that the Torah was given in the wilderness because they preserve the Torah who keep themselves separate like a wilderness. (Numbers Rabbah 19:26.)¹¹

Keeping all of this in mind, we think that it is also easy to see why the desert has such vivid allegorical implications in our own life today. These desert trials are not just for testing and obedience, they are also for our instruction, so that we learn that God must receive His rightful place and glory.

When we look at the modern day evangelical teaching, not much emphasis is given to desert experiences and the significance of spiritual renewal, instruction, and God's goodness given through means of the desert experience. If anything, modern day instruction comes through the guiles of religious institutions and the clergy. Yes, we have revival services that emphasize emotion and outward expressions of spiritual renewal, but the focus for the flock is more towards victorious living, rather than discovering God.

If one studies it closely, they will find that some of the clouded reasons of avoiding the desert are because of today's society being so focused on "power living" rather than addressing down times of soul searching and spiritual humbleness.

Yes we have retreats, but once again it usually focuses on victory experiences and not a stripping away of the man made idols of religiosity and self-motivation. It is understood that in this day and age, success is measured in advances, not retreat.

It is our opinion this has lead to devastating negative results with many of the today's pastors, workers, and leaders.

We must look at the desert in a different light.

Consider Moses before he led the Children of Israel out of Egypt. He encountered Yahweh at the burning bush in the desert. Consider Jesus being sent to the desert to face temptation, Satan, and physical denial. He fasted for 40 days in the desert. Consider The Israelites wandering in the desert, being taught over and over again the goodness of God. Deuteronomy 8 says they were led there to be humbled. The great provider always took care of their needs. He provided water. He provided bread. He provided meat. He protected them from their enemies, and He even dwelt among them. Psa. 78:19. says, "*Can God spread a table in the desert?*" They were in the desert classroom for 40 years for our example. 40 YEARS!

An allegorical aspect of the desert can be seen by the stories of Jonah and the Prodigal son. Consider the scriptures that can be found that allude to this also in the book of Job. Consider John the Baptist. He was the voice crying in the wilderness. Yet the wilderness here was a place where one went for repentance.

* * * * *

The ones that seem to understand the mystical desert experience, as seen in Scripture, have a vivid history and emphasize the practice of a period of retreat. This withdrawal is to find purpose and fulfillment in God, and God alone. The desert ties in significant imagery to help focus, and bring the point across.

We ran across a book by Belden C. Lane (Theological Studies and American Studies/St. Louis Univ.) called, "The Solace of Fierce Landscapes: Exploring Desert and Mountain Spirituality"

This book enables one to discover why the Bible so often speaks of the desert and mountains as places of spiritual insight and growth. He is a storyteller who finds in desert and mountain landscapes stimulation of the imagination, which leads to self illumination.

The central argument of the book is based upon a mystical tradition that "uses the imagery of threatening places as a way of challenging the ego and leaving one at a loss for words. If we cannot know God's essence, we can stand in God's place -- on the high mountain, in the lonely desert, at the point where terror gives way to wonder. Only there do we enter the abandonment, the agnosia, that is finally necessary for meeting God."

This tradition is based on the thought that less is more. Preachers and theologians often succumb the temptation to say more than they really know about God. In so doing, they put God into a box of their own making that has little or no resemblance to God as he is. They are like the fellow who had nothing to say but insisted on saying it any way.

The desert and mountain speaks of the self emptying of God and of Christ's self emptying love. No one can see or fully comprehend God. "Whoever tries to comprehend the majesty of the divine ends up confessing with Job, 'I have uttered what I did not understand, things too wonderful for me, which I did not know (Job 42:3).'" "God can only be met in emptiness, by those who come in love, abandoning all effort to control, every need to astound." "The God of the Bible is ever an elusive one. The only guarantee of divine availability is God's own promise to be present to those who empty themselves in perfect trust." ¹²

Dr. Lane brings in “*metaphorical pictures of the desert doubling as both reality and symbol on the interplay between nature and spirit.*”¹²

This searching for God through the desert is not anything new. And please note that it is not the goal of this book to explore or espouse any history or practice of asceticism, whether good or bad.

We just want to emphasize that the spiritual significance of the desert should not be overlooked. That’s why we call it “Desert *Life*”. The desert can usher in a time of purpose and instruction that tends to empty ourselves so we can truly catch a glimpse of God’s glory and love, as well as give answers for our rightful place in His glorious dwelling, of which we shall call, *the Kingdom!*

-----✕-----

Notes:

1. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Garden_of_Eden
2. [*Desert Ecosystems*](#), enviroliteracy.org, The Environmental Literacy Council
3. [*Anglicans for Renewal*](#), Canada magazine, Winter 2000 issue.
4. [*Desert Ecosystems*](#), The Environmental Literacy Council, ©2002 enviroliteracy.org.
5. [*Arabic literature*](#), by Maysa Abou-Youssef Hayward
http://www.columbia.edu/cu/lweb/indiv/mideast/cuvlm/arabic_lit
6. [*The Image of the Desert as Point of Reference for Spirituality*](#), kmacnish,
www.opensourcetheology.net
7. [*The Bible Knowledge Commentary, New Testament Edition*](#), Walvoord and Zuck editors, Victor Books, 1983

8. *Easton's Bible Dictionary*. www.sacred-texts.com
9. *Catholic Encyclopedia: Desert (In the Bible)*
[oce.catholic.com/index.php?title=Desert_\(in_the_Bible\)](http://oce.catholic.com/index.php?title=Desert_(in_the_Bible)) –
10. *We understand that Canaan or modern Palestine has beautiful gardens and land where sheep can graze and fruit trees can grow, especially in the two valleys that run north and south, one along the Mediterranean coast and the other along the Jordan River. Between these farmlands are many small mountain ranges suitable for raising sheep. Deserts lie to the east of the Jordan and to the south and west of the Dead Sea. (See the American Bible Society's resource center at: www.bibleresourcecenter.org for more information.) But for the most part, the area has always been very arid, especially in the dry summer season. This is not to say that it is all a desert, but you could argue that it is desert-like. Especially when you compare it with Lot choosing the "well-watered" land toward Jordan.*
11. *Bamidbar (Parsha)* http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bamidbar_%28parsha%29
12. *The Solace of Fierce LandScapes: Exploring Desert and Mountain Spirituality*. By Belden C. Lane, Oxford University Press, New York, 1998, Review written by Dr. Robert M. Puckett
13. *From Kirkus Reviews* ©1998, Kirkus Associates, LP.

Part II

The Teaching of the Desert

Chapter 5

Embracing God's Love

There are just certain things that need to be studied before anything else. If we focus on the desert life, we must consider the love of God.

Love is a very important aspect of God that we must realize, before we experience it. Above all else, the one attribute of God that must be understood is that God is Love. To visualize God in any other light than that of His love is to completely misunderstand His nature, His purpose and His Kingdom. To understand God is to know love. To understand love is to know God.

Too many of the issues that relate with us and our purpose must be understood in this light. To the unenlightened, the desert is almost always viewed as punishment, or as a result of the severe consequences of sin. This is definitely not the case, as we shall see from God's word.

The love of God is the missing element in most of the scenarios of God's work within the church, or the Body of Christ. When we interact with Christians today, we see an alarming trend that you cannot help but notice. The joy of the Lord is missing. Most seem burdened down with a sense of guilt and unworthiness. They almost look as if they have a 100-pound weight on their shoulders, being overwhelmed with a tremendous burden.

"Where does this burden come from and how can we find freedom?"

"How can we restore the joy of our salvation?"

This burden seems to be coming from a guilt trip associated with a wrong view of God, and a wrong view of their standing in Christ. Many times, if left unchecked, this backwards focus can lead to spiritual ruin. God may have to take some unusual measures to help us come to a realization of who He is and what we are. He does this in order for us to become more joyful and effective in His Kingdom. His paths may lead you into the desert for a closer

inspection of His love, and to experience it in the realization of who God is.

If we find ourselves in the desert, it doesn't mean we are being punished. It is a tool that God uses to help us focus. He moves us from our familiar surroundings and distractions so that He may whisper His truths for us to hear in that "still, small voice", apart from the clutter and confusion of man. Sometimes this may be the only way we can really come to understand these truths.

"Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light." (Matt. 11:28-30)

God's Punishment: Is this what it's all about?

I once had a friend ask me, "Will I be punished if I am not in the will of God?" He was referring to a recent negative "desert experience" as discipline for stepping out of the will of God. He was asking if the children of God are subject to troubles if they step out of the will of God. He said his first thoughts were about Job and wanted to talk it out and understand it from a different perspective.

If I remember correctly, Job's trouble came because of a test. Not because he had stepped out of the will of the Lord.

However, Jonah comes to mind when one thinks about discipline.

Now Jonah's situation was a little different than just stepping out of the will of God. This story bears witness that a dedicated servant who has been chosen to do a certain thing—should do that certain thing, or he might end up with a "whale of a problem"!

Jonah! I imagine that everyone who has ever crossed over the threshold of a church has heard of the story about the big fish swallowing Jonah. And three days later he gets vomited up on the beach. Yuk!

The reason Jonah ended up in the belly of the whale was because he was supposed to specifically do something for God! God told him to go to Nineveh and tell them to repent. Instead, he ran in the complete opposite direction. Jonah basically told God "I'm not going to Nineveh to tell them to repent, because if they do repent, then you'll be merciful and they won't be wiped out." Quite frankly, he told God, "I don't want that to happen!" So...he paid a price.

You probably remember another story of "problems" when we think about the parable of the prodigal son. As the story is told, he wanted to leave the farm and go "enjoy" life for a while with the money his father set aside for him. He wanted to live on his own, out from underneath the provision and daily chores of his father. His father let him go. He gave the son all his inheritance and off he went.

He lived large, partied hardy, spent all his cash, and ended up literally in the trash heap. He ended up hungry, miserable, friendless and out of money. I guess you could say he was in serious "troubles".

So...if we look at these stories we can come to the conclusion that if we step out of the will of the Lord, we'll be *punished*...right? Well, it would seem that way, but I would like to take a look at things from a totally different perspective.

Let's jump back to Job for a moment. Here we see something a little different. God allows Job to be put to the test. *Because God is pleased with Job, he gets "troubles"*.

(Huh? Wait...shouldn't that be the other way around?)

It's true. Satan said to God that there was NO way that anyone could be as faithful to God as Job was, if he had worries and "troubles". So God said, "OK...put him in misery and see what happens." So as the story goes, Job was handed one major disaster after another.

Much to the surprise of everyone, Job ended up in a dung heap of troubles. He had troubles upon troubles. Just as the consensus would be today, the consensus of his day was that Job must have done something wrong for God to come down on him so hard.

Job complained. He whined. He argued with his friends who said he must have sinned. However, he never said anything bad about

God, and knew in his own mind that he had done nothing wrong before the most High God.

One of Job's so called friends, Bildad, even had a really good spiritual argument that Job must have sinned. He said, "*Does God mess up? Does God Almighty ever get things backwards? It's plain that your children sinned against him--otherwise, why would God have punished them?*" (Job 8:3) He even uses the "religious" plea and asks him to walk the aisle of confession by saying, "*GOD will forgive you, Job, if you just get down on your knees!*"

Another one of Job's friends, Zophar, uses the "intelligent" religious argument to condemn Job:

"I wish he'd show you how wisdom looks from the inside, for true wisdom is mostly 'inside.' But you can be sure of this, you haven't gotten half of what you deserve. Do you think you can explain the mystery of God? Do you think you can diagram God Almighty? God is far higher than you can imagine, far deeper than you can comprehend!" (Job 11: 6-8)

In other words, "Hey bro, you're just mud and clay in God's eyes—who are you to say you haven't sinned!"

I kind of like what Job responded with in chapter 12, "*I'm sure you speak for all the experts, and when you die there'll be no one left to tell us how to live.*" (Did I detect a little sarcasm here?)

The conclusion by Job's friends was...God punishes all who get out of the will of the Lord. If you've got problems, you must have sinned. And they had all the religious arguments to back it up. But God's Word says...Job got troubles because he was tested. *BECAUSE God favored him, God sent him troubles.*

Would GOD do anything like that? Well, He can, and He does.

God's Message: Refuse to live in fear!

Now, there may be times when God does discipline his children for disobedience. The scriptures are full of these accounts.

However, in light of God's new covenant with us, I think it is very wrong to look at God through the eyes of fear, and think of Him as the "old man with the correction stick" who is going to punish you for every wrong move you make.

We will make it a point here to say, "*REFUSE TO LIVE IN FEAR!*"

It is our humble opinion that we should always focus on the grace and mercy of God—not on our sin. God is love. To keep looking at him as the "Old Man with the Big Stick of Correction" does more harm than good. When we focus on sin, whether it's our own sins or the sins of others, we become just like the "accuser", Satan.

(Satan, 'Adversary; accuser')

Where Satan does appear, he is clearly a member of God's court and plays the role of the Accuser, much like a prosecuting attorney for God. ...It is evident from the prologue in Job that Satan has no power of independent action, but requires the permission of God, which he may not transgress.

Satan works in opposition to God, though not entirely able to take action without consent. This view is also retained in Zech. 3:1-2, where Satan is described as the adversary of the high priest Joshua, and of the people of God whose representative the hierarch is [We know this to be Jesus]; and he there opposes the "angel of the Lord," who bids him be silent in the name of God. In both of these passages Satan is a mere accuser who acts only according to the permission of the Lord."¹

Perhaps we have jumped too far ahead. Let's start again from the beginning...

In order for God to show His mercy, He must first show us *why* He is merciful. The Old Testament Law sets up the premise that we all are sinners and the historical accounts of the Bible show us that *in no way* can we live up to the Law. Basically, the Law condemned us! However, in God's love and mercy, He set up the temporary sacrificial system of the Tabernacle to *cover* for our lack of ability to

not sin, until the proper time in which He would *permanently* cover our sins.

This ultimate sacrifice of His Son *Yeshua* vividly shows God's love and mercy. Through this sinless sacrifice, He provides for us a way to obtain holiness or righteousness when we could not do it for ourselves. Yes, there are consequences to sin...but God in His infinite mercy has provided a "*once-for-all*" sacrifice for sin through Jesus Christ, that we may be holy and blameless before a living, Holy God (*Heb. 10*).

In our "new covenant" of grace that God has provided, instead of concentrating on all the angles of punishment and calamity because we are sinners (and we are) we should dwell on the goodness of God and strive to walk in the Spirit of Love and Truth. We are much happier focusing here than on our sinful nature. It is good only to focus on sin when we are confessing our sins before God. Because when we do sin, He is faithful and just to forgive us of ALL our sin (*1 Jn. 1:8-9*). Even here, God focuses not on the sin, but on His love and mercy.

Once again, let's repeat an important fact: God's focus has always been showing Himself as being a loving and merciful God. Why? Because God is a God of love! To dwell on sin and punishment, even as we read about judgment, is a grave mistake that too many of us make as Christians.

But you may ask, "But why not? Doesn't the Bible tell us that we are sinners and we need to confess our sins to God?" "Does it not say that unless we live holy lives will be judged?" Yes, it does. But that is not the focus of the Christian walk as most of us have made it.

Just ask any person on the street as to what they think Christianity is and most will respond with what boils down to..."Rules and Regulations of Morality."

As you well know...Christianity is NOT about rules and regulations. That's a hang up of old Judaism and the Talmud! But unfortunately, "rules and regs" are what most Christians know and proclaim to the world. This is a tragic mistake and ultimately repels non-believers away from Christianity.

Christianity is a relationship with an eternal, Holy God. This relationship is only accomplished by the provisions God has made through His mercy. It is not accomplished through the keeping of rules—and not by anything that we may do. That is what the world needs to know. That's the good news...the Gospel of the Kingdom.

Instead we puff ourselves up as gods and declare to the world that we are something special because we have a list of morals that we follow. In this light, we also declare that we are Christians because we keep some man made rules and regulations that we think is morality, “a la Pharaseeism.” We are not special sinless gods, and not one of us can keep ourselves from sinning. *We are sinners saved by grace, covered by the blood of Yeshua!*

It is Hilda's and my most humble opinion...that as soon as most of us grasp this, the better off we'll be! We'll be much better off focusing here so that a merciful God can use us for HIS GLORY, instead of us trying to puff ourselves up as “better than everyone else!”

The desert has taught us an important lesson in our relationship with God, and it is a point that we earnestly feel needs to be said to most who may find themselves wondering in a spiritual wasteland. Many tragically end up on the verge of spiritual suicide because of the wrong emphasis put on God and sin. Unfortunately in a quest for control, church leaders and preachers usually pound fear into the psyche of the Christian body—instead of focusing on God's grace and mercy.

It seems that the spirit of the modern Biblical church is to concentrate on man's sinful nature and God's disgust of sinful practices, thus the need for constant reprimanding. For the most part, the emphasis is put on holy living and personal piety. While that may sound like the way it should be to most church attendees, unfortunately it usually comes from a viewpoint that we are to keep certain rules and regulations that the church deems necessary in order for us to live a holy and blameless life before God. We believe this is walking in the spirit of the Law and not walking in the Spirit of Truth.

We have even heard it preached that if one doesn't live by these regulated standards you are out of the will of the Lord and in

danger of hell-fire and ultimate loss of blessings as Children of the King, or even a loss of one's salvation.

Striving to keep Rules and Regulations and focusing on our sinful nature is worshiping God in the spirit of fear. This is a backwards focus.

Now before you run us out of town on a rail and label us as heretics, let me try and explain to you what we mean by that statement. This will require a little patience and careful attention to define the matter.

The intent of this book is not to bog you down in intense word studies and scriptural exegesis—however there are times when it is necessary to see where we may have gotten off track in our interpretation of foreign words and concepts that do not translate very well into our language and culture. This is one of those times.

When we study scripture, there seems to be much confusion when it comes to the word *fear*. There are different Hebrew words translated as fear, and they can have completely opposite meanings. There is a fear that means “dread and terror”, and there is also a fear that means “awe and wonderment”. This awesome and wonderful fear is what is usually found in the Biblical term, “*the fear of the Lord*”.

*Proverbs 1: 7 **The fear of the LORD** is the beginning of knowledge.*

*Proverbs 9: 10 "**The fear of the LORD** is the beginning of wisdom, and knowledge [revelation] of the Holy One is understanding.*

*Isaiah 33: 5-6 ⁵ The LORD is **a rich store** of salvation and wisdom and knowledge; **the fear of the LORD** is the key to this treasure.*

*Psalms 111: 10 **The fear of the LORD** is the beginning of wisdom;*

What is the Fear of the Lord? It is not the “*fear*” as we would think in English, or for that matter, even what we find in relative Greek terms. What we need to do is first look at its roots in the *Tanakh*, the original Hebrew Scriptures, and discover it as God first revealed it to us. This should be the starting place of how to interpret “fear” in the New Testament.

Isaiah 11: 1-3

A shoot will come up from the stump of Jesse; from his roots a Branch will bear fruit.

² *The Spirit of the LORD will rest on him—
the Spirit of wisdom and of understanding,
the Spirit of counsel and of power,
the Spirit of knowledge and of the fear of the
LORD -*

³ *and he will delight in the fear of the LORD.*

The Hebrew word for fear here is *yirah*.

Strong's H3374 yir'ah fear (also used as an infinitive); morally, reverence.²

Yirah is the same as “piety” or reverence, *not terror or dread*. This is not the same “fear” as used in Isaiah 2:10, 19 and 21:

¹⁰ *Go into the rocks, hide in the ground from dread (fear) of the LORD and the splendor of his majesty! ¹⁹ Men will flee to caves in the rocks and to holes in the ground from dread of the LORD and the splendor of his majesty, when he rises to shake the earth.*

Here in Isaiah 2 the Hebrew word *pachad* is used.

H6343 pachad pakh'-ad from H6342; a (sudden) alarm (properly, the object feared, by implication, the feeling).

There is a vast difference in the two words. Awe and respect surround *yirah*. This word even forms the root of one of God's name:

Yahweh Yireh , (H3376) which literally means: “God sees me ” and is used as an attribute that God provides all, because He sees all! This respect comes from His all encompassing power, all knowing understanding, Holiness and Grace.

“*Beholding with wonder*” is how it is alluded to by Paul in 2 Corinthians 3: 17:

Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom. ¹⁸And we, who with unveiled faces all reflect the Lord's glory, are being transformed into his likeness with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit. (NIV)

¹⁷Now the Lord is that Spirit: and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty. ¹⁸But we all, with open face beholding as in a glass the glory of the Lord, are changed into the same image from glory to glory, even as by the Spirit of the Lord. (KJV)

This word *reflect* comes from the Greek word *katoptrizomai*.

G2734 to mirror oneself, i.e. to see reflected (figuratively). KJV: behold as in a glass. It comes from the word optanomai G3700: to gaze (i.e. with wide-open eyes), as at something remarkable.

Note how this “beholding” or “gazing at something remarkable” is reflected in God’s glory which proceeds to transform us into His image. This fear of the Lord, this respect, this awe, this worshiping God in all His holiness begins to transfigure us (*metamorphoo G3339 to transform into another image (literally or figuratively)*) into His express image. *We begin to see as He sees.* (Compare this to Romans 3:18 where the ungodly are described as, “*there is no fear of God before their eyes*”).

Paul says in 2 Cor. 5:9ff,

*"So we make it our goal to please him... whether we are at home in the body or away from it. ¹⁰For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, that each one may receive what is due him for the things done while in the body, whether good or bad. ¹¹Since, then, **we know what it is to fear the Lord**, we try to persuade men.*

2 Corinthians 7:1 *Since we have these promises, dear friends, let us purify ourselves from everything that contaminates body and spirit, **perfecting holiness out of reverence for God.***

In Greek, the word for fear is *phobos*, where we get our word: *Phobia*.

It first had the meaning of flight," that which is caused by being scared"; then, "that which may cause flight" (a) "fear, dread, terror," always with this significance in the four Gospels (Vines)³.

G5401, phobos from a primary phebomai (to be put in fear); alarm or fright. KJV: be afraid, + exceedingly, fear, terror.

To further add to the confusion, *phobos* can also be translated as "reverential fear" and has the connotation of "worship". So we can see that context plays an important factor when translating the word *phobos*, and the Hebrew should set precedence over the Greek context.

"[Phobos] ...of God, as a controlling motive of the life, in matters spiritual and moral, not a mere "fear" of His power and righteous retribution, but a wholesome dread of displeasing Him, a "fear" which banishes the terror that shrinks from His presence, Romans 8:15, and which influences the disposition and attitude of one whose circumstances are guided by trust in God, through the indwelling Spirit of God, Acts 9:31; Romans 3:18; 2 Corinthians 7:1; Ephesians 5:21 (RV, "the fear of Christ"); Philippians 2:12; 1 Peter 1:17

(a comprehensive phrase: the reverential "fear" of God will inspire a constant carefulness in dealing with others in His "fear"); 1 Peter 3:2, 1 Peter 3:15; (Vines)

He said in a loud voice, "Fear God and give him glory, because the hour of his judgment has come. Worship him who made the heavens, the earth, the sea and the springs of water." Revelation 14:7

So when the focus is on sin, rules and regulations, and the wrath of God, we translate *fear* as trembling and dread. But in the context of God's love, we see it as beholding with awe! It's that which *"banishes the terror that shrinks from His presence."* God first revealed himself to the children of Israel on Mt Sinai with clouds, thunder, smoke and fire. He brought trembling fear together with reverential fear with His Law so that the Israelites would obey His commands. It was necessary.

Even in the New Testament, when the writers mention sin, there is an element of dread and terror that was to be expected because of the judgment of God.

Check out Philippians 2:12: *"Wherefore, my beloved, as ye have always obeyed, not as in my presence only, but now much more in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling."* (NKJ)

Working out our salvation requires knowledge of our sinfulness and ultimate punishment and death because of that sinfulness.

Look at Col 3:22: *"Servants, obey in all things your masters according to the flesh; not with eye service, as men pleasers; but in singleness of heart, fearing God;"* (NKJ)

Roman 13:5: *"Therefore, it is necessary to submit to the authorities, not only because of possible punishment but also because of conscience."*

"Slaves, obey your earthly masters with respect and fear, and with sincerity of heart, just as you would obey Christ." (Eph 6:5)

Notice here that fearing God compels us to obey because of punishment, especially from those that are over us.

Jesus in His earthly life lived out the Law in fear, but it was the opposite type of fear—this was reverential and *godly fear*, which is “awe and beholding with wonder”:

*“...who [Jesus], in the days of His flesh, when He had offered up prayers and supplications, with vehement cries and tears to Him who was able to save Him from death, and was heard because of **His godly fear**, though He was a Son, yet He learned obedience by the things which He suffered. And having been perfected, He became the author of eternal salvation to all who obey Him.” (Heb 5:7-9 NKJ) [emphasis mine]*

This “godly fear” in verse seven is translated “reverent submission” in the NIV Bible. Reverent submission can be summarized by looking to God through the eyes of awe and respectful obedience. Even though Jesus is a Son—God in the flesh, He still carried out His earthly duty in fear or reverent submission. He has no reason whatsoever to come to God in fear and trembling. He is God! But because He wanted to please the Father, He walked in servitude with reverent, “godly fear”.

In general, the “Fear of the Lord” as seen in the Old Covenant was focusing on God as holy and sinless. It emphasized that we are sinful and are in danger of being destroyed if we come near God because *we are not holy*.² The Law provided both a confessional and a ceremonial ritual (sacrifices) to make atonement for sins and it was done *in reverence* toward a Holy God. We were to come to God through fear and repentance. It was fear of His judgments that were demonstrated with awesome power and greatness. Sin had to be dealt with through the fear of the consequences. That was a correct focus then and is a correct focus even now as one enters into the salvation experience of grace. However this type of fear is not an element of a *forgiven* Christian and should not be typically used to describe our walk, nor should it be emphasized in a worship service.

“While the normal meaning of fear as dread or terror is retained in the theological use of the term [as an

*awareness of sin], a special nuance of **reverential awe or worshipful respect becomes the dominant notion.** [for the believer]"⁴*

God's Law: The Old Order and the New Freedom

We are not to worship God in the spirit of dread or terror. That was the OLD order, and emphasis of the Law.

*"But the Scripture declares that the whole world is a prisoner of sin, so that what was promised, being given through faith in Jesus Christ, might be given to those who believe. Before this faith came, **we were held prisoners by the law**, locked up until faith should be revealed. So the law was put in charge to lead us to Christ that we might be justified by faith. Now that faith has come, **we are no longer under the supervision of the law.**" (Gal 4: 22-25)*

*"For you did not receive a spirit that makes you a slave again to fear, but you received the Spirit of sonship. And by him we cry, "Abba, Father." **The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God's children.** Now if we are children, then we are heirs—heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ..." (Romans 8:15-17)*

*"...**For God has not given us a spirit of fear, but of power and of love and of a sound mind.** Therefore do not be ashamed of the testimony of our Lord, nor of me His prisoner, but share with me in the sufferings for the gospel according to the power of God, **who has saved us and called us with a holy calling, not according to our works, but according to His own purpose and grace** which was given to us in Christ Jesus before time began, but has now been revealed by the appearing of our Savior Jesus Christ, who has abolished death and brought life and immortality to light through the gospel,*

to which I was appointed a preacher, an apostle, and a teacher of the Gentiles.” (2 Tim 1:7-11 NKJ)

*Jesus could set people free who were afraid of death.
All their lives they were **held as slaves by that fear.**
(Heb. 2:15 NIRV)*

The fear that we once had of dread and terror of the judgment of God is replaced by the mercy and grace of a loving God. Jesus made “*atonement for the sins of the people*” (Heb.2:17). This word atonement means reconciliation, or to turn aside God’s wrath.⁵ We are to come to God through the eyes of grace and mercy, focusing on the loving provision of the sacrifice of His Son, Jesus.

To get technical, if you know something about the sacrifices and offerings of the Torah, they were almost entirely associated and given with the name of God, *El Malei Rachamim*—God full of mercy; All merciful God. Even then, Israel was to look on the sacrifices as God’s merciful acts of love.⁶

Also, we are now called children of God. We are part of the family. So the focus is to look at our adoption by God through the eyes of grace, mercy, and love. We cry, “*Abba, Father!*” Fear of the consequences of sin have been eliminated. Guilt has taken a back seat to the mercies of God, and we are also to worship him in that focus.

“There can be no true worship of God if it arises from guilt. You are not called to the worship of God because you are guilty and must find a way to get to heaven; you are called to the worship of God because God has freely and wonderfully forgiven all your sins, and you are called to praise and glorify Him because of this mercy.” 7

I know you still have questions about the reverential fear of the Lord. And they are good questions. Lord willing, we will look at this later and attempt to share some awesome things about it that God has revealed. But first, we need to focus in on this awesome good news of love and grace. We want to make this even clearer as we

study the scriptures. But first we must eliminate this focus on fear (dread and trembling), when it comes to God's love and mercy.

God's New Covenant: To worship in Spirit and Truth.

"The former regulation is set aside because it was weak and useless (for the law made nothing perfect), and a better hope is introduced, by which we draw near to God." (Hebrews 7:18-19)

Let's look at what Jesus says to the woman at the well in John 4: 23-24:

*"Yet a time is coming and has now come when the **true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth**, for they are the kind of worshipers the Father seeks. God is spirit, and his worshipers must worship in spirit and in truth."*

The Spirit of Truth is the Holy Spirit that Jesus said would be given to us:

"And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Counselor to be with you forever—the Spirit of truth. The world cannot accept him, because it neither sees him nor knows him. But you know him, for he lives with you and will be in you." (Jn 14:16-17)

In light of this, let us couple this to what we know is Spirit and Truth:

"And hope does not disappoint us, because God has poured out his love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, whom he has given us." (Romans 5:5)

"My little children, let us not love in word or in tongue, but in deed and in truth. And by this we know

that we are of the truth, and shall assure our hearts before Him.” (1 John 3:18 NKJ)

“Within your temple, O God, we meditate on your unfailing love.” (Psa 48:9)

What are we to focus on in worship? The Truth! The Mercies of God! The fact that God is Love! His great deeds that show his mercy and love! The Holy Names of God that demonstrates over and over His great love for us.

The Scriptures are just full of examples of God's mercy and long-suffering! The crown jewel of all of God's holy attributes is LOVE. This is what casts out all fear of judgment and death!

*“Love has been perfected among us in this: that we may have boldness in the day of judgment; because as He is, so are we in this world. **There is no fear in love; but perfect love casts out fear**, because fear involves torment. But he who fears has not been made perfect in love. We love Him because He first loved us. If someone says, “I love God,” and hates his brother, he is a liar; for he who does not love his brother whom he has seen, how can he love God whom he has not seen? And this commandment we have from Him: that he who loves God must love his brother also.” (1 John 4:17-21)*

When I look at I John 4, I see an amazing turn from God's judgments and fear of punishment to “*we are made perfect in love!*” Does that not make your heart want to leap up and praise God! “Perfect love casts out fear!” Let us worship God in Spirit and in TRUTH!

“A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.” (Jn 13: 34-35)

“Dear friends, I am not writing you a new command but an old one, which you have had since the beginning [love one another]. This old command is the

message you have heard. Yet I am writing you a new command; its truth is seen in him and you [love], because the darkness is passing and the true light is already shining.” (1 Jn 2:7)

Everything makes so much sense when we interpret things in light of “love”. The commandments of God turn from “Thou shalt not” to “THOU SHALT” Thou shalt love! Thou shalt love God! Thou shalt love thy neighbor! Thou shalt love thy brother! The emphasis is what kind of good fruit do we have? (Love, joy, peace, long-suffering, gentleness, goodness, kindness, meekness, etc.) It’s not what kind of sin we are to avoid. These fruits are what we are to concentrate on—NOT our sins and shortcomings.

This is why John writes in 1 John 2:

*“My dear children, I write this to you so that you will not sin. But if anybody does sin, we have one who speaks to the Father in our defense—Jesus Christ, the Righteous One. He is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not only for ours but also for the sins of the whole world. We know that we have come to know him if we obey his commands. The man who says, “I know him,” but does not do what he commands is a liar, and the truth is not in him. But if anyone obeys his word, **God's love is truly made complete in him**. This is how we know we are in him: Whoever claims to live in him must walk as Jesus did.”*

In the New Covenant we find references as to what sin is. But it is always contrasted by what love is and what the fruit of the Spirit bears. In bearing these fruits we live out a life that is pleasing to God. By living and walking in the Spirit we are able to accomplish this fruitfulness, whereas before it was nearly impossible to please God.

That’s why we read in Romans 12 an amazing transformation that takes place in the life of the believer:

“Therefore, I urge you, brothers, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy

and pleasing to God—this is your spiritual act of worship. Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will.”
(Romans 12 1-3)

Do you think God would accept a sinful blemished body as a living sacrifice? Could it be that our reasonable act of worship is transforming and renewing our MIND to that of viewing everything from God's perspective of mercy and love? Is it that important? If we are sinners...and we are. And if we are imperfect...and we are. And if our spirits are made perfect in love...and they are. What is the ultimate sacrifice we can give God?

That would be sacrificing our hearts, our souls, and our minds to think like God. We are able to do this because of the mercy of God and His great love. He has transformed us unto the image of His dear son. HE has made us holy and acceptable. It is NOT our works that make it so. (2 Pet. 1:3) In His grace He even gives us the power to live holy lives through the Holy Spirit, whereas it once was impossible to do so! (2 Peter 1:3)

If you study the book of Hebrews in this light, it really illuminates the passages as to what God wants to say to us here. The writer of Hebrews says in chapter 6, verse 20, that Christ has become a priest forever in the order of Melchizedek.

In Hebrews chapter 7, He explains why Christ came “in the order of Melchizedek” and then goes on to say “*for when there is a change in the priesthood, there must be also a change of the law!*” (7:12)

Verse 18 says,

*“The former regulation is set aside because it was weak and useless (for the law made nothing perfect), and a better hope is introduced, **by which we draw near to God.**”*

There is a new covenant for which we are to draw near to God. It has a whole different aspect of how we enter the Holy of Holies. Verse 25 says *“Therefore He is able to save completely (forever) those who come to God through Him, because He always lives to intercede for them.”* There is now no reason to fear God because of our sin when we enter in and draw near to God. ***Your sins are covered completely and forever. Jesus only had to do it ONCE.*** (7:27b)

In chapter 9 the writer of Hebrews states that the old covenant had regulations about sacrifices and worship that were only *temporary*, until such a time when the new covenant of God with man was to be put into affect by the sacrifice of Christ. The writer goes on to say that the priest entered into the most Holy Place by the blood of goats and bulls, but Christ entered in by His own blood.

This is important to realize. Read further into the chapter:

“This is an illustration for the present time, indicating that the gifts and sacrifices being offered were not able to clear the conscience of the worshiper [the guilt of our sins].” (9:9)

BUT, *“How much more, then, will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself unblemished to God, **cleanse our consciences** from acts that lead to death, so that we may serve the living God!” “God is not the God of the dead, but of the living. He delights **not** in the blood of bulls and goats, but in the living service of His people **in thankfulness and praise.**”*

Hallelujah, what a Savior!

God's Perfection: The Fear has been ELIMINATED!

Everything has been made perfect in love, and love has cast out all fear! Do you not see the emphasis switch from a focus on sin (dread and terror) to a focus on salvation and God's mercy (awe and wonderment)?

In case you didn't see the switch, read these verses in Hebrews again...

*"Just as man is destined to die once, and after that to face judgment, so Christ was sacrificed once to take away the sins of many people; and **he will appear a second time, not to bear sin, but to bring salvation to those who are waiting for him.** "The law is only a shadow of the good things that are coming—not the realities themselves. For this reason it can never, by the same sacrifices repeated endlessly year after year, make perfect those **who draw near to worship.**"*

We are not to be worshipping God out of fear! Christ is appearing for our *salvation*—not our judgment!

All of this is not to say we can do anything we want and not have fear of reprisal or consequence for our sin. NO! We must learn of God, know what pleases Him, and walk in His ways. His mercy compels us to do so. The writer of Hebrews makes this clear later on in the following chapters. But because we are humans...naturally we would have a tendency to think can get away with anything we want.

However, what the passages continue to say is that our focus is to be on Christ and his love, not on us and our sin. When we focus on worship this way: our minds, our spirits, and our bodies will follow the natural tendency to want to live a holy life before God and men. His love compels us! (Should we sin again and again that grace should abound? God forbid!)

Instead, *"...Let us draw near to God with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled to cleanse us from a guilty conscience..." "...And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds..." " ...Let us encourage one another." (Heb.10:21-25)*

See how this ties in with the Romans 12 verses that tell us that in light of God's mercy we should *"offer our bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God—as our spiritual act of worship."* Look how he instructs us to live in light of this worship:

“Love must be sincere. Hate what is evil; cling to what is good. Be devoted to one another in brotherly love. Honor one another above yourselves. Never be lacking in zeal, but keep your spiritual fervor, serving the Lord. Be joyful in hope, patient in affliction, faithful in prayer. Share with God's people who are in need. Practice hospitality. Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse. Rejoice with those who rejoice; mourn with those who mourn. Live in harmony with one another. Do not be proud, but be willing to associate with people of low position. Do not be conceited. Do not repay anyone evil for evil. Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everybody. If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone. Do not take revenge, my friends, but leave room for God's wrath, for it is written: “It is mine to avenge; I will repay,” says the Lord. On the contrary: “If your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink. In doing this, you will heap burning coals on his head.” Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.” (Romans 12: 9-21)

See how we encourage each other as Christians to do good? In the family, we focus on the *positive* stressing of the better things in *Yeshua*—not with the negative of “*God the judge*” who will punish all that do not have their sins covered by the blood of the Lamb. That message is for preaching to the lost. *They* need to fear and tremble before God! That is for them to know that they need to repent and look to God for mercy.

We as believers however, need to live in light of God's mercy and love, which will compel us to live holy lives. He gives us His Holy Spirit of Power to do so!

There is a time we need to examine our hearts and see if there be any wicked way within us, but that is not to be our focus. When we find such things, we confess them. *God forgives us*. As a matter of fact—*our sins are already forgiven!* THAT is the focus. We must turn from the negative to the positive and learn to examine everything in the light of love.

As Christians, we have done a great disservice to each other by trying to point out all our sins and to make a list of things we can and cannot do. Thereby, we have raised up a standard of “*Thou Shalt Nots*” instead of the “*Thou Shalts*”. The Pharisees had this list down to a tee. They had their religious order down to how many steps they could take on the Sabbath and not sin. That was their morality of the day, and you probably already know what Jesus had to say about the Pharisees and their morality! He called them “*vipers, white washed tombs, liars, and hypocrites!*”

Instead, in this new covenant we have been made free in Christ Jesus. Sin no longer has reign over us and we bask in the goodness of God and drink from the spring of his endless love. This freedom is nothing short of an amazing miracle in our lives. When we worship God for this great accomplishment, we worship in Spirit and in Truth. Our worship in this truth and freedom allows us to serve God even more so than what rules and regulations could ever accomplish. It compels us to humbly follow His direction with our sacrifice of praise.

“Freedom, as Christians understand it, is the ability to respond appropriately to God’s grace, to render God thanks and praise by answering with joyful obedience to God’s direction of our lives. True freedom is neither the permission to make a selection from a wide variety of choices, nor is it the absence of any external impositions upon one’s life; it is the experience of having been so compelled by God’s grace, accompanied by the recognition of God’s claim over one’s entire life, that one no longer has a need for choice or deliberation — one can only assent gratefully and in humble obedience.”⁸

God’s Holy Life: Christianity is not about Morality.

Christianity is not about morality. Christianity is living a holy life *because* of a tremendous relationship we have with the Almighty

God provided through His Son, Jesus Christ. *Yeshua (Jesus)* said, “*By this love the world will know that you are my disciples!*” He did NOT say, “if you live a clean moral life, the world would know you are disciples.” Love is the “proof in the pudding.” Love is the reason sinners will be drawn to *Yeshua*.

There are all sorts of religions out there that practice extreme rituals of morality. Only the Christianity of the Bible emphasizes a merciful loving God that is full of forgiveness and love. That is the Gospel, the good news of the Kingdom.

I don't know about you, but this loves compels us to fall on our face and worship the living *Elohim (God)*, *El Shaddai (God Almighty)*. Praise His name above all the heavens and bless His Holy Covenant that redeems man to an eternal life with Yahweh. Proclaim His mighty works throughout the earth! Stand up and praise Him with the trumpet, the cymbals, the lyre and harp. For *El Elyon (The God most High)* has done great things for us!

If you find yourself in the desert, please don't run away from *El (God)* in fear. Run to Him in love. *Elohim* is the one who loves us dearly. He wants to fellowship with us because of His love. He has made a way through the wilderness with His mercy. He wants us to live and walk with Him in a life of love. He wants to meet you in the desert and whisper to you of His great love. Listen to Him. Discover His great mercy. Rejoice that you have been set aside as a child of the King!

God's Trouble: Jonah and the Prodigal Son

In light of this aspect of God's love, let's go back to the issues of “troubles” for being out of the will of God for a moment. Let's think once again about Jonah and the Prodigal Son.

Did Jonah get into trouble because of his disobedience, or was it mainly because of God's love for Nineveh? Or was it a combination of both? Jonah was upset and ran from what God told him to do because he viewed the Ninevites as wretched, sinful people who deserved no mercy. They were the ones who wiped out every

enemy down to their last breathing animal. They were ruthless. Jonah was a prophet of *Yahweh* called to minister to the Israelites, and then he was told to go somewhere he didn't want to go, and to a people he utterly despised. And the last straw was that he was to tell them of the mercies of *Yahweh*.

Jonah was a prophet and servant of God. Here he was not obedient, nor was he inclined to think like God would in His mercy and love. In his prominent position, he refused to do what God told him specifically to do, so he paid a huge price. This was a specific command to one whose life commitment was to be a spokesman for God. Here, God wanted to show his love to a people who didn't deserve it. We might summarize this as, *"don't stand in the way of God's love, or you might end up on the wrong side of God's wrath!"*

"Whoever receives one little child like this in My name receives Me. Whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in Me to sin, it would be better for him if a millstone were hung around his neck, and he were drowned in the depth of the sea." (Matt 18:5-6 NKJ)

In the case of the Prodigal Son, here is an example of God's love from another perspective. The son went his own way and paid a price for not following some logical instincts, and not doing what logical experience says we are to do. The prodigal pushed his fate and felt the consequences of his lack of maturity. Here he stepped out of the protection and guidance of his father's experience and maturity and substituted it with his youthful lusts. He paid a huge price.

We can argue on all sides as to what his actions demanded, but our focus is on what the love of God teaches here. Did the father stop loving him because of his actions? Did the son lose his sonship or cease being a member of the father's family because of his decisions? No. We read the father was still yearning for his son to come home. As a matter of fact, the indication was that he knew he would return, so he kept his eye out for him. And when he saw that he was coming home...well, let's just say the "real party" began! We might summarize this as, *"don't underestimate the limitlessness of God's love!"*

God's Love: Do not make light of the Lord's Discipline

Do you see how the scriptures illuminate and resonate with God's love when we start looking at scriptures through the correct focus? It is so human, for all of us to be negative in regards to life that we interpret our entire existence in the negative. That is a wrong focus. We need to see ourselves in light of how God sees us. We are sinners saved by grace. And when God looks at us, He sees us as His children, made perfect and blameless because of His love and provisions and the obedience of His son, *Yeshua haMeshiach (Jesus Christ)*.

This whole emphasis of God's love compels us want to please our Father. We want to walk in His ways and do the things that please Him because of this great love—not because we are going to fall into judgment. Please see this aspect of punishment for being out of the will of God as just plain wrong.

However, there is an aspect of *discipline* that God will sometimes use *in love*.

In the flesh, there are natural consequences of sin that are in place. These natural consequences in the laws of the flesh will find you out. Natural instincts tell us that if you live a habitual life in sin, you will pay dearly in one form or another. Scripture bears this out.

“Do not be deceived, God is not mocked; for whatever a man sows, that he will also reap. For he who sows to his flesh will of the flesh reap corruption, but he who sows to the Spirit will of the Spirit reap everlasting life.” (Gal 6:7)

As for *Elohim's* love in the spirit realm, you are seen as forgiven and still remain in the family. Our High Priest, *Yeshua haMeshiach*, has appeased *Yahweh's* wrath towards you. However, in the flesh this does not mean you may not suffer natural consequences for your sin.

Keep on sinning and God will resort to chastisement and allow the consequences of your sins to bear its fruit, to help you see this in a better light. In this case, He doesn't discipline because of His

wrath, He does it because He loves you. In the same way any father would discipline their children to teach them and keep them from harm, God may do the same with us. Some may be smart enough to know that already. However, most of us are kind of dim-witted to these matters and keep on doing things that are displeasing to God.

To those children who continue to walk after the flesh, God reminds us through the writer of Hebrews:

"In your struggle against sin, you have not yet resisted to the point of shedding your blood. And you have forgotten that word of encouragement that addresses you as sons: "My son, do not make light of the Lord's discipline, and do not lose heart when he rebukes you, because the Lord disciplines those he loves, and he punishes everyone he accepts as a son."

Endure hardship as discipline; God is treating you as sons. For what son is not disciplined by his father? If you are not disciplined (and everyone undergoes discipline), then you are illegitimate children and not true sons.

Moreover, we have all had human fathers who disciplined us and we respected them for it. How much more should we submit to the Father of our spirits and live! Our fathers disciplined us for a little while as they thought best; but God disciplines us for our good, that we may share in his holiness. No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful.

Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it." (Hebrews 12:4-11)

We are not to fear discipline. We are to endure it so that it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace. The discipline once again points us to the love of God. Peace and righteousness flow from this attribute of who God is. Elohim is love!

God's Essence: The love of God is no small thing

When we see reverential fear in the New Covenant, it is beyond what we would see in the Law. That is why Zechariah, the father of John the Baptist in Luke 1 prophesized:

*"Praise be to the Lord, the God of Israel, because he has come and has redeemed his people. He has raised up a horn of salvation for us in the house of his servant David (as he said through his holy prophets of long ago), salvation from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us—to show mercy to our fathers and to remember his holy covenant, the oath he swore to our father Abraham: to rescue us from the hand of our enemies, **and to enable us to serve him without fear in holiness and righteousness before him all our days.**"*
(Luke 1: 68-75)

Fear as it relates to judgment deals with sin and the fear of consequences—or death. The reverential, fear of the Lord has to do with respect of who God is and to what He has shown us by His mighty acts of mercy and love. In other words, it is in context with His mercy and love that we are to live our lives as Holy, as our most reasonable sacrifice of praise.

It is also interesting to note than when you do a word study of the dread and trembling kind of fear in the New Covenant, it almost always correlates in context to Judaism. And the few times it may be used in context with the Gentiles, it is used in light of the dreaded judgment of God. We can see this when Paul uses it in 2 Corinthians 5, describing the judgment seat of Christ. Peter uses it in this same context in 1 Peter 1:17.

Please note if you study the judgment of believers: we as believers covered by the blood of the Lamb will not be judged for our sins. Christ has already taken care of sin. Here is where many errors are made in sermons and teachings that place tremendous burdens on God's children of the New Covenant who may be seen as wandering in the wilderness! We are not to be fearful of judgment. Our

judgment is to receive our praise and salvation, and rewards...or lack thereof (*Heb. 9: 27-28; see also 1 Cor. 4:3-5*). The intent of the heart will be revealed here. How wonderful it will be to hear God say, "Well done thy good and faithful servant!"

Maybe that is why New Testament writers always have such an emphasis on loving your enemies and being humble. Peter says:

"Finally, all of you, live in harmony with one another; be sympathetic, love as brothers, be compassionate and humble. Do not repay evil with evil or insult with insult, but with blessing, because to this you were called so that you may inherit a blessing.

For, 'Whoever would love life and see good days must keep his tongue from evil and his lips from deceitful speech. He must turn from evil and do good; he must seek peace and pursue it. For the eyes of the Lord are on the righteous and his ears are attentive to their prayer, but the face of the Lord is against those who do evil.'" (1 Peter 3:8-12)

"Above all, love each other deeply, because love covers over a multitude of sins" (1 Peter 4:8)

Let us make another very important point here. The love of God is no small thing. We feel it is THE most important attribute of a very powerful, awesome God. To view God otherwise is to mock His very essence. As believers, to look at God as the "Old man upstairs just waiting to smash us to smithereens with His correction rod of Righteousness" because we are sinners, is a lie designed and propagated by the enemy to make you fear God in the wrong way. Let's turn from the negative to the positive!

"And let us not grow weary while doing good, for in due season we shall reap if we do not lose heart. Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all, especially to those who are of the household of faith." (Gal. 6:9)

In conclusion, don't let the image of yourself and of God be clouded over with fear, doubt and accusations. Let your heart be forever and firmly established in faith and love, because of Yeshua and His great love shown to us!

Are you in the desert? Please don't look at it as punishment. Look at it from the perspective of *opportunity!* It all starts here. God is here. Take off your shoes...it is holy ground. He wants to meet with you face-to-face, heart-to-heart, and transform you into His image. What a great opportunity to hear God whisper to you, "*I love you!*"

-----✕-----

Notes:

1. Wikipedia, www.wikipedia.com topic: Satan
2. Strong's Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible / On Line Version (and which will be listed from here on with its corresponding Concordance number and definitions throughout.) <http://www.biblestudytools.com/concordances/strong-s-exhaustive-concordance/>
3. Vine's Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words (On-Line Version) <http://studybible.info/vines>
4. BibleGateway.com, Topical subject: Fear of God
5. Baker's Evangelical Dictionary of Biblical Theology. Edited by Walter A. Elwell. Copyright © 1996 by Walter A. Elwell. Published by Baker Books, a division of Baker Book House Company, PO Box 6287, Grand Rapids, Michigan 49516-6287. All rights reserved. Used by permission.
6. Web Bible Encyclopedia, Christian Answers.net
7. Hebrew for Christians, John J. Parsons, http://www.hebrew4christians.net/Names_of_G-d/El/el.html; see also Torah 101, <http://www.mechon-mamre.org/jewfaq/qorbanot.htm>
8. "Transformed Christians" or "What Have You Done Lately?" Romans 12:1,2 by C.W. Powell June 26, 2005

Chapter 6

Letting Go of Religion

OK, picture this...a road trip.

We're just meandering throughout the countryside looking for interesting stops and points of interest throughout the area. The desert life has made us long to get out of the house and go see some of God's handiwork all around us. We're just taking our time with no set itinerary or deadlines and drinking in the beauty of God's creation, and admiring the rustic homesteads of pioneers and settlers of eras gone by.

Often, even in the most remote locations, we come upon churches of all sorts and sizes dotted throughout the countryside. All of the churches seem to beam with high hopes of attracting worshipers to come and join them in their activities and social events.

However, a lesson seems to scream out at us as we would see all of these churches in some of the oddest locations. Sometimes we would see 3 or 4 churches within a few feet from each other, even in back woods and out of the way places.

Once again the desert is allowing our spirit to focus our attention on something we need to learn. It's an issue of letting go of something that is ingrained from our cultural perspective. It's an issue that confuses Godly things with tradition. It is a cultural icon that blurs the lines of systematic devotion and premeditated worship.

It's called Religion.

As most of us do while searching for answers, Hilda and I already were struggling with some church related issues that seemed to help push us into the desert. The desert life training started honing in on some familiar rituals, as we began to discuss some of the oddities we were seeing.

Please forgive us if this seems to be a harsh judgment of the institutional church. It is not meant to be. The Holy Spirit is using our negative church experience to teach us Biblical principles that seem to have been lost in our modern day houses of worship. Our prayer is that this examination of modern church practices will help us

assemble together in the light of God's love, and propel us to serve Him with all our hearts, souls and minds...and in humility, rather than call for a heated debate of inquisition as to who actually walks in the ways of true devotion.

Tradition and Culture

As we kept sighting churches at almost every crossroad, we found ourselves empathizing with the church's high hopes and aspirations. We were sure many of the churches had begun with all of the right reasons and had lofty goals of worshipping God in truth and deed. But as our experience has often taught us, even with the best intentions many churches fall helplessly into the trap of indifference and social clicks, forgetting their first love and surrounding themselves with the traditions and cultural norms of those who have taught from the traditions and institutions of men.

One wrong direction that cultural tradition may lead a church is in the territory of legalism. It is possible that when legalism creeps in, members would find themselves worshiping in guilt and fear. Sermons would abound from the pulpit claiming that we could not be a Christian unless we sacrificed all of our time to the church, gave every penny we had to the church coffers, and faithfully upheld every doctrine that the church proclaimed as the complete truth of God.

The guilt trips pouring from the Sunday School lessons and sermons can wrap around our heart like a vise. As we begin to realize that we cannot keep up with the demands made on us by rules and regulations, the guilt chokes out any life left in our spiritual being. Because of the letter of the law, God is pictured as a stern judge waiting to punish anyone who would dare step out of line with church doctrine.

Another wrong direction culture and tradition may lead a church could be into the realm of liberalism. Sermons would flow from the pulpit about the inherent goodness of man, political awareness, and charitable causes. God is a universal meaning and an

allegorical figure, not a personal being with intense love for His children.

Modern Church can become more of a social gathering rather than a house of worship—a who's who pictorial of earthly society and culture cloaked under the guise of Christianity. Finding a personal relationship with God is far from the ebb and flow of this normal assembly.

These types of traditional values of the church can end up pushing aside the true meaning of worship. Religion will lift its ugly head and cause many who may be seeking a profound personal relationship with Christ to walk away from the fellowship—possibly ushering them into a lonely desert of dejection—groping with their fears, questions and pain.

Our Personal Disappointments

It seemed the desert forced us to ask some very tough questions about ourselves and our beloved church traditions and where it fits into the Kingdom of God.

Questions such as: “What could turn a fellow believer away from the traditional church and herd him into the colorless pasture of indifference?” “Why is it that the very thing that most believers need in a fellowship is not found in most churches that dot the countryside and street corners of today?” “What happened to the real intent of the church?” “What caused the church to veer from the original course as set forth in Acts?” “What makes a church stray from the principles of loving God with all their heart and soul, serving with humility, and caring for the needs of others?”

It isn't easy for us to describe our feelings and disappointments of the institutional church. We must point out this is a painful recounting of our experiences. For we grew up in every aspect of the local church with all of its programs, doctrines, and traditions. . . only to discover that all of the man-made order was a far cry from the original intent of God concerning the early church and fellowship of believers. We trust that in sharing our experience, it is

not to criticize and make accusations of the organizations we grew to love, but later abandoned. It is very prayerfully shared to help us discover ways we can improve our relationships with Jesus first, then with others and ourselves within the true *ekklesia*, or “assembly” of the Body of Christ. The church is the body of believers, not the building in which we meet. Ephesians 4:1-16 states we must strive for unity in the Body of Christ. To do so means that we must humble ourselves and forbear one another in love, not slandering or talking down the good intentions of the institutional church—but building one another up in love and spurring our hearts to accomplishing good works for the Kingdom.

We will do our upmost to stay positive. To be honest, what we abhor mostly is organized *religion*. It serves no purpose other than to glorify man in his pursuance of God. Most of what we share here are the experiences we have gone through in fighting religion; and by sharing them, hopefully we can find common ground to stand together, to heal, and to move forward in proclaiming the Kingdom of God. Lord willing we will do this through the bond of peace, and forbearing one another in love.

The Most Important Principles of the Kingdom

Love God with all your heart, mind, and soul; love your neighbor as yourself; and serve with humility. That is probably the BEST starting place for any Christian ministry—especially within the local assembly. These principles are what Jesus claims are the most important in the Kingdom of God. (*Mk 12: 29-31; Mt. 18:4*)

There are all kinds of Christian denominations, methodologies, and approaches to try and convey the love of God to a lost world. But somehow in all the programs, doctrinal statements, manuals and Sunday schools those important commandments and that essential starting place seem to get lost in the sea of what a (so-called) successful path of the church should be. We have found that religion is a reprehensible thing that tends to grow up around us and choke out the love and fellowship of believers.

You may remember the joke about the shipwrecked mate found on the deserted island all by himself. When his rescuers found him, they also found three buildings. When asked what the buildings were for he said, “One is my house and the other is my place of worship.” The rescuers then asked, “Well, what is the third building for?” And the shipwrecked mate said, “Oh, that was my first church, but I got mad and left—and built another one!”

That joke pretty much says a lot about the state of the organized church today and why there are so many local churches here in America—almost one on every corner—even of the same denomination. We know we can’t lump every church in the same category, nor can one say every church has these same kinds of problems. But certainly love and humility should be one of the prime ingredients for any church to strive for, in order to stay together and keep itself on track with God’s agenda.

Another underlying and dastardly theme also seems to permeate the vast majority of organized religion and ministries in the western world. It’s an attitude which splits and fragments the Body into a million different compartments and organizations. It’s called *competition*, and its roots are based in *power struggles*.

You know what we’re getting at: competition for bigger and better things. It can be competition for members, competition of position, competition of titles, competition of “signs and wonders”, competition of spirituality, competitions of just being better or best!! Power struggles can boil down to base human nature at its worst!

We are not saying that striving to be the best that you can be for God’s Kingdom is wrong—but striving to be better than another in the pure sense of competition, and battling over who gets to be in control is a shadowy path that may lead anyone into some subtle evil practices.

A Study in James

Hilda’s father, Oscar Marshall, a preacher who passed away into the presence of the Lord in early 2005, said many times that the

best book in the Bible to study for daily living was James. He called it the "grounding" book. He would say that believers, as well as the organized church would do well to practice the principles set forth in the book.

Oscar was not a seminary scholar, nor a man of wealth and fame. He was a humble "back-woods" preacher who loved God and served with humility. He was a man who was taught by the Holy Spirit and learned many lessons in life *the hard way*.

He wrote of great frustration within the local churches he pastored, because of what he called "infiltrators" of the world among the brethren. He was known to quote an old saying, "When God calls one to preach, the Devil calls two!" Any minister of the gospel will tell you that statement rings true in just about any church.

James 3:16 says, "For where you have ENVY and SELFISH AMBITION, there you find disorder and every evil practice."

This also reminds me of a passage in Mark 10 where James and John asked Jesus if they could be on his right and left in glory. Jesus said it wasn't right for them to ask. The other 10 disciples became angry and indignant with the two, so Jesus had to call a staff meeting and set the record straight as to what it means to strive for greatness in the Kingdom of God.

He said *in order to be first, you had to be last*. You had to *strive to be the servant or slave of all*. Wow! What a difference this would make in the church body today to not have so much selfish ambition and envy! What a place of comfort and love it would be in the church to not have political jockeying for position in the power ladder of achievement, and consequently falling into what James calls "*the pollution of the world!*"

The book of James has much to say about daily living that seems to be lacking in the organized church and the body of believers. In our opinion, what James writes is very much anti-religious, and was written to correct the faults of the church of the day.

In chapter 2, verse 27 it says that "*Religion that God our Father accepts as faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows*

in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world.” It then goes on to talk about favoritism, showing your faith through your deeds, taming the tongue, humility, wisdom, boasting, rich oppressors, patience and the prayer of faith. We are sure James writes with high hopes of strengthening and encouraging the body.

We write with the same high hope, asking God to continue to filter out the “pollution of world” among the pilgrims wandering the desert solace.

The Pollution of the World

Let’s first try and explain what we think the “pollution of the world” really is in light of this reference to the organized church, and why many believers find themselves being pushed into the desert life.

Many times you see in a particular denomination or assembly a set of doctrinal statements and clarifications about how a church should conduct its services, and in many cases, even how a believer should believe and live.

Although this may seem good in most local circumstances, it is not by any means an all-inclusive way that should be forced on every church, believer or organization of how they should conduct their life and affairs. *This forced conformity is religion in its purest state.*

In almost every case, there are grey area issues and opinions that are taught as if they were coming from the very mouth of God. Usually there are certain scripture references misquoted and taken out of exegetical and historical context¹. Cultural norms and adapted pagan practices are taught as absolutes within the gray areas of personal convictions. These church dogmas are forcefully pounded into our psyche by strong pastoral personalities, who in their prominent, hierarchy position proclaim themselves as the spiritual guide of the congregation.

Every mature believer already knows what we’re talking about.

When someone disagrees with a “church” teaching, they may go through some difficult soul searching, guilt, and uneasiness about how they should then live in light of this disagreement, and as to what their own personal convictions should be. It is especially difficult when it directly contradicts what God has been revealing in one’s own personal walk with the Lord.

They may end up speaking out (sometimes with devastating results), change churches (only to find more of the same kind of rhetoric), or even quit going to any kind of fellowship altogether because of confusion or frustration. Eventually they may find themselves wandering in the wilderness looking for answers.

The desert screams for an answer to the question of “why the organization that is supposed to represent God pushes true seekers of God away!”

It seems to us that in most cases when someone speaks out against a denominational stand, a church covenant, or even a pastor’s opinion—that person is sometimes ostracized, ridiculed and passed under the eye of the “spiritual scrutiny committee” and found to be not walking with God, and “*polluted with the ways of the world*”.

The usual rhetoric is that he “doesn’t understand good Biblical doctrine”; he’s “a fence straddler”; or he’s even a “double-minded carnal man”. While in our humble opinion being “*polluted in the ways of the world*” as taught in the book of James, refers to showing favoritism; all talk, and no walk; slander; pride; lack of wisdom; boasting; oppression (which in this case boils down to control); lack of patience; and lack of prayer.

These “*polluted ways of the world*” seem to be the very things the institution puffs itself up with to defend its rules and regulations, condemning anyone else for questioning their traditional practices.

Many times, if we truly want to hear from God alone and learn of His ways, it may be necessary to separate ourselves from religious institutions and organizations that lord over our personal convictions; in order that we may be able to clearly hear and discern the truth and the will of God in our own hearts and lives.

Contrary to popular belief about our denominations, churches and pastors—these organizations and leaders are not the panacea by which we are to come near to God and learn of Him. We have gotten into the bad habit of only receiving the things of God through our memberships, pastors, and denominational guidelines instead of individually sitting at the feet of Yeshua and learning directly from Him and the Holy Spirit. We have long been led astray by well-meaning church constitutions and doctrinal slants in which the leaders of these movements and causes have routinely taught what they have been taught from the learning institutions of men and tradition.

The Issue of Pride

Pride is an issue we have found throughout church history, even beginning with the disciples. Here is an issue we ALL struggle to keep under control. Pride can do devastating things to any believer in any ministry. In Luke 9:46-56, the disciples James and John were arguing amongst themselves who would be the greatest. Jesus set that straight by saying they had to be humble and strive to be the least among them.

They also discovered another man healing in the name of Christ who was not part of their main group. Then, they came across a group that would not accept them for who they were. The disciples wanted the man who was healing in the name of Christ, but not part of their group, to stop doing what he was doing. They even asked Jesus if they could call down fire from heaven and burn into a crisp all the ones that would not accept them. (How dare they not give them their due!)

But Jesus rebuked them and told the disciples to leave the others alone. James and John had to be corrected by Yeshua and learn by example as to what was the right way to do things.

Really though, when it comes right down to the basics, it seems they were just doing what comes naturally—following their traditions of old, and the norms for that time in the tradition of the Kings.

Can we really blame them? Isn't this what all of us find in our own hearts: ambitions to be THE official spokesman for God. Do we not feel that our view is the correct one? Who wouldn't want to call down fire from heaven, like Elijah of old, against all those who don't believe in our way of doing things for God?

The organized religious rulers of Jesus' day and the Christian church throughout the ages have long persecuted anyone who would dare challenge their viewpoint or authority. They would call it blasphemy (take a look at Acts 6: 8ff). Many still practice that today, even among well meaning Christian leaders, pastors, elders and churches. Just take a look at all of the internet sites that claim they have the truth of God, and then read what they say about those outside of their doctrinal stands. It' gets real ugly.

It's a hard thing to do, to swallow your pride and admit you don't know everything, and also allow the freedom in Christ to permeate your fellowship with other believers that may not see eye to eye with your viewpoint. Instead of standing on the common, rock solid ground of *Yeshua haMeshiach* as the head of the church and Lord of all, we love to draw lines in the sand about religious cultural values and say vicious things about those who don't agree with us.

Stuffing God in a Box

In our view, the disheartening way any organization, religion, or individual tries to stuff "God in a Box" is nothing more than a vain attempt to tie up every loose end, and to put an end to "gray area" controversies² and opinions surrounding our limited and sometimes pathetic view of God. This attempt to stuff God into a personal worldview will usually find itself standing on pride, boasting, and the wisdom of men.

It is safe to say we are all guilty of this. We all think we have a better intellectual opinion and worldview. We all think we have the best experience, intelligence, knowledge and know how of the things of God. Most exegetical and doctrinal arguments will boil down to one or the other thinking we know God better than the next person.

Do we not feel sometimes that we are God's favorite? We'll even go as far to say, "The way I'm doing it has always worked; it feels right; so it must be the right way!" "If anything hasn't passed the test of tradition, it's heresy!" But what does this point to? Is it lifting up Christ? Is it glorifying to God? Or does it lift up man?

James 3:2 says "*We all stumble in many ways.*" That is to say we are flawed. No one is perfect and that includes his or her personal view of God. And like James and John, we must all be taught the right way to serve God—with love and humility.

The desert calls us to examine our own personal viewpoint about God and the lifting up of ourselves above God. The Holy Spirit uses the dry barren time to lay these issues out in the open and draw up a new perspective for us about God—about who He is and what we are. Love, humbleness, and acceptance of others should be foremost in our thinking when dealing with gray area controversies and issues. Where we draw the line in our cultural sand lot is not that important in eternity, as most make it out to be. We should not need to have someone else tell us how we should live. *What is important is that we do what God tells us to do! We need to live as He tells us to live! We need to hear from God Himself, as to what pleases Him!*

As for our own "flawed viewpoint", Hilda and I like to think that God can reveal himself to someone in one specific way and turn around and reveal himself to another in an entirely different way. Today, God deals with us as individuals, not necessarily in a collective, ethical and cultural environment as He did in the Old Covenant.

This seems to be very scriptural. He never dealt with anyone written about in the Bible exactly the same way. Many Christian authors also express this.³ Although God never changes and is the same yesterday, today, and forever—how He deals with us individually can be very different than our neighbors, friends and spouses—much less from church to church. We are not cookie-cutter robots running around with plastic smiles and tracts that explain how every small step should be done in correct order, stamped with the approval of our exalted leaders and institutions!

* * * * *

One thing we have discovered and as many spiritual guides will tell you, a desert time is often needed to help you focus on what God is revealing to you about Himself. It filters out the noise and clutter of a stressful life, and the persistent hammering of local, traditional, and cultural norms.

We like the illustration that has circulated many years about how amusing it must be to God, for man to try and interpret and describe God.

For example, if you were to take four blind men and tell them to describe an elephant when they have never seen an elephant, you would get four different opinions as to what the elephant really is, and what it may look like. Even give them a chance to feel, hear, smell, and talk to the elephant—and you would still get four different opinions as to what the elephant really is. Add to that a collection of stories that describe how the elephant behaved and reacted out among the wild...still four different opinions about the elephant. Imagine if the elephant could talk and tell the men what he was...four different opinions.

Imagine one discovering the front of the elephant with its long snout and huge tusks. What a story he could describe as to what an elephant is. Imagine another feeling the side of the elephant with its long and strong legs reaching up to what may seem like an eternity.

OK, the illustration breaks down after a while, but we think you understand what we're getting at here. Even after long discussions amongst each other, there would still be four different opinions of what the elephant must be, because they all experienced different things when they interacted with it. The only way we could get exactly the same description is if they were to memorize given instructions written by a committee or one man. (Don't get me started about committees!)

Some will say that the Bible is that written instruction and this is true. But how the living Word reacts among our different cultures, and how God chooses to reveal different things to us through this living Word in our own worldview is very much indeed a personal

thing, within a personal relationship. *Certain doctrinal absolutes do not change, but we are talking about gray areas here in this context.*

As many will testify, many spiritual leaders, teachers and pastors start out on-fire and ready to take on the world, only to be dashed against the rocks of life and traditions that don't allow for thinking outside the box or encourage enthusiasm for things outside their cultural and denominational norms. The joy and creativity is jerked out from underneath them. Religion snuffs out the spark of divinity and hides it under a bushel.

The faithful may try to be submissive, and ask God for forgiveness in their pride, and strive to do things that are acceptable to the church and institution, only to find they are slipping into the depths of conformity, control, and despair.

This is a disheartening process that slowly undermines and eats at the very joy one has found in serving God. The freedom that was so eagerly expressed in finding Christ as their Savior and gathering within the fellowship of the believers slowly fades into the arid sands of traditional religion.

All of this is not to say we have all the answers. We don't. That is something we really want to shout from the rooftops to be understood. And let us also say this: for anyone to say that if he or she are to be pastors, teachers, preachers, or a church; and they must have all the answers of grey area issues neatly spelled out and on paper, ready to defend upon the slightest hint of attack—they will find themselves on a shaky, shallow foundation of wisdom that does not come from God—but man. We think James spells this out.

What we want to emphasize is that love and humbleness usually do not find its way into the issue from traditional and cultural viewpoints. Pride and arrogance usually do. Need we say more?

Also, please understand that here we are not talking about defending our faith and having answers as to the authority of God's Word and His absolutes in guiding us in moral issues. Although we are to be ready for an answer to those who ask about the hope that is within us, that does not mean we need to have strict answers to every controversial viewpoint that arises in the church. Most of us have been taught from such a narrow view of God all our lives that we fail

to see outside this box. We are so afraid of God running around in seemingly “wild abandonment” that we bind Him up with our theological discourses and forbid anyone else of discovering a new facet of God’s character and behavior that doesn’t fit into our personal worldview.

God is not one to be bound, tamed, or explained away by man’s puny intelligence. God transcends all cultures, traditions, boundaries, opinions and laws. He is not captured and put on display by a certain temple ritual, traditional form of worship, or by a popular version of the latest book or worship song. And be it far from us to claim to have the ultimate truth in every facet concerning God and the way He chooses to work with anybody or anything!

We are not saying that a church gathering should not have a set rules and a general statement of faith regarding the collective view of God and man. Anything organized cannot function without these things. **HOWEVER**, in our own revelations from God, we have painfully seen that when the emphasis is put on a particular organization’s way of doing things, a particular slant on the doctrines of faith, or a particular way of worship—*most likely* the slippery slide down into what James calls the pollution of the world has begun.

The words start getting sharper with those who would disagree. The view gets narrow and puffed up. Pride lifts its ugly head. Proclamations trumpet that they have the truth for everybody. In the cloak of shepherding, control becomes the end goal—not freedom in Christ. The wolf enters in sheep’s clothing. Wisdom is stuffed into a small hat of “one size fits all”. Religion trumps God and the fat lady sings the closing hymn, as the faithful bow to the golden calf and doctrines of men

We also want to be careful to note here that in no way are we questioning or undermining anything about the fundamentals of the Christian faith or the absolutes of God. Those things as revealed in His Word and in our hearts by the Holy Spirit will stand eternal. The desert has helped us nail down any questions or doubts we may have ever entertained.

What we question is the manner in which eternal absolutes are being taught. Being force-fed a traditional doctrine or cultural life

style is not the answer. We are not the Holy Spirit; although we think sometimes we are by the way we lead and teach.

One more thing that should be mentioned is that one should be sure to use caution to not overstep principles and guidelines given to us in scripture that help us in the revelation of our self and God.

“Because our hearts have strayed so far from home, He’s given us the Law as sort of a handrail to help us back from the precipice. But the goal of Christian discipleship is the transformed heart; we move from a boy who needs the Law to the man who is able to live by the Spirit of the Law. ‘My counsel is this: Live freely, animated and motivated by God’s Spirit. Then you won’t feed the compulsions of selfishness...legalism is helpless in bringing this about, it only gets in the way.’” (Gal. 5:16, 23 The Message)⁴

The Practice of Shooting our Wounded

Another sour spot that we have experienced in the institutional religious church that also pushes many believers away is in the area of failure. Whether it is dealing within legalism or spirituality, sometimes the general consensus in the organized church is to look down on people and shun the ones who may have fallen in their walk with *Yeshua*. Dr. Larry Crabb, a psychologist at Colorado Christian University has indicated that the church should be “*The Safest Place on Earth*”. He writes,

“Rather than a place for people to display their goodness and hide their failures in fear of censure, the church should be open, supportive, and compassionate in dealing with our weaknesses.” “In such a place, there is no expectation that people have arrived at some level of perfection: it’s a place where people journey [together] toward God.”⁵

Please don't take us wrong! *There may be some bright spots in today's organized "churches" where God's love is the focal point of the body;* but sadly these assemblies are few, and in most churches and Christian ministries that can be found on every street corner, this kind of attitude is lacking.

The questions that surface from our experiences with organized religion and the resultant push into the desert ultimately have helped us see a new side of our relationship with God, and how He has dealt with man throughout history. That realization is also bringing us to a new found freshness in our relationship with other believers—especially away from the institutional church and religion!

We long to proclaim that Christ wants his bride to be adorned in love. We want the world to know that God is a God of love—not an old grandfather figure who is constantly ticked off at us because we can't follow some man-made rules and regulations.

We want to wave the flags of warning of how much the organized, institutional church, as well as many believers serving as lay-workers, pastors and spiritual leaders have failed in many ways to do the very things that God ordained the Body of believers to do. That is to *love God with all your heart, mind and soul. Love your neighbor as yourself. And serve each other with humility.*

What would happen if all of us, as believers, were suddenly infused with real love from God and humility to serve? What if we threw open our arms and accepted each other with our warped, limited views, without any kind of judgment?

Why can't we therefore lift each other up in love?

What if we were to teach that everything we do, everything that happens to us, all things that were created—large and small were not about us and for us—but about God. What would happen if we were to live as if nothing we do is for ourselves—but for God and His Kingdom?

If God was absolutely first in all things that we do, and the organized church could come together in unity . . . what would really happen to the world's view of Christianity? Think of what a powerful force it could be that would rise up and reach out in love to a lost and dying world!

-----✘-----

Notes:

1. *A contextual hermeneutical (the method of interpretation) controversy may arise between culturally and traditionally different denominations and/or organizations. There are hundreds of hermeneutical interpretive philosophies and it is generally understood that interpretation and exegesis of Scripture will rely heavily upon historical and cultural bias. It is safe to say that Hilda and I have begun to rely on the Spirit to lead us into all truth as He illumines a particular passage for our benefit. Our knowledge does not trump God. We will not limit God to any form of traditional Theology, human knowledge, or doctrine of men.*

Issues in Hermeneutics by Prof. Herman C.

Hanko (http://www.prca.org/articles/issues_in_hermeneutics.html)

biblicalhermeneutics.net (<http://www.biblicalhermeneutics.net>) Offers links to more than 300 websites/texts relating to Biblical hermeneutics

2. "Gray Area" controversies are what we would classify as lifestyles and practices not necessarily spelled out for us in Scripture. These practices may be perfectly acceptable in some cultures, but in others it may cause some kind of controversy as to the legality of the issue according to the local traditional culture. When scripture is not clear as to the "rule of conduct" in a specified case, culture and tradition usually play a large part in the determination of the legality of the issue. This is not uncommon in any part of the organized church, and may cause emotional dissention among believers who disagree with traditional interpretation. Such traditional and cultural issues are simmering among believers and tearing down the unity of the Body of Christ and limiting its effectiveness as an instrument of God.

* "... issues dealing with Christian freedom, things that fall in the "gray" area. What entertainment is acceptable? What kind of music is okay? What can a Christian do or not do on Sunday? What about what you wear, what you eat and drink, or how you spend your free time, does the Bible address those things? Some would say, "No, the Bible doesn't address them. Do what you want to do you're free in Christ!" While it is true that the Bible doesn't specifically list every possible decision you'll face in life, it does address all choices with principles that govern Christian freedom."

The Only Source of Wisdom by: John MacArthur

3. Oswald Chambers, "My Utmost for His Highest". See also John Eldredge's book, "Wild at Heart"
4. Wild at Heart, Discovering the Secret of a Man's Soul. John Eldredge, Thomas Nelson Books, Nashville, TN ©2001
5. It's Not About Me, Rescue from the Life We Thought Would Make Us Happy. Max Lucado, Integrity Publishers, Nashville, TN ©2004
6. The Safest Place on Earth, Larry Crabb, PH.D., Word Publishing, Nashville, TN ©1999

Chapter 7

Letting go in Worship

Is there a problem here?

You may have been in the desert so long you need some refreshing wind—a drink of the eternal Water of Life; a time to dwell in the cleft of the Almighty and feel the awesome assurance of His touch or hear the comfort of His voice. You need the streams in the desert that quench one's thirst and invigorate one to continue on with the journey.

The Spirit is whispering to us that it's time to worship. But how does one honestly go about worshipping after having endured the arid sands of the barren desert? Where does one find this oasis of hope after coming out of the programmed, performance based attempts at conjuring up the presence of God? How does one really get to the Throne Room? Why should one even try after the apathetical disappointments of past experiences and the divisiveness that seems to explode upon impact with those that are seekers of the core of true worship, and those that hold on to their cultural and familiar traditions?

The real question raised here is, "What is true worship?" It seems to us that the mainstream corporate church seems to have lost touch with the practice of real worship, and has slipped into a type of spectator sport in the order of service, with a small splash of entertainment to keep the people interested and in the pews (along with their tithes that support the enormous salaries that are required to keep talented staff). What we are looking for is something a little more genuine.

So, questions start to pop up. "Is real worship a sacrificial ritual...as in the Old Testament Covenant?" "Is it a tried and true recipe of organized choruses and methodology that lead us into the throne room of God?" "Is it a process?" "Is it a routine—a system?" "Is it just being in the presence of God, or does a certain attitude or emotion get us there?"

Our experience teaches that one of the reasons you may have found yourself wandering in the desert in the first place, might have something to do with the “worship” experience that is forced upon us in the common, Christian religious community. You may be like us and tired of the “Hokey-Pokey” type of worship that is encouraged in almost every modern church service. You know what I mean:

You raise your right hand up,
You move your left hand out,
You flail your arms all around ‘ya
Then you shake ‘em all about.
You do the Hokey-Pokey
And you stand and sing and shout;
That’s what it’s all about.
(Amen...)

OK, maybe it’s just us. And please forgive us if we seem too flippant. But hear what we are saying. We have found that there are many among us who genuinely *thirst* for more—more of God—not a routine! We long for true worship. We need deep and passionate corporate communion with the Almighty. Most corporate worship today seems lukewarm and predictable. Even with the best of intentions, it feels like a ritual. Because of time restraints, denominational guidelines, influential preferences, and dominant personalities, worship has evolved into an untamable animal of tradition coupled with a methodological system of performance that we have been told that if we follow, we are worshipping God.

Our parched spirit cries out that we have missed the mark! We have wandered too far off the track! We have either entered into the mirage of cultural bias and traditional misunderstanding or embraced the world’s standard of performance and technology as the panacea of true worship! So we search for a real oasis of hope. We attend seminars and pray for a thirst-quenching encounter with the Lord. We find that what’s out there are the bitter waters of *Marah* (*Exodus 15:22-27*).

So how do we pull the stick out of the mud and make the waters sweet again?

Maybe it's found in the seminar where they present the "worship experience" down to an exact science? Where they actually give you a formula calculated to the minute of when the Spirit should take over and His overwhelming presence should dominate. The recipe includes so many "up" songs contrasted with "slower" songs that tug at the heart strings and encourage us to "feel" God's presence. According to the promoters, this is a tested psychological approach that will work in almost any situation or setting!

To tell you the truth, it seems more like *witchcraft* than worship!

Hmmmm. Maybe we should look elsewhere. This feels like Christian commercialism trying to box up the Holy Spirit and present it in such a way so all can partake of the "milk-drenched, crunchy goodness" of the latest mass-produced, Holy Spirit endorsed product.

As we examine most evangelical services, it tends to be the same old pattern of complacency. The order of worship is predictable service after service: two fast paced songs, then announcements and greetings. Then, it may be followed by prayer and offering, special music, then continued slower worship songs, which is supposed to usher us into a quiet, reflective time. It may also seem to some of the weary and wounded sojourners that this may be a programmed ploy so the pastor can infuse us with his latest monologue tongue-lashing and personal insights into God's judgments. It's like we're stuck in the eternal clock of traditional rituals. So much so, you could set your watch to it!

Is this the fault of the Pastor or the Worship Leader? Or does the shoulder of blame lie with the individual worshiper? Is it because we are not open to the Spirit's "anointed"? Or are we just dead to the Holy Spirit's "chosen method" of ushering us into the Holy of Holies? Then again, maybe we're just confused and don't really understand the situation and what worship really is.

But why do we feel like it's the "same-ole—same-ole serving of dry baby food, with a splash of milk on the side!" "Where's the beef!?" "What is it that we—as mere mortals—keep on doing that makes worship such a charade?" "Isn't worship supposed to focus us on God?" "Does it always have to involve music?" "Does

worship mean we are forced to listen to a prepared study or a one-way delivery of a sermon dealing with spiritual things?” “Why are we so focused on time issues, order of service, stylistic entertainment value, and our *appearance* before others in worship?” “Why do we feel that this part of organized Christianity is so far off base?”

“What’s wrong here?”

For some Christians this perplexing issue is NOT a problem at all. They are very content and satisfied with how things are and don’t want to change anything. To others that is the very heart of the problem. We know there are some churches out there that really want to do things different and earnestly want to lead their congregation into true worship, but are at a loss as to how to go about it, always facing controversial issues. Besides not knowing how to change things appropriately, sometimes it is just too hard to swim against the tide of complacency, cultural bias, and tradition. One may feel like they are being “assimilated” into the program and “resistance is futile!”

These kinds of questions continue to rage in the desert sojourner, and “pet answers” are just not going to suffice! The bitter taste of the desert has once again forced us into another examination of what is truth. So it’s time to look at the “instruction book” and ask God for some good clues as to what one needs to know, and maybe what one needs to do, or not do, in order to help usher our spirits into the Holy of Holies with the “sweetness” of praise and worship.

Beginning to Understand Worship

Boy! Talk about a can of worms!! Now here’s a subject where even the most experienced and mature Christians dare not tread. As they say: “Don’t rock the boat!” “Don’t go against tradition!” “You mess with the bull, you get the horn!”

Where in the world do you begin? Do you throw out all your valuable knowledge and experience and solely base it on whatever Old Covenant Biblical records you can find? Do you throw in a mixture of the latest tried and true programs with new (or old)

contemporary movements to try and spark true worship? Does one abandon one's own cultural and traditional bias and seek a new (or old) philosophy to transform their spiritual outlook? Does the Bible even address a lot of these issues?

Are we asking too many questions??????

Well...to get started, let's once again start with what we DO know. Our Bible is the standard and guideline for things we need to know in our Christian journey. It doesn't spell out every situation or decision we need to make, but it does give us multiple clues as to which principle is best for us to pursue in different scenarios. The Holy Spirit should also be our guide as to when and where we are to go into worship. Let's just say that *by faith*, the Bible is our benchmark. And the Holy Spirit uses this as our guide. If it doesn't measure up here, then chances are we may be using the wrong yardstick!

Spiritual Worship

Hilda and I believe that the first thing we need to remember is that God is Spirit and deals with us in the Spiritual. That's not to say that God *only* deals with us in the spiritual, but for the sake of our argument here, He does for the most part. God is Spirit. The verse we like so much in John spells it out just right:

*"Yet a time is coming and has now come when the **true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth**, for they are the kind of worshipers the Father seeks. God is spirit, and his worshipers must worship in spirit and in truth." John 4: 23-24*

There is a premise here that many evangelical Christians that have backgrounds with the conservative side of Christianity tend to avoid like the plague: *The spiritual side of the Christian walk and worship*. Charismatic and Pentecostal Christians have long practiced spiritual awareness and worship; whereas many conservative traditionalists are hard pressed to catch up. For some odd reason in

some circles, the very core of God is often shunned and ignored as being “too experiential or emotional”, or as we’ve heard some say, “spooky”! Unfortunately, spiritual worship in this setting is often portrayed as cultish, even demonized and pushed to the point of *fear* of having anything that resembles spiritual awareness. To some, even the mention of the Holy Spirit sends trembling shivers of apprehension that one may be sliding downward into devil-worship. It’s sad, but it’s a reasonable observation.

However, we must remember that if we want to be true worshipers...we must approach God in Spirit and in Truth. Cast aside the fear for a moment and consider this: there should be no fear of the spiritual side of Biblical Christianity. For God said that He will accomplish all things, “...*not by might, not by power, but BY MY SPIRIT*”. (Zechariah 4). In Joel 2: 28-29 The Lord says: “*And afterward, I will pour out my Spirit on all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy, your old men will dream dreams, your young men will see visions.*” This sounds pretty exciting! What a privilege to have God’s Spirit in us—as part of us—as an advocate for us before God!

Look how the Spirit gives us life and understanding:

But it is the spirit [Or Spirit; also in verse 18] in a man, the breath of the Almighty, that gives him understanding. (Job 32:8)

⁹You, however, are controlled not by the sinful nature but by the Spirit, if the Spirit of God lives in you. And if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, he does not belong to Christ. ¹⁰But if Christ is in you, your body is dead because of sin, yet your spirit is alive because of righteousness. ¹¹And if the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead is living in you, he who raised Christ from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through his Spirit, who lives in you. (Romans 8: 9-11)

Look how the Holy Spirit intercedes for us:

²⁶In the same way, the Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groans that words cannot express. ²⁷And he who searches our hearts knows the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints in accordance with God's will. (Romans 8: 26-27)

Look at the different names of the Holy Spirit and how they spell out the awesome Truth of who He is, and what He means to us:

*Counselor;
Comforter;
Baptizer;
Advocate;
Strengtheners;
Sanctifier;
Spirit of Christ (not the same as the spirit of Christ);
Seven-Fold Spirit (Rev.);
Spirit of Truth;
Spirit of Grace;
Spirit of Mercy;
Spirit of God;
Spirit of Holiness;
Spirit of Life.
Symbolized in OT and NT by:
(1) breath or wind;
(2) fire;
(3) water;
(4) oil;
(5) light;
(6) a dove.¹*

Please, please, please...don't be afraid of experiencing or worshipping in the Holy Spirit!

Now on the flip side, we must use *caution* as to what influences our spiritual side, for “*even the Devil can appear as an angel of light.*”

“The Spirit clearly says that in later times some will abandon the faith and follow deceiving spirits and things taught by demons. Such teachings come through hypocritical liars, whose consciences have been seared as with a hot iron.” (1 Tim.4: 1-2)

With the teaching principles of TRUTH in Scripture, and with the guidance of the Holy Spirit who resides in us to guide, teach, and comfort us—the Truth will help us avoid these pitfalls (2 Tim 3:15-17; see also John 16:13). The more we are well versed in God’s Word, (the yardstick, if you will) the less prone we are to being deceived.

It should be mentioned here that there are great resources in exploring the spiritual side of Christianity, especially since it is the Spirit who gives us life, and where God operates within the believer to accomplish His will. It is our opinion that Watchman Nee’s “*The Spiritual Man*” is a great book that all mature believers should take the time to read and study to avoid the missteps of doing things in the flesh, and especially misinterpreting “soulish” behavior with that of the Spirit.²

Principles of Worship

So Biblically, spiritually, and experientially, where do we scrape together the most information about true worship? Do we study the ones who are most experienced in spiritual things? Do we study modern facets of worship that are successful? Do we throw out all preconceived notions and move into the vast unknown with a song and a prayer?

First, let’s go to the guidebook and look to the experienced worshipers there to give us some clues. Now let’s see...who would fit the bill? It’s got to be someone, who like no other knew the most about God and spiritual worship. We need to compare notes with

some of the ones who had a keen insight into the heart of God and experienced God on every level there was to know. Perhaps the best choice would be to take a look at two with great qualifications: Moses and King David.

We have many written praise and worship instructions by Moses and David preserved in the Bible. But because of space limitations and narrow attention spans, we will concentrate on the basic principles from the “Worship Songbook” of Psalms, and not make this a comprehensive study.

Here’s a quick little synopsis into what we feel they have to say about “true worship”, to help us get on the right track. (Note also that in these Psalms, there are also correlations to other Biblical references that chime with what Moses and David have recorded.)

We have already seen that all praise and worship is to originate from the heart. It has to be Spiritual. It can be in many different physical forms, but it must be coming from the Spirit. Let’s just make a little list...

Worship IS

(According to a few things written by Moses and David):

- *A Response to God for His Greatness*
(Psa 96;109:30)
- *Spiritual* (Psa. 51:1; compare Jn. 4:23-24)
- *Adoration and Awe of God*
(Psa. 27:4; see also Hab. 3:2)
- *A spirit of Praise, and Thanksgiving*
(Psa. 100; 107:22; see also Heb. 13:15; 1 Pet. 2:9)
- *Singing* (Psa. 96; 100 & 101.)
(Note these are Psalms ascribed to Moses.)
- *Joy, (which can be also accompanied by Dancing)*
(Psa. 98; Psa. 149:3; 1 Pet. 1:8
Also, 1 Chron. 15 and 16!)
- *Focusing on God* (Psa. 95)
- *Confession and Repentance* (Psa. 51; Acts 3:19)

Wow! Just in these few principles, worship involves a lot of spiritual, emotional and experiential things. But the thing that really

captures one's attention is that the over-all guiding principle of worship must be to focus on God first and foremost. It's not about us! Worship is ALL about God! God is enthroned by the praise of His people. Or as modern language puts it: *God inhabits the praise of His people!* (Psa 22:3) When we focus this way, a natural tendency is to praise Him, not only because of all the great things He has done, but also for His mercy and compassion, which in and of itself, will lead us into confession and repentance.

Worship should lead us to one thing...**GOD!**

- The LORD of the Universe, *El Elyon*.
- The Maker of heaven and earth, the all-powerful *Adonai Elohim El Shaddai*.
- The Holy and Eternal "I am that I am", *Yahweh*.
- The *Adonai* who is both Master and Friend.
- *Abba*, who is our Father God
- And The Name that is above all names, *Yeshua*.¹

When we are concentrating on who God is and the great things He has done, the tendency is to NOT dwell on your individual situation. In other words, we won't dwell on our problems. We find joy in God. We think about what He did for us. Even the stupid, dreadful things aren't so stupid and dreadful anymore. (OK...maybe we went too far with that one.) But seriously...that's where one needs to be while in worship!

Too much of real life situations tend to keep us focused solely on the wrong things. Yes, right now you may hate what you do for a living. Yes, you may not even be able to stomach the sorry, organized, corporate worship as a whole. You may hate legalism. You may abhor "put-on" religion. You may be even turned off by any kind of organized and institutionalized worship. But learn to focus! Worship is to focus on God.

We love God! And what is more amazing—He loves us!!! Yeah! Break out the band instruments, guitars and cymbals! Cough up the sand that's stuck in our throats, and let's sing to high heaven of the mercies of God! THAT gives us hope. THAT gives us something to

sing about! Yeshua is our reason for picking ourselves up and moving on with the journey before us. Abba has given us a reason to go on.

The Good, the Bad, the Ugly in Worship.

Now let's dive a little further into some things that also should be noted while we are looking over some principles of worship. Let's compare some good worship habits with those that are not.

One good habit that other experienced Biblical worshippers have noted is to just take the time to *listen to God*...instead of constantly babbling to Him about our problems and troubles. He already knows all about them. Jesus told us to let our words be few. (Matt. 6:5-13) Solomon had also reminded us of that.

"Do not be quick with your mouth, do not be hasty in your heart to utter anything before God. God is in heaven and you are on earth, so let your words be few." (Ecclesiastes 5:2 NIV)

You have probably even heard a worship song or two about this. But worship doesn't have to have music and verse to be true worship. The compilation we are writing here may be a little long, but our words to God during worship have been fewer and fewer in the past few years. (It brings a little smile just to write that.)

Don't confuse this with the earnestness in which God wants us to pray. No, this is worship time. Prayer and petition can be included in worship, but the emphasis once again is to focus on God, not to ask for things for ourselves. The desert has pointed us to this...not a worship song, not a sermon, not someone pointing their finger and saying we need to get in line or else! No. The Holy Spirit actually brought this to our attention and confirmed it in Scripture. But He had to get our attention first, and He did it through the desert.

Let's be clear. We are not saying you shouldn't be praying as much. This is a different subject altogether. We do have our requests and concerns, but they should also be based on what God wants—not what we want! Our emphasis during worship is communing with

God—not babbling on and on to Him about our situation. (“Babbling on and on” is what Jesus says the pagans do!)

Communion with God in Worship

Christians should just love being in God’s presence. This is a line of reasoning that you may need to dwell on for a little bit. If we do not have this desire, then maybe we need to first, check our spiritual pulse, then maybe we should investigate our position in Christ before God. We are part of the family now—joint heirs with Christ. We can boldly enter into the Holy of Holies because of the blood of Christ and commune with our Abba-Father! The Aramaic term “*Abba*” used here literally means “Daddy”.³ Only a real son or daughter, being naturally born or adopted, can use this intimate term for their father.

Also, consider this: God—being the almighty, all knowing, all sovereign, maker of you and me—knows all about our situation, our wants, and our heart’s desires before we can even think of them. (*Matt 6: 8*) What He wants us to do is to have *faith* in who He is, and that whatever befalls us is somehow going to ultimately bring Him glory. (*Heb. 11:6*) Besides, the Bible teaches us the Holy Spirit already intervenes for us with groaning and earnest passions from deep within us. (*See Romans 8.*) He does command us to pray, and we should. Jesus was a prime example of what it takes to be in earnest prayer. However, we do not feel Yeshua spent all His prayer time with God asking for this and that...He simply asked (as he taught us to pray) that God meet His daily needs, and that He would be strengthened to do His will, and the Father would be glorified through Him.

We believe Yeshua spent most of His prayer time in communion with the Father, and that this is worship in its purest form.

As we have said before, modern Christianity has somehow lost touch with this aspect of worship. Ask most “worshippers” on any given Sunday morning if they spend a regular communion time with God, and they most likely will say “No”...if they are truthful. For the conservative, we feel this is because we have been taught to stay away from the Spiritual because it is an area where one should not dabble. Therefore it is out of our comfort zone.

The Charismatic movement has made great strides in bringing Spiritual worship back into focus, but it is also our opinion that in many modern worship services, too much emphasis is put on an emotional “high”. An emotional response is needed in worship and should be part of it, but this emotion should not be the ultimate goal, as many have made it. Our experience tells us this is a subtle misdirection that leads us off into a self-satisfying aspect of worship that exalts the soul of men, rather than the Spirit of God.

Let’s look at it in this light: do you remember as a child longing to be with your daddy? You wanted to crawl up in his lap and feel his hug, hear his voice, and be like him in every way. Oh Yeah, while we were there we would sometimes sneak in a trivial request for candy or maybe a tricycle; but mostly you wanted his attention and to be with him. You tried on his really big shoes and walked about proudly flopping them on the floor, begging daddy to look at you and be pleased, and mostly you wanted to be just like him!

That “child like faith” in your Heavenly Father should be the desire of all Christians who have been washed in the blood, grafted into the Vine, and declared a son through the finished work of Jesus Christ! *It IS emotional* to be with Daddy. But *being with Daddy is the goal*, not just the feeling that comes along with it! This is part of the worship experience.

This very essence of communion as a Christian is such an important part of the Christian journey that is no wonder that there is so much confusion and “battle” about spiritual worship and the methods, styles, and preferences that go along with it.

Satan wants it that way. The enemy does not want you to experience true worship because it is so vital! So he throws in misdirection, distractions, controversies, arguments, and confusion so we get frustrated with it and miss the mark. True worship focuses our thoughts in the proper direction—towards God. Satan wants us to pattern ourselves in the world and focus in on exalting man and pleasing ourselves!

Think, pray, study and ask God to show you the truth about this issue. Don't let fear be a part of your thinking. This aspect of worship is important to consider becoming part of your practice.

Encouraging Corporate Worship

Not only do we see private communion and worship encouraged in David and Moses' Psalms, but we also see corporate worship stressed as an integral part of the experience for God's followers. We are encouraged to corporately reflect and remember what God has done for us.

The early Christian church in Acts records the believers met together every day in fellowship. Corporate worship, reflected in the Lord's Supper or the Communion of "breaking bread" is something that Yeshua taught us to do. This is so we continually remember what God has done for us through the sinless sacrifice of His Son.

We are told in Hebrews that we are not to forsake the assembling of ourselves together as the manner of some are, so that we may encourage and strengthen one another in the faith. This is reflected in corporate worship. (*Heb 10:23-25*)

Paul of Tarsus gives us ample clues in how corporate worship is to take place by his encouragement of the Corinthian church. The book of Revelation gives us a glimpse of corporate worship in heaven, and gives us an account of the singing about the Lamb that was slain. Hosts upon hosts are gathered together to praise the name of God.

Corporate worship is important to all stratus of God's Kingdom, from the early days of Adam and Eve, throughout the many

centuries since—even until today. Let us not forget this important part of our Christian walk.

There are modern calls and movements that have stressed the dismantling of any kind of organized corporate service so that we can focus entirely on individualistic relationships with God. As important as it is for the Christian to have an individual and personal relationship with God, so much more it is understood that we should gather together with one purpose in mind—and that is to worship God corporately. Unless one is specifically called for a season to separate themselves from all other forms of gatherings, this corporate gathering should be sought out.

We must be balanced here.

But we must also caution that we are not to let the ways of the world enter in and take over in place of the Holy Spirit. We need this corporate time to strengthen ourselves and encourage one another! The Body of Christ needs to arise and join hands in unity...and in worship...to stand against the throngs of Satan and usher in the maturity and fullness of the Bride of Christ! (*Eph 4:13*) But again, let us be careful to not try and box God in by our man-made rules and religious organization that tends to divide us. But rather let us collectively seek with a pure heart, exclusively, the desires of God and the Spirit of Truth!

Gifts and Talents used in Worship

Another important aspect of which we need to be reminded is “bad worship practices”. Bad worship is probably a misnomer. Maybe a better way to say it would be: “wrong focused worship”. What we think of when we say “wrong focused” usually deals with motives, especially how we may sometimes use the worship service to accomplish some sort of *self service*. Worship is not a time for someone to come forth and draw attention to themselves through their special talents and gifts for their own ultimate satisfaction and glorification. This is a type of *performance based* worship. Performance based ministry tends to be of the soul and not of the

spirit. Let it be mentioned here that many worship leaders and preachers often fall into this trap. How many times have we gone into worship worried about ourselves and about how we are going to “deliver” with our talents and gifts and what kind of compliments we get? Is this worry not about pleasing men?

Now this is not true in all cases and certainly not how we normally tend to react to different ministries, but how many times have we been to a church, Christian concert, or seminar where we felt like the preacher, speaker, soloist, or band is on some heady, “full of themselves” belief that they are the “greatest thing since ice-cream”, and God just couldn’t get along without them?

I’m sure they have it in the back of their minds that what they are doing is for the Lord; but if they get no recognition for what they are doing, they go ballistic and do whatever they can to draw some kind of attention. Some have been known to go into depression because they didn’t get any response or accolades for their effort. For lack of a better term, we like to call this, “Drama”. (It gets ugly here...and we need to stay clear of this fleshly tendency.)

Once again, let’s be clear. We believe whole-heartedly that showing artistic talents, practicing our gifts, and glorifying God with them is not only scriptural, *but also commanded* for every believer to do. (See Romans 12; I Cor 12 and 13) This is a part of our holy and reasonable service.

But to use these gifts for our own pride and satisfaction, trying to elicit an emotional response and glorifying the flesh is definitely not worship, nor is it ministry. This is where we as Christian brothers and sisters fall prey to the enemy—especially ones that are extremely talented and have practiced spiritual worship for a considerable time and are very comfortable with performance based theatrics. Because of this familiarity, and long-standing “*polish*” that most do not obtain, pride can creep in and overshadow their meaningful relationship with the Father. Pride is a dangerous thing. As a matter of fact, it crosses a line into danger that God will not let go on for too long.

Keeping all of this mind, it is possible for us to do whatever our heart wants to do in the name of God, and it could very well be

classified as worship—as long as our actions are holy and pleasing and done as unto the Lord, guided by the Holy Spirit. That’s the pure and simple truth that we need to understand before we start tacking on all sorts of stipulations and guidelines!

Then again, we may not have to do anything with our gifts and talents in order to worship the Almighty. Simple communion is just that—simple communion.

Worship is not a musical concert—though it could be. Worship is not an entertaining lecture on the attributes of God—though it could be. Worship is not an orchestrated technical showpiece that’s part of a gathering—*though it could be!*

Let’s check out Romans 12: 1-2.

“Therefore, I urge you, brothers, in view of God’s mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God—this is your spiritual act of worship. Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God’s will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will.”

What is our reasonable act of worship? How do we offer our bodies as living sacrifices? The key here is “*in view of God’s mercy.*” When we view God in the light of a loving God that has done great things for us, and as the One who has provided a way of salvation solely through the conduit of love, we cannot help but transform our thinking into “worship”. When we step out of the shadow of paralyzing fear and look into the light of love from the eyes of God, our minds, our hearts, our bodies fall into the line of complete sacrificial service to a loving God who loves us for no other reason, except—*He chooses to do so!*

The bottom line is this: the “bad” pattern of the world is looking out for number one—that is we do it only for ourselves. It is self glorification, pride, and arrogance. The subtlety of this seduction is easily transferrable to whatever goal we may have in worship, whether it is emotions, performances, responses or accolades.

But in light of God's mercy, we should be transformed in our thinking that GOD should get all the attention and glory. You begin to see that it's not all about us. Therefore, all that we do ends up as "unto the Lord" and ultimately it ends up as real worship of God—because we want Him to be glorified!

A quick word of warning here to our fellow sojourners that scripture plainly points out: IF we *continuingly* seek to puff ourselves up and use our talents and gifts in pride and arrogance, and ultimately push the Lord into the back seat of our worship; and we continue to depend on the flesh and emotions for leading others into worship, with the ultimate goal of an emotional high...we may cross over a very thin line into holy discipline. God may have to bring us into a forced position of humbleness so we learn a lesson that God is a "jealous God", and nothing is to be placed above Him. If we have a God given gift or talent, we best use it for His glory, and His alone. (*Prov 29:23; Especially look at James 4:4-8*)

This warning does not mean we cannot use our gift or talents within the confines of the world. Oh Contraire! If we seek the ultimate glorification of God in holiness and are using this gift and talent as pleasing unto God, it does not matter at all what we do and where we do it! As long as it is glorifying to God, and led by the Holy Spirit, with the aim or goal of directing our hearts toward God.

Of course when we finally find a good measure of true worship within our practice, don't expect it to always be satisfying without a little bit of preparation. How many times have we sat down to have some real communion with God, spend some time in the Holy of Holies, earnestly seeking His face when... the phone rings; the kids start whining about being hungry; the boss calls about work; your husband or wife needs something done right away; the lights go out; or you even fall asleep!?!

Educate one another to focus on God. Practice and strive to be the best you can be (as unto the Lord) in using your gifts and talents during worship. Try not to draw attention to yourself, but be prepared and ready if you are called upon to lead in worship. Encourage one another to be open to another's desire to enter into worship. Let everything be done decently and in order, but rely on the

Holy Spirit to usher us into the Throne Room, instead of trusting in the flesh using gimmicks and technology!

This is God time! Learn to respect it! This is communion with the Lord God Almighty. This is our Abba time! Try not to let anything stand in the way of this most precious time for fellow sojourners and believers to *drink and be refreshed* in one of the most intimate experiences a Christian can partake—individually and corporately!

What is True Worship?

We can clearly see that it is our personal relationship with the Father that ultimately determines how we enter worship. Our attitude of worship does not depend on a particular style or method, nor our likes and dislikes of those certain styles and methods. It is spiritual and to be led by the Holy Spirit. It does not hinge on psychological tactics and certain styles of music; nor does it hinge on professional performances and technical “bang” in order to usher us into the presence of the Lord. Our own personal attitude is of utmost importance.

Worship may be singing old gospel hymns, or using thunderous guitars and drums. There are times when we may use just plain old vocal harmony or we could erupt in praise with a 300-voice choir and orchestra. Be it during communion, in an “*Erev Shabbat*”, or at home being silent and still before God—it is important...*vital*... to always keep worship in our schedule. Just don’t let the method get in the way of the results!

When it comes to True Worship:

Christ has given us the privilege.

Holy Spirit provides the means.

Rejoicing and passion is the fuel.

Instruction in humility is the ticket.

Staying focused on God is the key...and

Total communion with God is the goal!

The desert life teaches us that we need to always strive for personal and corporate time with our Abba (Daddy). We need to set aside time to praise and uplift the glorious Father and His Son, *Yeshua haMeshiach* with music and song, and done with joy! Our experience of desert thirst has focused our attention on some spiritual nourishment we all need fulfilled, if we are to live and thrive in our surroundings. We'll all be more stable and enjoyable Christian brothers and sisters if we just stop pretending to worship, and stop trying to command a performance during worship, and really enter into the Holy of Holies worshipping in Spirit and in Truth!

Together! Let's praise His Name above all names!

-----✕-----

Notes:

1. *The Names of God*, by Lambert Dolphin, <http://www.ldolphin.org/Names.html>
2. <http://www.worldinvisible.com/library/bookcat.htm>, "*The Spiritual Man, Vol 1-3*", Watchman Nee, (Stephen Kaung, Translator) Christian Fellowship Publishers; PF edition (June 1968) (original publication, 1928)
3. *There is still some debate over this term, and it is uncertain because of western cultural bias.*
[See bibleresources.wordpress.com/2007/06/20/mark-1435-abba-fatherdaddy-controversy](http://bibleresources.wordpress.com/2007/06/20/mark-1435-abba-fatherdaddy-controversy)

Chapter 8

Letting go of Ministry

The desert teaches us some very interesting things about our surroundings, our needs, and our focus. But there are still some things we need to discover from the others who have been through the desert trek before us, either out of pure survival, or for another reason that may bring dread and terror to most of us—*change!*

Elijah's Situation

When we look at the life of Elijah we see a prophet of God with a great resume of victories and one, so-called “defeat”.

In 1 Kings 17 through chapter 19, we find the Biblical stories told of this great prophet. Here we read that the ravens fed him. He was fed by the oil and flour that never dried up. He brought back the widow's son from death. He called down fire from heaven to consume a sacrifice that was a demonstration of the powerful LORD God. He had all the prophets of Baal killed. He prayed for rain, and even ran a marathon by the power of God.

But then Elijah got a message from Jezebel. This wicked wife of King Ahab said she was going to kill him (19: 1-2). So, he ran again. This time about 70 miles to Beersheba in what some commentaries say was “in fear for his life.”

St John of the Cross, a mystic monk of the 16th century, describes this experience of Elijah as a “Dark Night of the Soul”, as does the Christian author, David Roper.¹

When you look closely in scripture, this dark time for Elijah especially takes on a significant role for our study, because it *takes place in the Desert!* Whatever name you may call this time in Elijah's life—it *is* a time of Desert Life experience. And here once again God, through the teaching of the Holy Spirit and the life of Elijah, is using the desert to bring home a few important lessons for us.

St. John of the Cross wrote,

“God perceives the imperfections within us, and because of his love for us, urges us to grow up. His love is not content to leave us in our weakness, and for this reason he takes us into a dark night. He weans us from all of the pleasures by giving us dry times and inward darkness. In doing so he is able to take away all these vices and create virtues within us. Through the dark night pride becomes humility, greed becomes simplicity, wrath becomes contentment, luxury becomes peace, gluttony becomes strength. No soul will ever grow deep in the spiritual life unless God works passively in that soul by means of the Dark Night.”²

In my own life, I have met with the imperfections of my character and dealt with a long desert experience of depression and doubt about God and myself. Surprisingly, God used this time in the desert to teach, strengthen, and nourish me, and did it in His tender love and care. Having stripped me of all my pride and everything I held dear, He replaced it with a powerful appreciation for His character and love that can only be described as divine.

The point that Hilda and I want to make here in the life of Elijah is that sometimes the process of turning a corner or choosing the right path, and gaining a new perspective of God’s attributes may only come through the process of the desert journey. This may involve some big changes, and it needs to be embraced if we are to have an effective ministry. It may mean letting go of the familiar, or the ministry that we have nurtured for such a long time and have called our own. Sometimes this is very difficult to do, as we shall see in the life of Elijah.

When we read the text of 1 Kings chapter 17 through 19, we get the sense that Elijah is a powerful man with the divine blessing of being God’s spokesman and intermediary of judgment and power. It must have been an awesome position.

Think about it.

Being a prophet meant you could stand in the courts of Kings, call down fire from heaven, perform many great miraculous feats, and predict the future with imaginations hanging on to every word.

The catch was that you had to be very obedient in speaking exactly what the Lord tells you to speak...and do exactly what the Lord tells you to do. Some that did not do this were cursed. Some that disobeyed were punished. Some lost their position, and others lost their lives.³

Elijah's Cry

Elijah cried in 19: 4, "I have had enough, Lord." "Take my life; I am no better than my ancestors!"

This cry bewildered us for quite a while. Something just didn't ring true in our spirits as to what most commentaries state was the reason for such an outburst.

Elijah said this after a 70 mile run to Beersheba, and then another days journey after that. Then he falls asleep; he is woken up and nourished by God; then he takes 40 days and nights to go what should have been a 7 day journey.⁴

We especially get confused when God speaks to him in the gentle voice saying, "*What are you doing here, Elijah?*" God actually asks this twice, and gets the same response twice, "*I have been very zealous for the LORD God Almighty. The Israelites have rejected your covenant, broken down your altars, and put your prophets to death with the sword. I am the only one left, and now they are trying to kill me too.*"

We have read a lot of commentaries and heard many sermons that Elijah was scared for his life and running away from Jezebel. Therefore the reason he was in the desert was in fact *punishment* for not having enough faith in God.

But somehow that just doesn't ring true with what we read of Elijah and his character. Some think it is because Elijah is going up against a woman with very strong and seducing spirits. That could be

true in many respects, especially when you study the meaning of her name.⁵

But somehow, that just doesn't add up. Think about it.

Here's a man who just set up hundreds of Baal prophets, taunted them with sarcastic remarks (18:24), and ended up slaughtering them all (18:40). Does he sound like someone who would be scared of a conniving woman's threats?

There must be something else!?

Could it be that even after such great successes, that this dedicated and faithful servant in touch with the very nature of God still needed to learn something deeply profound about the nature of God and His sovereign will?

Could it be that at the forefront of God's plan for the lesson that was about to ensue was something he knew spiritually and mentally, but didn't want to face?

It is important to realize that the desert can also be a spiritual awakening time even though we may be a "running" success story in the Christian arena. It's not always desert time because we have failed! The desert classroom calls even the most important spiritual leaders to where God is waiting to reveal himself *even more profoundly*.

Most commentaries have long discourses about Elijah's failure. We tend to look at this as God's triumph. God reveals mostly things about HIMSELF here—some interesting aspects about His attributes and His nature; and He does it *through* the desert ministry.

Elijah's Run

Do you actually think that Elijah ran from Jezebel, after knocking off hundreds of Baal prophets, more powerful and more influential than Jezebel, because he was afraid of her?

So what was he afraid of?

Our thoughts turn toward other desert ministry subjects and we ask the same question.

What was Jonah afraid of when he ran from his assignment? What was David afraid of when he ran to the desert for cover? What was Moses afraid of when he ran to the desert?

All of the commentaries may be right in some aspects of their interpretation of this powerful story. However, the way we see it is that it's not so much of a "who or what" he ran from, as it may be a "why" Elijah ran to the desert.

For sure in all these cases we mentioned above, these men of God were comfortable in their position of where they were. Moses was a powerful Egyptian prince. Jonah was a powerful prophet, just like Elijah, calling down God's judgment! David was an anointed King, powerful soldier and warrior. Different reasons kept creeping up as to why they ran to the desert; and they all had their different reasons.

May we proposition you here to think that maybe they **LIKED** the position they were in? Could it be that they may have wanted to maintain these positions and do God's will from their comfortable viewpoint and familiar ways of doing things?

It could be that God had other ideas He wanted to show these faithful servants. Maybe God wanted to show a different side of *Himself* to them. But first, they needed some stripping away of the familiar comforts, and needed to enter into the classroom with a little humility.

This way, as St John of the Cross said, "*Greed would become [or replaced with] simplicity, wrath would become contentment, luxury would become peace, and gluttony would become strength*".

With these comforts stripped away, it would be easier to realize that God had a different side all together they needed to discover—love and grace. God wanted them to not just see His great power and judgment, but also see His great love, grace, forbearance, and forgiveness.

It could be that Elijah wanted to stick around and be the great "fire caller of heaven" for a long time to come.

Most NIV Bibles have a translation note in this passage where it says "Elijah was afraid and ran for his life..." The note says that it can also be translated, "Elijah **SAW** and ran for his life." We like the

way The Message translates it: “When Elijah saw how things were, he ran for dear life...”

Maybe Elijah saw the end of his public ministry.

Wait a minute...what?

Being the prophet he was, maybe he saw the end to his public ministry. Let’s just say maybe he wasn’t ready to give it up just yet. Do you really think he was afraid of Jezebel or death?

I doubt it.

Do you really think he was afraid of Jezebel’s demon gods? Most definitely not when we look at what had just happened on Mt Carmel with the rest of the prophets of Baal.

Maybe what he was afraid of had nothing to do with fear of dying, but everything to do with living. Could it have something to do with giving up the “glory” of being God’s number one player?

Think about it.

Could he have realized that he went a little too far in his pride in dealing with the Baal prophets that he sensed that God was not pleased, and he was about to be removed?

What did God tell him to do? He told him to go back the way he came, appoint some new kings and THEN find Elisha and anoint him as a prophet to take over his job.

If you read the passages again with this in mind, like we did, maybe a few things will pop out at you with better clarity. Look at what Elijah says, “*I have been very zealous for the LORD God Almighty.*” This name for *God* is translated, “LORD, the God of hosts” in the New American Standard, and in the New King James. It’s translated “GOD-of-the-Angel-Armies” in The Message. In Hebrew it is actually the name *Yahweh Elohim Sabaoth*:

Yahweh-SABAOTH: "The Lord of Hosts" The commander of the angelic host and the armies of God. Isa. 1:24; Psa. 46:7, 11; 2 Kings 3:9-12; Jer. 11:20 (NT: Rom. 9:29; James 5:4, Rev. 19: 11-16).⁶

Strong's H6635 tsaba' tsaw-baw' or (feminine) tsbadah {tseb-aw-aw'}; from H6633; a mass of persons (or figuratively, things), especially reg. organized for

war (an army); by implication, a campaign, literally or figuratively (specifically, hardship, worship).

KJV: appointed time, (+) army, (+) battle, company, host, service, soldiers, waiting upon, war(-fare).

This name: “Lord God of Hosts”, the “Commander of the angelic armies”, is used mostly in reference to God fighting for His people. It dealt mostly in military terms of describing protection and fighting for God’s purpose. (See Romans 9:29 and compare it to Rev 19: 11-16.)

Elijah knows whose side he is on and what’s at stake. In his predicament however, maybe he doesn’t see anybody else left to fight the forces of evil. It seems to me that what he may have meant was, “I ran to fight another day, since no one else is left to do it.”

God says, “*What are you doing here?*” Elijah answers again, (and we take a little liberty here...) “Hey, I’ve been doing a great job in battle for the Commander in Chief...but there ain’t nobody else around to do the job because they’ve all been killed off, and now they are trying to take me out too!” In further paraphrase, “There’s no one left to do the battles here, but me! And if they take me out, we’re gonna be up the creek without a paddle!”

Could it be that by killing all of the Baal prophets and then running, he was taking matters into his own hands and trying to preserve God’s work by his own methods?

Could it also be that he wanted to cling to his current position and not get taken out before he was ready or before he thought his job was done? Could this explain why he said, “*I’m no better than my ancestors?*”

Maybe the 70-mile run jogged a little sense into his head and he realized his futile mistake, remembering the prophets of old who also had their vain faults. It seems from what we read in the scriptures, most all of the patriarchs and saints of God had their little fleshly “aces in the hole” to keep God’s plan and their own plans alive, just in case things went awry.

Abraham’s ace was to tell everyone that Sarah was his sister. Jacob’s ace was to swindle his way into getting blessings. Moses, described as one of the most humble of God’s servants, was to use his ace with the force of anger to get things done.

Get the picture?

Hey, these aren't huge earth-shattering sins normally to us, but they did reveal cracks in their faith or maybe even pride of having back up plans of their own, just in case God's plan didn't quite pan out.

Look at the little comment God says to Elijah that is most often overlooked (If we may paraphrase again a little here): "Hey, I've got SEVEN THOUSAND in MY back up plan that haven't bowed a knee to Baal!" (19:18) To us, that particular response says a lot as to what was in Elijah's heart when he replied to God.

God then said (in our paraphrased rendition), "Also, let me explain something else to you, Elijah. I've even got all the bad guys surrounded and taken care of with Jehu and Hazael; and then your successor, named Elisha, will take care of anybody else that happens to slip through the cracks!" In modern words, "*Dude*, I've got it covered!"

"...So Elijah, what ARE you trying to prove here?"

OK, He didn't say it that way or that sarcastically. But in our humble opinion, He did tell him emphatically that "*Your ways are not my ways.*"

Elijah's Lesson

Gentle and loving was God's order for the day in teaching and revealing Himself to Elijah. Look how God took care of him after running all that way and seeing him collapse under the juniper tree. God might have looked upon his actions like a loving father would with his little child, who in a child's best strength that he could muster, tries to defend his dad from harm.

In this case it's just too much for one scrawny human to do. Elijah realizes this and is at the point of throwing it all away because he sees the futility of trying to do all of the battles of the Lord by himself. But GOD comes to him and feeds and waters him, because the desert journey that is to come is "too much for him".

This so much reminds us of a verse in Isaiah that says, “*A bruised reed he will not break, and a smoldering wick he will not snuff out.*” (Isaiah 42:3). Here God treats Elijah with love—NOT damnation and punishment because he ran.

God had some more teaching to do. Again the desert imagery plays an important part. He wanders for 40 days and 40 nights in the desert wilderness. He seems to follow a pattern that is very familiar when we think about scripture and God’s dealings with His people.

Moses had to learn of God’s provision, love and care wandering in the desert for 40 years. The children of Israel had to learn of God this way also for 40 years. David, even though he slew the great giant Goliath, needed to learn of God’s provision, love, and care through the desert.

And as we read in the Psalms of David, God used desert imagery to drive home these truths in Psalms 55:

“My heart is in anguish within me; the terrors of death assail me. Fear and trembling have beset me; horror has overwhelmed me.

I said, “Oh, that I had the wings of a dove! I would fly away and be at rest- I would flee far away and stay in the desert;

Selah

I would hurry to my place of shelter, far from the tempest and storm.”

All of these lessons took place in the desert classroom!

When God finally speaks to Elijah on Mt Horeb (by the way which is the same mountain Moses came face to face with the creator), He doesn’t reveal Himself in the mighty wind, the trembling ground, or raging fire (as he had done with Moses). He spoke to Elijah in the still small voice.

Do you think there may be some significance here?

MAN, OH MAN!!! It’s loaded with significance!

The first scripture that pops to mind is “*Not by might nor by power, but by my Spirit*’, says the LORD God Almighty.” (Zechariah 4:6) The Message translates it: “*You can’t force these things. They*

only come about through my Spirit, ' says GOD-of-the-Angel-Armies." Did you notice what name pops out here also? *Lord God-of-the-Angel-Armies – Yahweh, Elohim Sabaoth.*

This had to be a real paradigm shift for Elijah. Here he had been used to calling down fire, blowing away false prophets, and shaking the foundations of the kingdoms for the Great Commander in Chief (*Yahweh Elohim Sabaoth*); and then...God reveals the softer, gentler side of the *Yahweh Yireh*, "God our Provider" (*Yireh* literally means " God sees me" and signifies that He always sees our situation and provides adequately when the time comes. (*Gen. 22:19; Strong's H3070 from H7200*); and *Yahweh Shalom*, "The God of Peace" (*Shalom* signifies that kind of peace that results from being a whole person in right relationship to God and to one's fellow man.⁷)

What we believe the key teaching for Elijah here is that the Holy Spirit needs to lead the way in God's Kingdom. God's ways are not our ways--even when circumstances may seem hopeless, and we think the only way out is to fight our own battles! We need to let go. Whatever ministry we may have is not ours. It never was.

Later on in revelation, we read that Jesus taught these same principles to His disciples with a few clarifications like: "To be first, you must be last; humbleness marks a man of God; God is ever gracious and forgiving; and He honors the humble and humbles the proud". Do you think it *coincidence* that the disciples James and John, the ones who wanted to call down fire from heaven on "the others", were corrected by Jesus with the "humbleness sermon"? (See Luke 9:46-56)

Elijah's Understanding

Notice what Elijah does after this encounter with God in the desert (19:19). He goes directly from there to find Elisha and throws his cloak on him, signifying he was to be his successor. I think Elijah is demonstrating here that he got the message. He finally let go of "his" ministry. He captured a new vision of his position, and then let go and let God have His way.

It took the desert to get his attention. God gently let him in on just what His plan really was. As a matter of fact, we don't hear of Elijah very much after that in this narrative, except for a few encounters with Ahab again.

Where did he go? What did he do?

We have to jump over to 2 Kings chapter one to find out.

Four years later, we find him at Gilgal.⁹ Most likely this is a school for prophets.¹⁰ We are not sure if Elijah was a paid staff member who taught here; but certainly he and Elisha, his now constant companion and apprentice (2 Kings 2), visited here often.

It seems that God's new role for Elijah was to leave the public arena and go privately teach others how to serve in the office of prophet. It seems his newfound revelation of God was needed in the up and coming prophets who were ready to take over the reigns. We believe this was God's revelation for Elijah in his desert life ministry.

How many times have we as spiritual leaders tried to hang on to our "ministries" way longer than we should? Even after God has moved on, we try to desperately make things happen in our own power? When God says it's time to move on—it is always best to let go and move on.

One more thing before we leave the story of Elijah. It deals with one of the last encounters he has with Ahab in 1 Kings 21.

Ahab had stolen Naboth's vineyard through deceit and false accusations (conjured up by Jezebel) and God sent Elijah to prophesy against him for "murdering" this man for personal gain.

After Elijah encounters his "old enemy" Ahab (21:20), and prophesies against him...take a look at what happens:

*"When Ahab heard these words, he tore his clothes, put on sackcloth and fasted. He lay in sackcloth and went around meekly. Then the word of the LORD came to Elijah the Tishbite: **"Have you noticed how Ahab has humbled himself before me? Because he has humbled himself, I will not bring this disaster in his day, but I will bring it on his house in the days of his son"***

Do you think there may be some significance here?

MAN, OH MAN!!!

God is still teaching Elijah about humility! God turns around and shows his mercy, forbearance and unconditional love to one of the most undeserving individuals we have ever seen.

Even the storyteller of the account reiterates how *really bad* Ahab was...

(There was never a man like Ahab, who sold himself to do evil in the eyes of the LORD, urged on by Jezebel his wife. He behaved in the vilest manner by going after idols, like the Amorites the LORD drove out before Israel.)

The author of the Kings probably thought the same thing as we are thinking. "Man, this dude is ready for the fire!" However, it's another lesson illustrated of God's attributes and unfathomable ways.

We must always keep in mind; His ways are just not our ways. Here even though this evil king was deserving of harsh punishment for his actions, God delayed that punishment because Ahab humbled himself before God.

Do you think Elijah would have accepted this outcome without any kind of protest *before* his desert experience?

Just think about what Elijah did on Mt Carmel with the prophets of Baal. Remember how he taunted them?

"By noon, Elijah had started making fun of them, taunting, "Call a little louder--he is a god, after all. Maybe he's off meditating somewhere or other, or maybe he's gotten involved in a project, or maybe he's on vacation. You don't suppose he's overslept, do you, and needs to be waked up?"
(1 Kings 18: 21, The Message)

It is not difficult to see why God wanted to keep teaching Elijah about humility. Do you think he finally got the message and passed that great lesson on to his pupils?

Elijah's Example

As leaders and teachers we must be careful to live out the very things we learn, as we see in the life of the successor of Elijah.

Elisha had an image problem. It seems that he was bald and got a little rattled when some street kids started making fun of him (2 Kings 23-24). He cursed them and two she-bears came out of the woods and mauled those kids. 42 kids died because Elisha cursed them.

Those of us who have kids know that “kids will be kids.” But to have them torn from limb to limb because of a proud prophet with a psychological image problem must have been devastating to the parents. Sure, the kids should have been taught some manners and respect. Sure, they should not have been unsupervised. And maybe Elisha was having a bad day...we don't know.

But if love and humility was first and foremost in Elisha's ministry, do you think those kids would have died an awful death that day? With that kind of prophetic power, should we not be extremely careful to only do what God says we are to do?

We don't know about you, but we are sure getting the gist of how important love and humbleness are in doing God's work.

If ever we think we are something special; if ever we think God can't do the job without us; if ever we think that our only job is to do the spectacular for the Lord God of Hosts; if ever—whatever we do—isn't done in love and humbleness, we have missed the whole point of what it means to be God's representatives and servants.

As we continue our study of the desert life, it is important to realize that God may use the desert as a tool to teach saints and Christian leaders to come to a new revelation about God's nature, His program, and His covenants. There are times we must all learn to see our God in a different light to help us understand His will. This is what we all need to comprehend.

As we approach a new dawning of how God is revealing His great mysteries, and ushering us into His Kingdom being consummated, it will most certainly involve letting go of the familiar.

Let's keep in mind that the desert doesn't have to be viewed as a fearful, awful place. As you see in the life of Elijah, God met him there, fed him there, taught him there and sent him out from there to do the real work of the Kingdom *in love and humility*.

Let it be a lesson and an example to us all!

-----✕-----

Notes:

1. David Roper, "A Man to Match the Mountain: Overcoming the Obstacles of Life" *Library of Online Evangelical Christian Books*, 1996
<http://www.ccel.us/mountain.title.html>
2. *Ibid* p.69
3. Prophets, Web Bible Encyclopedia,
<http://www.christiananswers.net/dictionary/prophet.html>
4. The Restoration of Elijah (1 Kings 19:5-18) By: J. Hampton Keathley, III, Th.M.
Copyright 2005. bible.org
5. <http://latter-rain.com/eschae/jezebel.htm>
6. The Names of God by Lambert Dolphin <http://www.ldolphin.org/Names.html>. See also Hebrew4Christians.com
7. *Ibid*, (Internet version)
8. Smith, William, Dr. "Entry for 'Elijah'". "Smith's Bible Dictionary".
<<http://www.biblestudytools.net/Dictionaries/SmithsBibleDictionary/smt.cgi?number=T1322>>. 1901.
9. Easton, Matthew George. "Entry for Gilgal". "Easton's Bible Dictionary".
<http://www.biblestudytools.net/Dictionaries/EastonBibleDictionary/ebd.cgi?number=T1489>>. See also Prophets, Web Bible Encyclopedia, www.Christiananswers.net

Chapter 9

Letting go of the Past

One thing that the Desert will do is give you ample opportunity to do some inward retrospection. Once we have been stripped away of constant distractions, the Holy Spirit can use the quietness to help us focus on some issues that may be hidden deep within our psyche. This inward inspection of the soul should remind us of where we have been, how we got to where we are today, and where we should be going with respect to a God who really loves us beyond anything we could imagine.

Many times this involves letting go of our past.

The following is a personal narrate of how my own desert retrospection turned into a self-examination of culture and what makes me who I am today; and why I needed to let it go, and press on towards what God wants me to be.

Those Were the Good Old Days

I was reading a book called “*Blue Like Jazz*” authored by Donald Miller. It’s a good book, and found it well worth reading. A pastor friend of mine suggested I read it after talking with him. He mentioned that Donald Miller sounded a lot like what I was describing in my conversations with him.

A quote from the book caught my eye and sent me into a deep inward “retrospection”. That quote kept ringing in my ears throughout the day. It seemed the Desert wasn’t through teaching me more about what God wants in a relationship.

In the book, Donald Miller said,

“...My faith was about image and ego, not about practicing spirituality”.

“...I had the image of a spiritual person, but I was bowing down to the golden cows of religiosity and philosophy.”¹

Some of the things I dwelt upon in my inward reflection ran deep into my upbringing and God encounters. These were some deep seeded issues I had been wrestling with, as Hilda and I were trying to fit into a Christian fellowship of some sorts.

It all began with memories.

Ah, memories! All Good!

“Once in a land far, far away...” OK. It was actually Jacksonville, Florida way back in 1973! (Kind of far away...but not that long ago to me!)

I graduated from High School in 1973. I had hair down to the middle of my back, and I wore a "short haired wig" in order to work at a McDonalds. (The things I did for a job!) I drove a yellow, 1966 Rambler Classic with a set of old surf racks on the top. In my mind, I was soooooo cool—just groovin' down the street in that car...with smoke pouring out of the tailpipe! I wish I had a picture of that old car! But then again, it just might spoil the mental picture I have of that pivotal time!

That car really was special! The “Rambler” and I spent many a weekend at the beach—just my surfboards, my buddies, a few girlfriends and me.

For that time of the century, I had the most AWESOME stereo sound system in my ride. I was the envy of the neighborhood! Hey, it rocked! I had an *enormous* 100-watt amplifier coupled with an 8-track player! At party time I'd open up my trunk, roll down the windows and ROCK the beach! It really was special!

I was a "Rolling-DJ" to go. Some even called me an expert at negotiating with sand dunes. Then again, maybe that's my exalted ego saying that! But man, the music was good back then!

The music! That's what I remember the most about my teenage years! It's strange how music kind of describes and molds your young life. I loved all of it! I just didn't realize it as much back

then! Those 1973 hit songs you could hear on my stereo all the time...and all the way down the beach! It was the music that made my era what it was!

Yes, those memories—all very good—all very painful! Too bad I didn't know then what I know now...that those were the times I would look back at and come to a realization of some important issues that have shaped my life today.

When I described these memories to a few friends of mine, one quipped: “So you were *cool* back then?” It sure got me to thinking. So, was I? Hardly!

I was probably what you would call anti-cool. It's not like I was the James Dean of anti-establishment or a rebellious teenager who scoffed at clicks and teenage drama. I just marched to a different drummer. I still do. Yeah, I looked, acted, and behaved like normal cool teenagers. (Well, as normal as any awkward teenage boy can be!) But inside I thought different and felt different than most of the other “cool” people.

It seemed like things affected me more than others. My feelings ran far deeper, and I saw things in the world around me that no one else saw or felt. What's worse is that I would sometimes express these feelings and describe the things I saw, and people would look at me like I was some kind of social reject from the State Hospital. Sometimes I would think maybe I should have been committed!

I realize now what it was, all this weird stuff inside of me—but not then. Yeah, thinking back I really wanted to be cool and accepted by the in crowd, but I just wasn't. Some understand it, most don't. I have a tendency to counter flow with normality, even though by appearance, I tend to conform.

For example: let's say there is a rock. Imagine, if you would, a big boulder in the middle of this mental picture. Most would say, “Yeah, it's a rock, so what?”

Well, for me, I would see way beyond *just* a rock. I would see an amazing shape. Perhaps it's an oddity that needed explaining; a mystifying presence of something created that was way beyond anything that I could create or dream of myself. I would possibly

write a song about it, or try and express it in a painting. I would notice the colors and hues and crevices that made you think of a character's face and odd creatures. I would wonder why it ended up the way it did. Why is it in the middle of this picture?

I would also wonder why others didn't see the same things I saw, and be perplexed as to why they rolled their eyes at some of my strange mental pictures and vivid imagination.

It's how my mind works. That's my "different" drummer. It's not that I'm an intellectual thinker or someone who has some amazing revelations. It's more along the lines of having the soul of an artist.

It wasn't long before I learned I was different. I was drawn to others who somewhat thought like I did, but always afraid to hang with them too long for fear of being labeled a weirdo. I learned over the years to keep it mostly to myself and not share it with many people. (Except, now you all know.) Most do not understand. (Actually, I don't understand myself sometimes!) And mostly I learned to just go along with what everyone else thought and said. That way I wouldn't be thought of as such a weirdo and I could slip into the status quo with the appearance of "cool conformity".

It is probably why I got so screwed up spiritually. Here I was, an individual that felt and saw things profoundly peculiar within my own little world. Honestly, I just couldn't understand why Christianity had to be so dull, boring, and discolored—filled with endless lists of guidelines that I had to follow in order to be called a Christian.

I grew up in the traditional Church. I went to services EVERY Sunday from the time I was first pulled out of my mother's womb. I learned my particular institutional Christianity viewed things as either black or white. Certain issues, trends, or things were either good or bad. There was no grey area to the right! It was rules, rules, and more rules—mostly about what you couldn't do.

So when this teenager who along with the wonderment and emotion of life, who loved the music and culture of the day, and let it penetrate into the very core of his soul and existence, then tried to reconcile "Christian" teachings and the feelings of my music in my

own vivid world—well, it just didn't compute! Matter of fact it just froze my mind to where I couldn't, or should I say *wouldn't* think or act on my own. I chose instead to conform.

To conform, I adapted a mental, self-mutilating process of traditional spirituality and played my part to the "tee". It is here where I connected to the quote in *"Blue Like Jazz"* that I *"had the image of a spiritual person, but I was bowing down to the golden cows of religiosity and philosophy"*.

To make a long story short, I ran the gambit of religion to the detriment of others and myself until God pulled the plug. I found myself running away and eventually I ran so far that I found myself in the desert. And there I was, trying to sort things out. What I found there was amazing! I found that God was there, and as a matter of fact, He had been with me all along!

Culture, Tradition, Christianity and Clashes

Modern, but traditional Christianity has always lagged behind the cutting edge of the world culture by about 10 to 15 years. Some groups are as much as 25 to 50 years behind. There are good reasons for this, but for lack of a better word, in "arrogance" the church calls some cultural phenomenon that has nothing to do with sin—moral decadence. The standpoint is that *anything new* in thought, culture, or trends has to be of the Devil.

Now, I'm not talking about obvious moral decline in sin nature and anti-God trends in our society, but more along the lines of culture and social norms that tend to shape any autonomous community—including "Christian" community.

For instance, when rock music first hit the scene here in the United States, there was a huge outcry by Christian leaders and preachers. They would preach to the thump of the pulpit and loudly proclaim that it had to be of the Devil. In the late sixties and early seventies, those words pounded into my psyche and would echo throughout my hollow world of confusion.

I therefore concluded with the help of well meaning teachers and preachers that the worldly beat in Rock ‘n’ Roll was just too intoxicating to have come from God. I would hear evangelists preach that the emphasis on the 2nd and 4th beat was a representation of the sex act, which also represented the vile decadence of a morally corrupt society. Therefore only the traditional organ and piano would be allowed in our sanctuaries!

But my mind kept counteracting with thoughts like: “didn’t the organ and piano have their hay-day of controversies when they were introduced to the church?” “Don’t orchestras and marching bands have rhythm, beats and melodies to portray a mood and elicit an emotion?” “What makes rock and roll any different than traditional marching bands, country, folk, or big band styles?”

I also heard preachers say that there would never be a place for drums in the church because drum beats and *rhythms* came from ancient and “evil devil worship” in deep, dark Africa. Imagine that! Rhythm was an invention of ancient devil worship!

It turns out that many of these silly statements came from racially motivated biases, and often were laced with deep seeded control issues.

Me, I naturally felt guilty—because I loved the beat and the music of Rock and Roll, but was heavily influenced by the teachings of the familiar, “Golden Cow” church! Oh man! I dreaded the thought of having to listen to George Beverly Shea for the rest of my life.

Even as the “Jesus Freak” music of Larry Norman and others were making headway within some Christian circles, I was made to feel guilty about everything that had a beat, and in which didn’t have a three-point sermon with illustrations. Matter of fact, I was beginning to feel guilty about everything that I loved. Somehow I grasp that anything pleasurable was carnal, because it threw right up in the face of traditional religion. The consensus was...and still is somewhat today: *“If it feels good, it can’t be good”*.

As I have traveled the world, I have found that even well meaning, well-rounded Christians still cannot grasp the intricacy of how our spirit, mind, and body are intertwined. I have found much

controversy surrounding the issue, and have been told to stay away from such discussions, because it leads to depravity!

Now days, many a faithful follower will have the tendency to judge how carnal a person is because of some of the choices of what they may like to occasionally do. Some times they may be things that are frowned upon in some of their conservative circles. But to a totally different social circle, the issue doesn't even cross the mind as being "carnal". It is a totally different world view.

There is even an emphasis now that here in the United States, unless a Christian votes conservative Republican, with a "Tea Party" twist, there's just no way they can understand God's will for themselves, mankind, or America.

Yeah, I know all the traditional verses that talk about the carnal mind and Paul's teaching, or at least our interpretation about dwelling on carnal things. We are supposed to "beat our body into subjection", "practice self control", and lend ourselves willingly to "conform to the Spirit's control".

These are all well taught and might I add, *sound Christian Doctrines* to which I agree whole-heartedly we should practice. But most of the religious teachings you come across about carnality are stretched to fit a local traditional and cultural worldview. Even Watchman Nee's greatest work of the "Spiritual Man" is full of his own worldview. But then again, they are HIGHLY valuable to understand how the Holy Spirit works within our spirit to do God's work, and how the enemy deceives us into following our flesh.

My artistic soul likes to reach deeper and explore beyond the traditional, and see what lies behind such doctrinal pillars of the denominational and institutional church. In true Bohemian style, I like to think that if life is too carnal, then why does God leave us here on earth when we become Christians? Are we supposed to ignore our so-called "carnal tendencies" while we are in the world and become "Ashuritic" to the point of self-mutilation to prove our faithfulness to a Holy God? Is this not "works"? Is this not intrinsically carnal? From a strictly Spiritual viewpoint, is this not but living in the flesh and not in the Spirit?

Where is the balance? Where is the real fence line drawn between the two extremes? Is it a local traditional bias that underscores the dividing line, or is it one's own conscience? Where is the common ground between doctrinal tradition and one's own worldview as revealed to us by the Holy Spirit?

If one were to draw a line in the sand somewhere different than the pastor of the First Baptist Church, are they carnal? No doubt, if the line is more liberal than his, there will be the tendency to think of them as carnal. One could draw the line even further to the extreme right and become a believer that anything of modern convenience is carnal. But those who formulate the carnal lists in the traditional church view this as going "too far".

So who is it really that gets to decide the dividing line?

I am not advocating complete depravity to emphasize grace by any means. There are rather specific things that God hates, and because we love Him we tend to rather do the things He likes. Nor do I advocate that only the truly spiritual one is the one who spends all his time in prayer and utterly shuns everything of "worldly" existence. (Don't confuse this with the merit of seeking spiritual values from God's perspective, and not letting the world influence our thinking.) But where is this list in the Bible of things that are supposedly carnal, that the traditionalists like to tack on to the church constitution?

Please excuse me if I'm a little blunt here. But this is an issue that delves deep into the core of traditional norms, whereas in these circles when it comes to conformity—it's all or nothing! The traditionalist believes if you think outside the box—you are a heretic—and worthy of hell fire!

So, If I may...let's dig into the "rule book" philosophy to see where this issue of "carnality" lies in the scheme of daily living.

If one is a real Bible scholar, we will have to admit and agree that we rely on principles taught in the Bible and not lists. These principles often tend to bring different interpretations—depending on personal cultural backgrounds of do's and don'ts.

Let me repeat this if you missed it. Most don't like to admit it, but the majority of Biblical interpretation relies on a local and

traditional bias to make sense of the social issues that come up in the Christian walk.

When you think it through, it's sort of like bad science. If one has a theory or assumption and programs his experiments and resultant computer analysis to correspond with his assumptions...viola! He proves his theory because he has already pre-programmed his data to match his assumptions.

It's the same thing with Biblical interpretation. One may have a pre-programmed assumption about who God is and what He thinks, based on His own culture and traditions. Thus any search to find truth in the Bible is seen through the filter of these assumptions and traditional bias. The question that one needs to ask is, "Do we read our Bibles to find out what it says, or to prove our assumptions?" This is a huge blind spot in all religions. It's sad, but mostly true.

Somehow we get this idea that we already know everything there is to know about God, His plan, His purpose, His ways. I've heard it said like this many times: "The Canon is closed and therefore any 'revelation' or relevancy that isn't spelled out from our assembled scriptures and Western interpretation is heresy."

We (myself included here) think we can dissect the eternal "I Am" into bite sized little pieces. We boldly label and categorize His every facet and program; and then we tend to put Him and His Kingdom up on a shelf for everyone to admire how great of a Christian and Theologian we are!

Once again, in a strict Spiritual sense...this too is carnality. For in this case, man's intellect and pride must be puffed up to accept his own marvelous findings.

Cultural Conformity

OK. I can hear some thumping going on in the pulpit! Maybe I should back up and look a little more at my own circumstances in light of this—and explore the issues a little more in perspective, to bring some further clarity to my own mind.

As I mentioned before, I was a rewarded, faithful attendee of church from the get go. If the doors of my church were open, I was there. (Well...except for the times as a teenager I would sneak out of church and wander the parking lots, bored to tears with religiosity!) As a matter of fact, when you get down to it, I just always seemed to have “believed” in a sovereign God. I never really know of any time where I doubted the existence of a personal God that loved me.

Oh sure, I would sometimes look around at other religions and ponder other free wheeling philosophy, wondering what they were all about and if it was right for me. But I always came home and rested in the arms of *El Shaddai*.

As far as church goes, I did all the denominational, traditional things. I raised my hand at the proper times. I walked the aisles of commitment, and I even threw a “stick” into the fires of service. These were all things I was compelled to do—and even wanted to do. I felt an uncontrollable desire to do these things. I realize now what or *who* that was, but back then I didn’t really know what it was all about.

When I turned 16 years old, many pieces of the puzzle fell into place, and I realized what all of this “church stuff” meant. It was here at that moment, that the “baptismal fires” of the Spirit suddenly threw me into an amazing new spiritual aspect that opened up the most invigorating and colorful aspect of God that I had never experienced or known before. Life was good! Life with God was incredibly good, even delicious!

But as I look back, I realize my spiritual awakening was quickly stuffed into a “one size fits all” box. I was a casualty of a denominational chokehold of traditional thought.

I was taught to conform to religion.

In my later teen years, this inward conflict of religious reasoning and spiritual experiences literally threw me into a tailspin of searching and rebellion, as I tried to make sense of it all. Mostly, I found it easier to go with the flow of my surroundings—be it either in church or on the streets. I was good at assimilating. When I was in the traditional church, I acted the part even though my spirit was at odds with religiosity. When I was on the streets, I acted the part and

did the things others were doing, although spiritually there was the conflict of the ages warring in my soul.

Still later, after some traumatic experiences of life, I gave in to the wooing of the Spirit to follow God. I can honestly say I really wanted to just follow God and let the Holy Spirit guide me in every aspect of my life. But I still found it easier to go with my surrounding flow and settled in with traditional Christianity as taught by my local church. *It felt* like the right thing to do here. Mostly because it was here, wherein I was raised.

Thus my cultural bias raised its ugly head! It was here that I started the downward spiral into the catacombs of traditional Christianity. I can point to this moment where I decided to go with the flow of my familiar culture, which in turn smothered my spiritual trust in a God who wanted to take me into the outer limits of a personal relationship.

I trusted a tradition more than God.

I placed my faith in a cultural bias, which proved to be shifting sand—and which led me away from the solid foundation of enjoying the presence of God. And in which I might add—He was wanting to enjoy mine! I let go and walked away from that invigorating and colorful aspect that was once shown to me earlier.

Please don't accuse me of wanting to condemn the church, which nurtured and guided me throughout my formative years. I am not in the least bit sorry for my upbringing. I am very thankful for godly parents, and thankful for an environment that encouraged moral issues. I do not deny that in these things I was truly blessed!

In the same way I am thankful for my godly parents who raised me in the best way they knew how. I am very grateful. However that still doesn't make them right in all of their decisions and opinions about their care for me. Sometimes they got it wrong, just like I did with my own children. But condemn them for not being perfect? No, I would not do that. The problem lies with me and the way I conformed and bowed down to the golden cow of religiosity!

However, in that upbringing I can actually single out a particular teaching that made me a slave to the religion of my youth. It's a trap that most do not even know exists. Even well meaning, godly men and women do not realize it.

We have already discussed this, but it is important to recant how this issue can squash our relationship with God. I would quake in my shoes as I was taught about the terribly misused "Fear of the Lord". This was usually accompanied with the traditional oratory image of the old man with the long white beard, having a LARGE correction stick in his hand. It was always stressed that he would not hesitate to smack me up side the head whenever I would have the slightest inclination to step outside the boundaries of the church's moral opinion. If I wandered too far—death would be a certain consequence!

I can remember often pondering that God must really hate people in general! The preacher said that everyone that didn't believe as we do, were not really saved! After all, they never came to OUR church and heard the true gospel!

Furthermore, it would be proclaimed that it was *my job* to go out and wrangle up these wretched sinners, and herd them into the real church, so they could hear the Gospel and be saved! If I didn't, I was guilty of condemning them to hell because of my lack of obedience! I can vividly picture that if I didn't spend every spare minute in personal evangelism, that Old Man up there would certainly "pop me good" till I got in line with what the preacher said and obeyed! People were dying every second, and it was my fault that they were going to hell!

That's some real dicey stuff for a teenager that has a vivid imagination to internalize. No doubt, I fell in line and marched to their drumbeat, for fear of retaliation from the taskmaster. I bowed down and conformed to the sacred cow.

Don't get me wrong. I am all for personal evangelism in how we share the gospel, especially in relationships and by how we live. But this type of evangelism was belligerent. I was taught to force the "traditional" Gospel down people's throats. The lost were described as being so blind; they were deaf and dumb to anything spiritually

good. It didn't matter whether they were ready or not to accept anything about God. The magical formula was that they just needed to hear the message and recite a sentence prayer to escape the pit fires of hell! And I was armed to the teeth with answers to dubious responses. I was loaded down with Bible verses and tracts—enough to leave hundreds wherever the spirit deemed necessary.

Yes sadly (I did say *sadly*), I did my part of turning scores away from the real Good News that there is a God up there that really, really, really loves us, and understands our very core nature—good and bad; and that He wanted to have a real personal relationship with us through the provision of the sinless sacrifice of Jesus Christ!

Culture Crash: Going off the Deep End

After 25 plus years of faithfully playing *the game* of church, the curtains fell; the other shoe dropped; and the cows and roosters all came home to find the barn empty with no place to roost.

It all felt like a charade. It felt like I'd been cheated out of an inheritance. It felt like I believed a lie and the enemy stole my life.

Although I say that, I also want you to know that not all was meaningless. I have experienced some very good ministry moments; and I also feel that literally hundreds of thousands at least heard and responded to the good news of the gospel through non belligerent ministries that were loving, well planned, and thoughtful; and in which I was privileged to be a part. I feel that God was there all along, blessing and using those events for His glory, despite my blindness and the focus on the wrong things. As in the testimony of the saints and thousands before me, He blessed in spite of myself!

However, He was also there trying to get my attention. I can just see Him off to the side throwing His arms up and waving, trying to communicate with me that there was a *much deeper* reality, understanding, and relationship with Himself that He wanted to take me into.

Because I was so blinded by the modern rituals of “*Churchianity*”, I missed it. God had to take drastic measures. He

pulled the plug on everything that I held dear, just so I would realize the most important thing in following God is not about our works and how we perform!

When I look back, I realize I was holding on to all those years of work in the ministry as my shining hope for the future. I watched it quickly burn away like hay and stubble. When my wife of 23 years filed for divorce, I fell off into the deep end and all of those 20 something years of ministry went up in smoke. Literally, I was abandoned and orphaned—by just about everyone I had called my Christian family and friends. One by one I watched them all walk away; some to sit in judgment armed with damning evidence and testimony declaring me “unfit” to be called a Christian or friend, because I had sunk so low. I was left with nothing to cling to, *except God Himself*.

It has taken many years to recover from all of those traumatic life changes. The Holy Spirit has used the good and the bad, along with the desert to teach me many things since. But I have discovered that God was there all along, still whispering that He loved me, and that *He still had a purpose for my life*. I learned some very key things about God and His love.

Let me clarify something here. I am not saying that Christians who are in traditional institutional churches are all blind and stuck in a guilt-ridden, traditional box. I am relating these things because not all traditions and interpretations represent all of the true church and real believers who have the Holy Spirit residing in their heart of hearts. Some may be perfectly happy in these cultural settings and look forward to their traditional programs each week. I can honestly say if these people are sure they are doing what God wants them to do, it’s not a problem at all to me! It is just not what I am hearing from God, and it is not where God wants me to be. Honestly, I do not trust anything set up and run by men, and I have good solid reasons to stand by these revelations. I would say to these people who stay in the institutional church to be sure that God is in it, and that you don’t trust the false spirit of religion as your guide to truth.

But please, let's not compare our line in the cultural sand and start judging each other because of our own limited and personal viewpoints.

All of Christianity can stand together on the common ground we share, and lift up the name of the Lord Jesus together if we would but forebear one another in love. Our common ground is Christ. *Yeshua haMeshiach (Jesus Christ)* is our "One Hope, One Lord, One Faith, One Baptism, and One God and Creator of all." (Eph 4:6) All of the "grey areas" are just personal viewpoints that should not get in the way of how we can each be brothers and sisters in the Lord.

Christianity is a Relationship with God

All this retrospection boils down to this one eternal and earth shattering truth. As simple as it sounds, this is what God revealed to me: *True Christianity is all about our relationship with God.*

Yahweh, Elohim El Shaddai wants to Tabernacle or dwell with us. It is not about our local church, our ministry, our theology, our doctrine, or about our faithfulness to any Christian task or organization. God wants to dwell *within* us through His Spirit. He wants to interact and fellowship with us mere mortals in HIS way, and His way ONLY—not man's way. He wants a house—a spiritual house made up of you and me as living stones fit together and formed into the image of *Meshiach*, as His Bride and Body.

As for those of us that He has called and have heard His voice, if ANYTHING gets in the way of this very thing He wants to accomplish in our relationship with Him, I have no doubt that he will remove that obstacle, just as any Good Shepherd would do for the sheep that He loves, be it good in the eyes of man or not.

If for one moment we could just see ourselves through the eyes of God, I think we would realize that God is not overly

concerned that we are somewhat carnal as we start this new relationship, trapped in this fleshly and finite body but for a moment. As we learn to crawl, then walk, and ultimately run in the Spirit, we learn to daily nail that flesh to the cross. Every day we become more like Him, as we learn more of Him and what He wants us to say, do, and be!

It's very simple--it's all about Him!

If we tend to let sin dominate our actions and fellowship within this relationship with Him, He will *lovingly* place obstructions, obstacles, and trials in our paths to channel us in the right direction that will eventually help us learn to trust Him entirely, leaning not into our own understanding.

Yes, He is a Holy God and cannot dwell with sin because of His nature. BUT just as the story of the prodigal son reiterates, He *always* sees us as His redeemed children; washed in the blood of the Lamb, with ALL of our sins forgiven, even though we may be covered with sin for the moment! He patiently waits and longs for us to come home and be clothed in His clothing of eternal blessing.

Soon we will be free of this sinful flesh and physically free to be with Him forever and ever in His Holy presence, within His garden. That's where we are going back to—back to the garden! That's something to look forward to!

Meanwhile, we are caught in this dreadful world. But this is not something to be sorrowful about. For as Donald Miller has discovered, so too have I: *"Life is to be lived, not just gotten through."* Jesus said in John 10:10, *"I have come that they may have life and have it to the full!"* Yes, He leaves us here on earth for a purpose. Our life is to be completely *full* of His ways to further establish and build His Kingdom. His way is filled with joy, satisfaction, and the incomparable riches of His grace! For we are His workmanship created to do good things—and these things were created for us to do even before the foundations of the earth were laid! (Eph. 2:10)² That's some full living, right there!

We are also a light. You might say we are beacons that point the way to God. We are giant searchlights that cry out: "This way to God's dwelling!" And to those that seek God, God will definitely

reveal Himself to them. (But it won't be on man's terms!!) And possibly, we'll get the chance to introduce those seekers to Yeshua—because we are great examples of God's grace and already know Him, *personally*.

Memories are good. Painful ones teach us many things. But the past is the past and now we must let go of it. We press on! We let go of heartaches, disappointments, failures and so called successful ministries.

NOW that I have learned these amazing and simple facts of who God is and who I am—once again, life is good! Life with God is incredibly good; and dare I say, *delicious!*

-----✕-----

Notes:

1. Donald Miller, "Blue Like Jazz", Thomas Nelson Publishers, Nashville, TN., 2003
2. Why not read the entire second chapter of Ephesians and then Romans 8.

Part III

Paths out of the Desert

Chapter 10

Serving God, not Self

Sometimes we may miss an important truth about God because we have a veil of culture draped over our understanding. We tend to interpret truth to the limited traditional understanding in which we find ourselves. When God finally gets through to us and removes the veil, along with the scales that blur our vision, the realization and impact of this revelation can be liberating, to say the least. Here's how God got a hold of our lives with an important truth we tend to over look.

Lifting the Veil of Self

The Pastor was preaching in Luke 16. "Ho-hum."

"How many more times must we hear about Lazarus and the Rich man?"

In my boredom I strayed over to these verses in Luke 17, and my-my, *something caught my attention!* "Caught my attention" really isn't strong enough. It's more like it grabbed me by the ears pulling downward, and stuffed my nose into something that suddenly opened my eyes into a deep truth that eludes even the most mature Christian. There it was! The key that unlocked my shackles and tossed me the golden key to my locked door of opportunities!

Luke 17: 5-10 The apostles said to the Lord, "Increase our faith!"⁶ And the Lord said, "If you had faith as a grain of mustard seed, you could say to this sycamore tree, 'Be rooted up, and be planted in the sea,' and it would obey you."⁷ "Will any one of you, who has a servant plowing or keeping sheep, say to him when he has come in from the field, 'Come at once and sit down at the table?'⁸ Will he not rather say to him, 'Prepare supper for me, and gird yourself and serve me, till I eat and drink; and afterward you shall eat and drink'?⁹

Does he thank the servant because he did what was commanded? ¹⁰ So you also, when you have done all that is commanded you say, 'We are unworthy servants; we have only done what was our duty.'"

The wave of Truth hit me so hard, that I was knocked right back into spiritual reality. It poured over me like a refreshing river of pure water and washed away all the grim and sand of the desert! There it was—*the key*. *It was my key*, the one that I had lost, and I was groping around to find.

Afterward, I shared these verses with Hilda, and we began to ponder on these verses...almost incessantly—for weeks, for months.

This was a truth that we somehow missed. (Let me rephrase that.) This is a truth we thought we knew, but in reality we didn't know. It's sort of like "head knowledge" verses "spiritual knowledge" of the Truths of God.

This pattern of "head knowledge" is repeated all throughout Scripture, and continues throughout the Body today—even though we have the Holy Spirit to illumine us to these Truths. Why do we miss them? It's probably because we do not always walk in the Spirit by faith. Instead, we choose to walk in the flesh relying on our own cognizance and tradition to get us through. Or worse, we rely solely on a preacher, or some well-esteemed Bible teacher to spoon-feed us the Truth.

But here it was right in front of our eyes. It was the truth that seems to have eluded us, as if there was a veil draped over our understanding. And maybe there was a veil. A veil that Satan loves to use so we are obscured from the truth of what God is saying to us through His Word. We had been struck down by this truth, and we started confessing our *lack of faith—and selfish motivation to be a servant of God*.

Wait a minute, you may ask. Somehow lack of faith and selfish motivation to be a servant don't really seem to go together.

You're right. At first glance it doesn't really seem to be, but Jesus was teaching this very thing from the first moment He started His ministry.

Looking back, the desert taught us to be humble and run to God who loves us beyond measure. We also learned that we must become a servant in order to be great in the Kingdom of God. Yet we continued to think that when it comes to faith—one must rise up in their own strength and become a Champion! “Take the bull by the horns.” Boldly say, “Give me that mountain!”

I would often think, “Yeah—that’s got *me* written all over it—‘Champion of Faith!’”

Yet, while wondering around in boredom on a Sunday morning service in a little back woods, country church, God struck me down with His Truth and it sunk into the oblivion of my soul. It “cut me asunder” and lay open a deep seeded *lie* that I harbored in my heart.

It seems I was looking at God as my “Sugar Daddy”. In other words, I thought, “If I do this—God *has to* bless me with that.” If I do and say the right things, I can say to the tree “move”, and it gets up and runs to the sea!

There ya go! Man of faith! Faith that can move mountains! Champion for the Kingdom! Slayer of Dragons!

However the Truth screamed, “You’re an unworthy servant!”

Here’s what God said to strike down my attitude . . . my pride: “*AFTER you have done all that is commanded, you say... ‘we are unworthy Servants!’*”

I confess. I’m guilty of doing exactly what Jesus described was the rich man’s problem in the story of Lazarus in chapter 16. Just like the rich man, I looked down on the lowly. My faith was strong. I did all the right things! I wasn’t anything like those mealy, weak-kneed flounders in the faith that didn’t follow the Lord – like. . .like I did!

I was too proud not to see it! After all, I went to seminary and I already know all there is to know about God, faith, and the Bible!

Ok, Honestly. I really don’t believe that, but I act that way all too often, especially when it comes to faith and being a servant.

The Misinterpretation of Obedience and Blessings

Here's the issue: Does fasting warrant a blessing? Does obedience demand a wish granted? Does "pray without doubting" automatically put us in the bonus round?

"When the desires of our heart are perfectly in line with His desires, then we will get all that we ask for."

*Max Lucado*¹

So what is God's desire?

It's not the "name it and claim it" philosophy that has run amuck in the Christian world that I'm talking about here, but it does connect with the basic principle of acting on our faith and tying it in with being a servant. As far as where "name it and claim it" is twisted into error, we really don't see how claiming a yellow Hummer for our exalted ego has anything to do with advancing the Kingdom.

What we're alluding to is the issue of the so-called magic formula: "Disobedience brings cursing, and obedience brings blessings." "If we do this...God *has to do* that." You know what we mean. It's taught in many pulpits, almost every Sunday. "IF you attend every service, God's going to reward you." "IF you give your 10% no matter what faces you, God's got to give you back 100-fold, pressed down and shaken." "IF you pray and fast, you'll be able to get the impossible!" "Live the faithful life and you'll get a crown of glory!". "Obey God and you'll get a mansion!" "Jump this high, God has got to..."

Is the light bulb coming on here?

The flip side to the magic formula is: "If we disobey", well...watch out for the big stick of correction flying out from hand of God! He is ever ready to knock us up side the head with some heavenly wisdom!

Now don't take us incorrectly on any of this. It's not that these things are wrong in every respect. Let's just think about what the motivating factor is in all of this. It is this *motivating factor* that is the lie we have jumped at and swallowed, "hook, line, and sinker".

If we are obeying to get our reward, we missed the point completely.

Game over.

If our obedience is getting our just reward for being obedient...we are not fit for the Kingdom of God.

If we are following God because of the fringe benefits, we missed the whole point of what being a Christian is all about.

Look at Luke 18:18-30. Here is when the rich young ruler came to Jesus and asked him what he must do to inherit eternal life. What does Jesus tell him? “Keep the commandments.” The rich young ruler replies he has been doing that since childhood. In other words—He’s been obedient. So what does Jesus then say to him? “Well...there is just one little matter left on the table that you haven’t thought about.” “Go sell everything you have and give it to the poor!” “THEN you’ll have treasure in heaven.” “THEN—Come follow me!”

Can’t you just see the look of disappointment on the young man’s face. “But-but...I’ve got a lot of stuff!” Can’t you just hear him say in his aristocratic way, “How irresponsible would that be for me to sell it all and just live day to day, hand to mouth, like...like YOU do!?”

Now we’re not advocating here that we all have to sell everything and live like gypsies in order to be a servant. What we want to emphasize is the underlying motivation here that Jesus points out.

Here’s the point. If we are not *willing* to leave, or give up everything for the sake of the Kingdom, we are not worthy of it. If ole’ “*numero uno*” isn’t taken out of the way first and foremost, “obeying and following ain’t gonna mean a hill of beans” to God. Doing all the right things for the wrong reason is not going to cut the mustard!

Putting our personal wants in front of the Savior is what we’re talking about here. Let’s put it in blunt terms:

*When our personal wants ... our personal desires
become more important than the Master, those
desires become our God.*

Max Lucado said it right:

*"When the desires of our heart are perfectly in line with
His desires, then we will get all that we ask for."*

When we desire what HE wants...all of our petty issues melt away. Selfishness is burnt up in the sacrificial fires of the offering. The things of this world pass away. The old becomes new. The New Creation emerges.

What I was struck down with had been a reoccurring issue in my spiritual life. I had been dissatisfied and frustrated for a long time. It's a longing I had stirring inside of me for quite some time – that God is holding back something from me that He wanted me to do. I had strived to be "obedient". I walked the "narrow way". I had given my life, my time, and my money...but always feeling that something was missing. I pushed the issue...striving to make things happen. It fell apart. I moped. I wrote about it. I prayed ever so fiercely about it. Nothing. Years had gone by. Decades had slipped through my fingers without seeing that one thing, *the big dream* that God placed inside me to do.

The reason—selfishness! *My personal wants were always in the way.*

It's been frustrating, yet interesting how things have come about almost in full circle. God had to take EVERYTHING away that I held in esteem, in order for me to be in the right frame of mind to do the very thing I had always dreamed of doing. God kept leading me right back here to this very issue. But I just kept missing the lesson. The veil was glued to my forehead.

It's so easy to be misled in our motivation. Somehow, I imagined that my desire was not selfish. After all, I had an attitude of wanting to glorify God. But still, God kept things away from me, and out of my reach. I rationalized; I philosophized; I cried. I died. I wallowed in apathies.

I missed the lesson.

Then out of nowhere-- during a little visit to a small country church and a casual glance at a monumental Truth, the Holy Spirit

flipped the lights on! It was like the veil was lifted—the world was a new place—like I had been asleep for all these years. Something inside of me just *came ALIVE!* WOWSIES!! I kept asking myself...was it something I did? Was it something I prayed?

NO.

It was just God saying, "OK, It's time. Time to get the message." "Time to learn the great lesson." "It's not about YOU...It's all about ME!"

"AFTER you have done everything you have been asked to do, you should say—"We are UNWORTHY servants."

It's not, "HEY! I deserve something here for my efforts!" My friend, it's all about GOD. We are just His servants. He is the great potter; we are the meager clay. He's shaping us into what He wants us to be.

If my motivation is, "I'll get something from God, if I do this." Then it is not acceptable in God's eyes. That is what God has been gently *explaining* to me for so many years.

I thought I knew that before. I thought I was there. But apparently I still hadn't quite got the correct gist of the message.

Somehow, I missed the bus.

The disciples needed to learn this too, from what Jesus said to them after they asked him to increase their faith. Look what was going on around them. Jesus was healing people left and right. Multitudes were following them around to see what miracle was going to happen next. They were part of an amazing thing—yet here they were—not a part of it, really.

They wanted to be in on the action. (Hey, who wouldn't?) So when they asked for increased faith to make a tree wither up and die...what did Jesus say to them? "You haven't quite gotten the lesson yet." "It's not about you. It's about ME!"

They got the message later on, after the resurrection and when the Spirit of God moved on them. They understood it then and that is why the Gospels record this...so we too can get the lesson when it is time for God to move among us.

Hey! I don't know about you, but I'm GLAD it's not about me!

Further Clarification of Faith and Obedience

Now, let's explain a little bit about what this is, so you aren't confused about what we are saying. One thing we are not saying is that you have to be perfectly obedient to experience God's blessings and see God's Truth. We are better off to be careful about the "perfect" part when it comes to obedience and faith. "If any man says he is without sin he is a liar." (1 Jn 1:8) We will not be completely perfect till we see Christ face to face. Our position in Christ is perfect, but our current bodies are not.

Should that matter to God?

Know this--He knows we are but flesh, but he has also given us the Holy Spirit to dwell within us.

It is important to remember that the same power Christ used while he was in the flesh, is available to us if we combine it with faith. (*"...Although he was a son...he learned obedience from what he suffered."* Heb 5:8) (Look at Eph 1:17-23.) Faith is a crucial element here. The Children of Israel were not faithful to the Covenant God gave them so He turned away from them (Heb. 7:9) To them, it was a system based on works and fear. Christ came and perfectly fulfilled the obedience part of the 1st Covenant.

But our NEW Covenant with God is based solely on grace and faith. (*"Not of works lest any man should boast!"* Eph 2:8-9) The Israelites of the Old Covenant did not combine what they knew with faith, or else they would have approached their relationship with God in a whole different way. (Heb 4:2)

Here is what you need to hear: *our obedience is faith*, or correctly stated: it is *obedience that comes from Faith* (Rom 1:5) or *obedience to the Faith* (Rom 16:26). It's faith in God. It's faith in His promises. That includes His Word, His love, His Son, His Spirit, and His Truth. Our faith proclaims that what He says is Truth, and all that He says, will come to pass.

Look at it this way. Often because we fear losing control, we will *disobey* so that we remain in the driver's seat. This, more or less, boils down to a lack of faith or trust. We must have obedient faith in God's way, which allows us to confirm God's Word and eliminate fear to trust Him completely.

When faith comes first...not selfishness...all the other obedience stuff (like the things He really wants us to do) is easy. Why? Because we just follow. We are but servants. We want what HE wants! Who cares if we get a reward! We are only doing what the Master tells us to do anyway.

If God wants that tree to jump into the sea—then “by God” affirm it; say it; believe it! That tree will run to the sea and do a double flip with a cannon ball to get in the water!

Let's further clarify some issues...Spurgeon wrote:

“...It has been supposed by many ill-instructed people that the doctrine of justification by faith is opposed to the teaching of good works, or obedience. There is no truth in the supposition. We preach the obedience of faith. Faith is the fountain, the foundation, and the fosterer of obedience. Men obey not God till they believe him. We preach faith in order that men may be brought to obedience. To disbelieve is to disobey. One of the first signs of practical obedience is found in the obedience of the mind, the understanding, and the heart; and this is expressed in believing the teaching of Christ, trusting to his work, and resting in his salvation. Faith is the morning star of obedience. If we would work the work of God, we must believe on Jesus Christ whom he hath sent.”²

Look at Ephesians 2:9:

“For we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.”

When faith is put in its proper perspective, and we know that we are here to do *His bidding*...look at what God says we are: “*His workmanship*, created in Christ Jesus to *do good works*.”

It is also important to realize that “Obedience” does not mean “Holiness” as some espouse. We can do nothing in and of ourselves to make ourselves holy. ONLY GOD can make us holy through faith in the shed blood of Jesus Christ.

We are created to do good works and our works are evidence of our faith. Just don’t get the cart before the horse in this issue. *Our works will not create holiness, or blessings, or miracles!* However our obedience of faith in God and His Word of Truth will produce holiness, blessings, and miracles. Remember, our heart—*our motivation*—is important to God.

These Truths may not be spotted right away. We miss things because our own agenda gets in the way. Our own cultural slant on the way we look at things puts a veil over our eyes and hides the truth that calls out to us. That’s why we need a time for God to work on us. We need time to strip away all of the selfishness and clutter of “stuff” that takes our attention away from the truth.

That’s where the desert comes in. It helps us focus. It clarifies things. When we finally open ourselves up to learn from the Spirit of Truth, He helps us spot the truth of His Word. God then starts to show us the path out of the sands and into the Promised Land. This is the land flowing with milk and honey. (Where life is good—even delicious!) This is the land of those dreams that God instilled in us to go and do!

Look at the latter part of verse 9 in Ephesians 2: “...*Which He prepared in advance for us to do!*”

Are you thinking that God doesn’t have something special for you to do? Think again! He has prepared it before time began—a special work for you to do! I would even bet you know what it is! What’s that big dream you have always had? You know, that nagging feeling that somehow you missed the boat of that special something that you always dreamed about you would do for God?

Has the light come on?

Can you not see you have a dream that God has instilled in you to do for Him and His glory?

And since we mention dreams being instilled in us...we highly recommend a couple of books that you may want to read. The first one is “The Prayer of Jabez”, by Bruce Wilkinson², and the second is a follow-up book also by Bruce Wilkinson called, “The Dream Giver”³.

To those of you who raise up your head and say that these books only glorify “Word Faith”, “Positive Affirmation” and “Name it and Claim it” philosophy, let us just state firmly that we don’t believe you have really read the books without bias—much less understand this principle of being servants. Perhaps you are missing the lesson. If all you get is “name it and claim it” from reading Bruce’s books, perhaps you should reexamine your heart and clarify some issues that you need to work through before God is free to let you loose to build His Kingdom.

Our goal as a servant should be to glorify the Lord, advance His Kingdom, and do HIS bidding. Our God is not our own appetite for things and our own personal well-being. This is not about us!

What is impossible with Man IS possible with God

Let’s look at one more thing before we delve into this “selfish” issue in another chapter.

Look at what Jesus tells his disciples after that exchange about the rich young ruler in Luke 18. Jesus explained that it was hard for rich people to enter into the Kingdom of God because they were so burdened down by personal stuff, or selfishness. The disciples in verse 26 said, “Who then can be saved?” In other words—we are all selfish! It’s human nature!

It’s interesting—no, just down right *amazing* how Jesus responds to that. (This is just such a “God thang!”) Jesus says—“What is impossible with men *IS* possible with God!” Read that again! “What is impossible with men *IS* possible with God!”

Here is what that means to us.

There are many out there with their “fire insurance” of salvation. Oh yes, they believe in Jesus and His death and resurrection, but really when it comes down to brass tacks, they are consumed with self.

Come to think of it, we all are! We will not experience the full measure of the blessings that God has in store for us until we learn how to surrender all to God and His Kingdom. This is not just a mental understanding, but it must come sincerely from the heart. It will not come till we bow the knees and acknowledge that *Yeshua haMeshiach* is Lord of all; and that what He wants is more important than our own selfishness, or appetite for material things.

It may take some doing, but to those He has called, God will eventually bring us around to the truth! It may take years, it may take decades—but God always comes through.

When we *finally surrender all* . . . let me repeat that. When we *FINALLY* surrender all of our wants, desires, and dreams to the King of Kings and admit we are but *lowly servants*, and that the real reason of our existence is to glorify His Name...then get ready to be unleashed with the incredible power that can only be managed under the strict supervision of the Master!

Want a lesson in faith?

“What is impossible with men IS possible with God!”

Did Peter get the lesson here in Luke? Maybe he did, maybe he didn't. We know for sure he did later on! But here Peter replies, “We have left all we had to follow you.” Now granted, Peter was not a wealthy man. He was a lowly fisherman. But he and his brother Andrew, along with his partners James and John, did leave the family business to follow Christ. Luke 5 says they just left their boats there on the shore and followed Jesus. They literally left all they had, along with the most precious thing they had—their families. You might call it “wild abandonment.”

Now we are not going to get into any theological debate about the importance of the family and taking care of our own wife and kids;

but here, in this instant when Jesus called them—it was the right thing to do to leave their families and follow Christ.

Jesus also gives us GREAT encouragement here in verse 29. He says,

“I tell you the truth, no one who has left home or their families for the sake of the Kingdom of God will fail to receive many times as much in this age and in the age to come, eternal life!”

When and if we get the right *motivation* about serving, we will not fail to be blessed many times over, as to what we left behind. The Rich Young Ruler should have taken up the offer to sell all he had! He would have been so much better off following God, than he would have ever been, trying to keep up with the Jones’ and guard his stash! The rich young ruler is a lesson for all of us. We are no different than he is.

The blessings of God will pour from heaven because of correct motivation! *Now, please don’t look at this as just material blessings!* That means you haven’t gotten the lesson yet! We have learned that we will receive what we need, when we need it to further the Kingdom, and bring God His rightful glory! (Study the Sermon on the Mount. Matt 6:25-34; Lk 12:22-35) God is always faithful. ALWAYS! It’s not only here and now (in this age), but also think of the granddaddy prize of them all—*eternal life* and the permanent dwelling we receive in the age to come, and which may already be at our doorstep!

Now that is something well worth leaving everything behind for! Trading the temporal for the eternal is always a win-win situation, if you ask us!!

Want to learn a great truth? Learn this “servant motivation” lesson well. It may well be your express ticket to the Promised Land. This Promised Land is a garden beyond our wildest imagination!

-----✕-----

Notes:

1. Max Lucado, "*It's Not About Me*", 2004, Integrity Publishers, Brentwood, TN
2. "*The Obedience of Faith*" A Sermon delivered on Thursday Evening, August 21st, 1890, by C. H. SPURGEON, At the Metropolitan Tabernacle, Newington. <http://www.spurgeon.org/sermons/2195.htm>
3. Bruce Wilkinson, "*The Prayer of Jabez*"; 2000, Multnomah Publishers; Sisters, Oregon
4. Bruce Wilkinson, "*The Dream Giver*"; 2003, Multnomah Publishers; Colorado Springs, CO

Chapter 11

Following God

"Early Celtic believers referred to the Holy Spirit as the Wild Goose, a name rightly describing the unfettered, free, and wild nature of God. They knew that God could never be tamed, that following his haunting cry would be adventure, risk, danger...and life. We've got a phrase we use nowadays that shows our contempt for such a radical life. We call certain adventures "wild goose chases." I have no idea if there's any direct historical connection, but the contrast is pretty revealing. It shows how much we hate to surrender control of things, and step into the unknown. We want a plan."

John Eldridge¹

God's Ways Are Not Our Ways

What comes across your mind when you hear someone say they are following God? In your mind's eye does it look like a well-ordered march across the land with God leading and beating the drum in cadence as we strut to the beat of His path? Does it remind you of a list of carefully chosen actions that one follows in a perfectly straight-line to get us to a certain destination?

Humanly speaking, mostly what comes to mind when you think of following God is well ordered, well organized, and easy to follow, right?

When it comes to God however, there is one thing you must keep in mind: *God's ways are not our ways.* (Isa 55: 6-11; Ecc 11:5)

Sometimes to get you from point A to point B, the path God takes you is not a straight-line path at all. Sometimes that path may lead you entirely in the opposite direction you think you should be

heading. It may wind and curve, double back, and end up in the same place you started.

It is sort of like what John Eldridge talks about looking like a *wild goose* chase!

Oh sure! Wouldn't it be great if the paths were always smooth and not at all rocky, or up hill and full of peril? Wouldn't it be nice if there were always a gentle brook at your side flowing with clear, cool water to drink whenever you were thirsty, instead of constantly having to put up with sand and smelly cesspools? Wouldn't it be nice if the paths were always lined with perfect places to rest with grass and shade trees, instead of prickly thorns and rocks? And wouldn't it be nice if we had our satellite direction finder and GPS showing us where we are going.

But that is usually not the case.

Is this difficulty we must face because God hates us and doesn't really care for us at all? Is it because we're such thick wayward sinners that we have to endure such hardships to be taught a lesson? Is it because we have to suffer to pay for past sins we have committed?

NO! We endure hardships because we are loved!

OK. I can see the eyes start to roll and Bible verses start to be flung at us about leading us beside still waters, green pastures, etc. But put those aside for a moment and let's think through this subject a little and explore some other Scriptures that tell a different side to abundant living.

Let's go back in time and look at just how an all knowing, all powerful, and all providing God may lead His people, shall we?

A Catastrophe in Confidence

The Children of Israel have just seen the great miracles of God happen before their very eyes. Wow!

Just think of the immense privilege it was to see these incredible things happen. Moses demanded of Pharaoh—"Let my people go!" He didn't let them go, so the ten plagues were unleashed

against Egypt, and God demonstrated to everyone that He was greater than any other god that Egypt could hurl against Him. One by one, these plagues attacked and defeated the most beloved and worshipped gods of the time. Each Egyptian god in its own unique way was taken out. And when the final blow was delivered against the first-born sons of the Egyptians, Pharaoh agreed to let the people go.

Can you imagine the confidence boost it must have been for the captured and slave driven Israelites to see this? Then on top of it all, they were able to plunder their former masters, gather up all the riches they could carry and head out into the desert. Out there in the wide-open desert they would be able to freely worship the one true God, and He would lead them to a land flowing with milk and honey—a place reserved just for them.

Wow!

Redemption was happening at last! After all of those years of suffering, God finally came through—just as He said He would!

On the way out, Pharaoh tried again to destroy Israel. But instead, Pharaoh's army was swallowed up by the Red Sea! This was complete devastation to the once all-powerful Pharaoh of Egypt. Again and again, God showed Himself faithful and able to deliver. This demonstration of God's power and love left no doubt, that He was the *El Shaddai* (*God the almighty provider*), *The Yahweh Nissi* (*The Lord our shield and banner*), and *Yahweh, Elohim Sabaoth*, (*the Lord God of Hosts*).

God was showing that He did not forget His promise that He made to Abraham in Genesis 12 and 15. This was a defining moment in Biblical history. This was the pinnacle of God's demonstration to Israel that He was the Almighty God, and before Him there was no other. This was the day of deliverance. This was the ultimate demonstration of faithfulness and power.

Wouldn't you have loved to be there? Wouldn't it have been fantastic to see all these great miracles happen, and see God triumph time after time against the most powerful, earthly force of the day? It must have been wonderful.

God was visibly there with them every step of the way. As they left Egypt and headed for the Promised Land, He went before

them in a cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night. Who wouldn't want that "*Shekinah Glory*" to be ever present, showing the way they should go? What a time—what a day! This was one of the greatest moments in history!

But, as we take a closer look at this historical account of what happened, we see that the ones who were there to witness all of this incredible history happening before their very eyes somehow missed the very point of what all was taking place.

How can that be?

When we read about this completed historical record, our tendency is to criticize the children of Israel for their reactions to the peril they faced. It is rather easy to scrutinize the lack of faith and seemingly ungrateful people who had witnessed such a wondrous thing. We proclaim in our hearts we would never do such a thing!

Think again!

First of all, let's not be too hasty to criticize. We were not physically there. We did not experience the frightening prospects of being wiped out by a powerful army that would absolutely show no mercy. We did not face the risk of dying of hunger and thirst each day as we wandered in the desert.

Secondly, let's remember we are reading a completed narrative. In other words, we can see the outcome of what God did to rescue His chosen. We know the results—they did not.

Thirdly, these historical records were written for our example of how we are to respond in similar situations. Romans 15:4 and I Corinthians 10:11 state that everything written was for teaching us. The children of Israel went through these trials so that we would be taught that "*through endurance and the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope.*"

So what do we make of it? What do we learn from it?

Rejoice that God is teaching us through examples; and rejoice that God wants us to learn to live by the principles that He gives to us through these historical writings. There is no doubt we are all prone to make the same mistakes as the children of Israel. Be glad that God has shown us an everlasting covenant of grace and mercy, and that our salvation does not depend on how well we pass the desert test.

Keeping these things in mind, let's dive into the story and see what the desert has to teach us.

Why did God bring us out here to die!?!

God led the Israelites out of Egypt and into the desert. Finally, they were going to see the promise to Abraham come true and enter the Promised Land. Yet a strange thing happens. Instead of heading straight to the land flowing with milk and honey, *they took a detour*. Now remember God was going before them, leading them. Why not head straight to their destination?

Wouldn't that make the most sense? After all—there's quite a few people there along with all their *stuff*. Can't you just see the clamor and commotion of getting all those people to move together in the same direction? Think of all the children, the elderly, the carts, animals, and the hustle and bustle of that many people laboring to get to a place they really didn't know; never mind all the stress it must be to be able to get that much inertia moving.

The destination for the Promised Land is northeast along the Mediterranean Sea, yet they go east and then *south—straight into the desert*.

What's up with that? Surely the all knowing, all seeing, Almighty God knows He's taking them in the wrong direction, right? Instead of heading to that wonderful safe place He's been talking about, He takes them into the harshest part of desert. This is a place of nothing but sand and rocks—a real wasteland! There's no water here. It's lifeless. Surely, this is a mistake!

Why would God lead all these people into one of the world's harshest environment—especially after demonstrating all those victories? Come on! This is *the desert* here!

God's ways are not our ways.

We need to back up a little and take an even closer look at what happened during this pivotal time in Exodus. God preserved this

account of history in writing to teach us some deeper things about Himself. But we have to dig a little deeper into his Word.

As we read about Moses in the beginning chapters of Exodus, we see he was special. God separated and protected him at birth and blessed him with a fine Egyptian heritage, even though at the time most Hebrew newborn males were being put to death. He was raised as Pharaoh's own grandson. He was a prince in the courts of Egypt. (*It must have been real nice!*)

But in chapter 3, we find Moses tending sheep on the far side of the desert.

That's interesting.

Here was Moses, recognized as special since birth. He was miraculously spared the death of most Hebrew males at the time, and by God's provision ended up being a well-educated Egyptian/Hebrew, trained in all of the most advanced technologies and wisdom of the day. Now we find him here in the desert—*tending sheep*. This must be another mistake. Why would God have allowed him that entire blessing in the beginning just to tend sheep?

How did Moses end up here?

We read that Moses was acutely aware of his Hebrew heritage. When he saw an Egyptian beating one of the slaves, he became angry and killed the abuser. When Moses realized he was going to be killed by Pharaoh for doing this, he ran into the desert. There he met a priest's daughter and helped her with the herd get some water at the local watering hole. He ended up married to her and tending her father's sheep.

40 years go by.

Moses leads the sheep he was tending to a mountain called *Horeb*, or as the Bible describes it—The Mountain of God. As he was doing his shepherd thing, he notices a strange phenomenon. It was a burning bush. This was not just any ordinary burning bush that one may occasionally come upon in the hot, hot desert. This bush was not being consumed while it was on fire, as you would normally expect.

Imagine Moses sitting there in the shade munching on some goat cheese and honey, looking at this bush just burning away for

hours and hours. Moses might say to himself, “That’s a strange one there! I gotta check this out!”

As he approaches he notices this is no ordinary fire. There’s something in the fire. It looks like a person. No wait! It’s an angel. . .it’s Him!

What a sight to behold! Stand back and take this in.

This is where Yahweh decides to meet Moses—in the middle of the desert!

Of all the places the most Supreme Being has to choose from, He decides to introduce Himself here in this dreadful place. Must be some kind of mistake here! Surely God would choose a better place than this! It makes better sense to introduce Himself in a royal palace somewhere or maybe a great temple built for such purposes—but not in a wasteland!

This place is called *Rephidim*. It’s in view of Mount *Horeb*.

As in all names in Hebrew and Jewish culture, the name *Rephidim* has an interesting connotation. It means “props” or “supports”. It’s the same word in Hebrew they would use for timbers that sure up the sides and tops of a tunnel or mine.² Here, Yahweh introduces Himself to Moses. Here in this place, Yahweh reaches out and reveals His infinite nature, power, and resolve. This hot, dry, rocky, somewhat dreadful place is the place that would “support” the faith of Moses and Israel.

To Yahweh—this is a holy place. He even commands Moses to take off his sandals because it is holy.

Interesting, isn’t it? Why would God consider this desert place to be holy?

In the narrative we read here in Exodus 3, Yahweh explains to Moses that he is to go get His people out of Egypt. As any of us would be, Moses is kind of taken back and asks a bunch of questions. He asks –“Who am I, that I should go do this thing?”

I don’t know about you but it sure is something that I would ask God. I’d probably say it like “Hey! You’ve got the wrong guy here! I’m a NOBODY! Besides that, I have a speech problem. No one’s going to listen to me!”

Nevertheless, Yahweh responds to Moses and says, “*I’ll be with you.*” And He even gives him a spokesperson to do all the talking for him. His name is Aaron. He further adds, “And this is going to be the proof that you know I sent you...you’ll bring the entire nation right back here to *Rephidim* and worship the Creator right there on the holy mountain.”

Not only was this place to be a great faith booster for Moses, but it was supposed to be a place that would “*shore up*” the faith of *Israel* as well. That’s why they headed south instead of going straight to the Promised Land. This was a divine appointment with God. This is where Yahweh chose to introduce Himself to not only Moses—but to the entire nation of Israel!

Let’s chew on that a little bit.

Jumping back to the point after God did all the miracles in Egypt, we see how God erratically moved the nation about in the desert after they left Egypt. We also see that the irrational movements had a purpose. In Exodus 13:17ff, we see that God wanted to guard the people against facing war, lest they become discouraged and turn back; so He led them southeast into the desert. Later in chapter 14, God specifically leads them around in circles so that Pharaoh would think they were wandering in confusion. He had a specific reason for doing so. This was so that God would gain glory by punishing the Egyptians, and demonstrate His protection plan for His people.

The great lesson we get from this desert trek is that God always has a specific reason for leading us on what seems like a wild goose chase. We may not realize it at the time and it may seem difficult and frustrating; but keep in mind that when we are following Yahweh, most likely we will not proceed in the way we think we should go. God always knows what is best, even though we can’t see it at the moment.

Think about Moses for a moment. Somehow we get the feeling that he knew he was going to be some kind of a leader of the Hebrew slaves because of the way he attacked the Egyptian slave driver. We also read in Hebrews that he chose to give up his Egyptian

heritage, and by faith chose to be mistreated along with the people of God.

His mother, who had been summoned to nurse him after he was picked up out of the Nile by Pharaoh's daughter, no doubt had the awesome privilege of teaching Moses all about God and His faithfulness. That teaching hit home and Moses took it to heart. He believed God and it was accounted to him as righteousness. But when he took it upon himself to be Israel's leader, he ended up making a mess of things and had to flee to the desert.

Taking things upon yourself to do God's work can get you into trouble. Getting ahead of God's plan can be disastrous.

Keep that in mind.

Moses ends up in the desert, for 40 years. 40 YEARS! I would imagine that this would be a soul-searching period of time for Moses. If he had gotten the gist of his calling correct, he was supposed to be the leader of the Israelites. But that wasn't working out. He'd made a mess of things and now he was out in the desert, herding sheep.

Boy! Talk about a dose of reality—this lesson went on for 40 years!

Did I mention it was *forty years*?

In our own desert journey, it may seem that God is punishing us for something. That may or may not always be the case. The important thing to remember is that all things happen to us for our good (Rom 8:28). When we read Hebrews, we realize that all things that God brings our way are for our training. In Hebrews 12:1ff, it says we are "*to run with perseverance this race marked out before us.*" We are to receive God's hardships as discipline, teaching us about faith, endurance, and sharing in His holiness. Yes, sometimes hardships come because of God's rebuke. But just remember it is for our own good; and God is treating us like we would our own children.

God may also lead us into difficult situations for good, solid training. As any athlete would prepare for a long race, we too must be put through vigorous and difficult training sessions so that we may endure the race set before us that God has already mapped out for His glory and Kingdom. Ask any athlete that competes. Ask any soldier

that goes through rigorous training. They'll tell you it's no picnic to train and train hard. But it is worth it once the time has come to put their training into action!

Picking up once again where we left the narrative in Exodus, we see that Pharaoh gets a little dose of reality himself and starts to bemoan the fact that he was looking like a fool for letting the Israelites go. So he sends the entire Egyptian army out after them to take them out. When the Egyptian army starts closing in on the Israelites, the people panic and are terrified. They start crying out to the Lord and grumbling to Moses saying, "Were there not enough graves in Egypt to bury us there—so you brought us out here to die in the desert?" "What a mistake!" "Didn't we tell you in Egypt to leave us alone and let us serve there instead of having to come out here to die!"

Moses then gives a pep rally speech and tells the Israelites to stand firm, be still, and watch how Yahweh will fight for them and deliver them!

Interesting enough in verse 15 of chapter 14, there is an odd comment right after this pep rally speech of Moses encouraging the host to be still and watch. Yahweh says almost the opposite: "*Why are you spending all this time crying out to me? Get up off your hind ends and MOVE!*"

Wow! Even with the best of advice, it may not be exactly what God wants. Moses is right in one thing. God is going to protect them and do a great thing by destroying the Egyptian army. But God wants to do it a different way than any one could have imagined. He wants them to go through the Red Sea.

Let's look at the reasoning. The big army is there behind us, marching at us with the intent of wiping us out. The sea is in front of us and the mountains are on either side of us. We are essentially trapped. The Lord led us here, so we know we are in the right place. So...*obviously* we have to sit here, be still, and watch as God fights for us.

...Nope. God's ways are not our ways.

Here's a case where the BIG miracle is going to happen; it's something that will be talked about for centuries to come. It's

something that is *so big*...we can't even imagine it. God is going to part the sea and lead us through on solid, dry ground.

This is such an awesome thing that it is hard to wrap your mind around it. This is so much a *God thang* that humanly speaking—it's impossible. The wind blows all night; the sea is parted in the middle with a wall of water on the right and left; and you get up and walk through it with all your children, animals and elderly—all those millions of people.

And please don't let anyone talk you into believing that this was a shallow part of the Red Sea and it was no big deal to dry up a small portion of it with a strong wind so they could pass through. The scriptures specifically say that there was a *wall of water* on both sides. That is repeated just for emphasis. It was a wall of water on the right and left! It was a big deal!

I used to surf growing up on the east coast of Florida. One of the thrills one got while surfing was to surf down off the top of a big wave and glide, standing face to face with a wall of water that sometimes would envelope you, and you would get what they called a "tube ride". That was the ultimate high in surfing. It was a real adrenaline rush because it didn't happen all that often.

Just imagine what this must have felt like to the Israelites as they walked through this wall of water on either side, not even getting their feet wet in the process! Imagine the nervousness they must have felt having this huge army just itching to get at you and chop you to pieces, and there you are struggling along with your family and possessions—waiting your turn to squeeze into that bottle neck at the entrance of the tube ride! It must have been an adrenaline rush!

AWESOME!

All of this to say that sometimes the practical is not what God has in mind. Oh sure, we are to use our minds to reason out the obvious responses and actions we should take. But that might not be the way God wants to accomplish His will. He may want to do the impossible so that He gains glory for Himself and His Kingdom. Don't be afraid *to listen* to what God tells you to do and follow through on His course of action—no matter how impractical it sounds!

And don't let anyone tell you that God doesn't work that way anymore. *That's pure Hogwash!*

*God is not bound by man's puny understanding,
nor our rules of order.*

Just think of the story and how it would have been told if the Israelites gathered themselves up to fight the Egyptians on their own accord here at the Red Sea. Sure, God would have fought for them and protected them. But the story would not have been anywhere near as glorious if Moses and the rest decided to take matters into their own hands and carry out the most obvious course of action.

It's also possible to surmise that God would have been so angry at the Israelites for not following His orders, that He would have allowed a severe defeat because they didn't obey. That certainly happens later on.

Let's keep that in mind as we trek through our own desert journey. There are amazing discoveries to be made if we would just listen to what God wants us to do and obey.

Now, back to the narrative.

After all of this amazing demonstration of God's power, and the passing through the sea of testimony that God had ordained, God turns the multitude towards the mountain of *Horeb*. It's a long way there, but God is leading them. They trek 3 days into the desert without finding any water.

It's here that the doubts start creeping back in again. Reality starts raising its ugly head, and when the habit of looking around at the circumstances fall into our way of thinking—the doubts over shadow our faith. Even after some mighty demonstrations of God's power and faithfulness, how quickly one forgets.

It doesn't take a genius to see that the children of Israel are no different than we are. When the going gets tough, we usually start to whine and complain.

They find a water source at *Marah*, but they can't drink the water. Apparently it is bitter. The salts of the desert have contaminated the water and it's impossible to drink. When the

grumbling gets loud enough for Moses to hear, Moses cries out to God and He shows him a tree that he is to throw in the water and make it sweet.

God comes through again.

This so much reminds me of a passage of Scripture that says, “*Out of the same mouth come praise and cursing. My brothers, this should not be. Can both fresh water and salt water flow from the same spring?*”--James 3:10-11,

In this case, the only way to get fresh water was to throw some kind of tree into it to sweeten it.

I don't know of any tree that can purify water, but there is one mentioned on the Internet called the Moringa tree that is supposed to help.³ There is no doubt that charcoal can filter water also.

I don't know what to make of it except it was the provision of God. It was a piece of wood that Moses threw into the water. Where did it come from and why was it there? Only God can know that, but He provided nonetheless.

In the same way for us—He provides us salvation through the One that was crucified on the tree.

The narrative specifically says that Yahweh tested them here at *Marah*. He gave them a decree to be careful to follow God and do what is right in God's eyes; and He would bless them and not bring any of the diseases on them that He brought on the Egyptians.

Afterwards He leads them to the *Elim* oasis. What a place of refreshment this is. There are 12 springs here and plenty of date palms to go around.

God provides once again.

But as sure as the sun rises, the multitudes start to grumble once again. This time they are hungry. God provides *manna*. It's so miraculous that they don't even know what to call this dew-like substance that falls from heaven. So they call it *manna*, which means, “*What is it?*”⁴

Once again God proves He is the sufficient *Yahweh Yireh*, the all-provider.

Now imagine if you would, the situation when they finally get to *Rephidim*, where Moses has been pressing all along to get to. All

these millions of people with all of their livestock, spoils of victory, family and friends have traveled all this way. They have seen the hand of God miraculously provide time after time. Now they have finally reached the place where Yahweh wants to meet them and shore up their faith and introduce to them who He really is, in all His glory, as *Yahweh, El Shaddai Elohim!*

However, the circumstances of life close in and they realize there is no water there to support this multitude.

Water is the very essence of life. Without it, you can't possibly survive. Here there is none that can be found. A quick assessment of the situation and you can see that it has the potential to be quite disastrous. How long could they survive without water? You might get *one day* before panic sets in, given the amount of people there are along with the disproportionate amount of children and elderly; add to that the hydration needed for all the animals, and then consider the dehydration that comes from the cold air exposure of the desert nights; then add to that the perspiration loss from hot temperatures of the desert days, and you get a short amount of time before people and animals start dropping like flies.³

It's easy to see why the people were complaining. This is a real difficult test.

But given the previous examples of how God has miraculously provided since they left Egypt, would it not be a surprise if God didn't suddenly come to the rescue?

Apparently not to the Israelites, the grumbling resumes. They blame Moses. They blame God. They blame themselves for being stupid enough to leave Egypt and come all this way out into the desert to die.

Moses is upset, and rightly so.

I would imagine Moses couldn't understand why they were still so lacking in their faith. Can't they believe just once that God would intervene again and show them His faithfulness? After all, Moses already received his greatest confirmation. This is the place where God met Moses. This is the place to which they returned. He told Moses the first time he was here that to prove how faithful God

was, he would come back to this very place with all the host of Israel and they would worship God on this mountain.

They are here! All of the miraculous things God did to get them here are just incredible! How could they not believe?

But isn't this how we usually look at our own life struggles? We want everything smooth and worry free. We don't need hassles. We don't need struggles. We don't want trails and tribulation! We don't need lessons! We are above all of that! We want blessings! Give us blessings—abundant blessings!

Maybe we're just too impatient for God to show up. So we grumble and complain.

The Blessings of Rephidim

Welcome to life! It's filled with troubles and confusion. After you overcome some of those troubles—pile on some more troubles. That's just the way it seems to be. God has ordained it to be that way.

I can hear you thinking from here, “WAIT A MINUTE!!! Are you sure?” “Surely there is a mistake?” “When you become a Christian all your troubles disappear, right? What about all that abundant life and joyous living we keep hearing about?” “We are children of the King, and we are favored people!”

Oh yes, there is abundant life and joy in Christ. It's all a matter of how you react to these trials and tribulations. If we are waiting on God and waiting to see His hand of provision, we find joy in His mercy, love, and faithfulness in the waiting. When He finally breaks through. . . and He always comes through, we rejoice even more and God is glorified! He always provides. He promised He would!

Look what God does here in Exodus at Rephidim, even after all of the grumbling and complaining—God has been waiting to show them again that He is the Yahweh Yireh, and introduce them to the God of our salvation—*Yeshua*. He tells Moses to strike a rock and out from the rock bursts a fountain of sweet water so rich, there's enough

to water all those millions of people and their animals. The water had been there the whole time, but it was hidden from them. All they needed was a little instruction of how to get to it.

Imagine the surprise to see this much water come out of a rock in the middle of the desert.

God's ways are not our ways.

Once again God shows up and proves Himself faithful.

We read in I Corinthians 10:3 that they drank from the rock that accompanied them the whole time. That rock was *haMeshiach* (*Messiah or Christ*) himself.

Don't ever think that you face your trials alone. God is there. Listen to Him. No matter how dark it gets. No matter how desperate it seems—*Yeshua* is waiting to show up and prove He is faithful.

He was with the Israelites as the Shekinah Glory.

(Ex 13:20)

He was with them as the Lord of Hosts.

(Ex. 3:2)

He was with them as the Bread from heaven.

(Jn. 6:32ff)

And He was with them as the Springs of living water.

(Jn 4: 1-26)

And He's with us too. He's waiting to bless us with joy overflowing as we receive that wonderful drink of cool, sweet water that we so desperately need. Let's not miss the blessings of God by grumbling and complaining about our situation. Let's listen to what God tells us—and pay attention to the blessings we have been given. That's where we find our joy and satisfaction. It's always the best thing to do.

I want you to notice one other thing in this story. Even in the midst of all the grumbling, whining and anger, God does not seem to be angry with them even though they quarreled and tested God. He has not one word of rebuke here—only instructions as to what to do: "*Strike the Rock.*"

This is significant.

To me this is even a greater event than passing through the Red Sea. Here in the middle of nowhere with no hope of surviving without water—God shows up. This was a hard test. This was understandably difficult to go through. Yahweh knew that, and remember He wanted to introduce Himself to them here at Rephidim. What is His first step in introducing Himself? ...*As the Rock that springs forth living water.* His introduction is with *Meshiach (Christ)* Himself. (I Cor 10:3)

God's instruction to Moses: strike the Rock. . . strike *Meshiach* Himself. It is a sort of foreshadowing of what has to be done in order for God to introduce Himself to us. "He was bruised for our iniquities...by His stripes we are healed" (Isaiah 53)

Look how Scripture pictures this:

I Peter 2:4-8 The Stone (from the Message)

*Welcome to the living Stone, the source of life.
The workmen took one look and threw it out; God set it
in the place of honor.*

*Present yourselves as building stones for the
construction of a sanctuary vibrant with life, in which
you'll serve as holy priests offering Christ-approved
lives up to God.*

*The Scriptures provide precedent: Look! I'm
setting a stone in Zion, a cornerstone in the place of
honor.*

*Whoever trusts in this stone as a foundation will
never have cause to regret it. To you who trust him,
he's a stone to be proud of, but to those who refuse to
trust him,*

*The stone the workmen threw out is now the chief
foundation stone. For the untrusting it's ... a stone to
trip over, a boulder blocking the way. They trip and
fall because they refuse to obey, just as predicted.*

Compare this with Isaiah 8 :14

*and he will be a sanctuary;
but for both houses of Israel he will be
a stone that causes men to stumble
and a rock that makes them fall.*

Consider how Yeshua was “*struck*” while He was on trial and at the cross. We can begin to see a correlation.

God comes to man. He shows up to introduce the Kingdom of God. What happens? They stumble over Him and reject Him. They strike him. But it’s part of the plan. It’s not our ways—it’s God’s way. It’s beyond genius. It’s perfect. For through the striking of the Rock, we receive salvation.

Keep that in mind.

Moses and the Spoken Word

Let’s take a few moments and take a closer look at Moses! Here is the great prophet of God—Yahweh’s mouthpiece, Yahweh’s voice to the people of Israel. We read something very interesting about Moses. Although he was the chosen spokesman for God, he had a speech problem. So much so that when Yahweh asked him to go to Pharaoh and tell him to “let my people go”, he told God he wasn’t a very good speaker. He says to Yahweh in Exodus 4: “I’ve never been eloquent in speech.”

This actually angered God. He said to Moses, “Hey! Who makes a mouth? I’m the sovereign Master, the maker of your mouth—now go and I’ll help you speak!” But Moses wanted God to get someone else.

Yahweh was angry with Moses. First of all, He was angry because Moses showed some disbelief here—refusing to believe God can help him in his weaknesses. But He was also angry that Moses did not want to *speak the Word of God* for fear of not being eloquent enough.

Take that in for a moment.

Here is Moses speaking to Yahweh and God is speaking to him. Yahweh says to go speak to Pharaoh and to the children of

Israel. Moses is concerned about his speech and asks for another who is more eloquent.

This angers God.

How come Yahweh is angered for someone to be concerned about the way they speak? Could it have something to do with the actual spoken Word? Could it be that the actual spoken Word of God is powerful enough to overcome any speech impediment? Could it have something to do with what we read in John 1:1 that in the beginning was the Word and the Word was God? Was Moses showing his lack of faith in the Word? Surely The Word didn't need any kind of protection from being ridiculed because of the way Moses talked?

We do know that Moses and his speaking problem will eventually do him in, and bring God's wrath down heavy upon him. We also know that Moses has an anger issue. The Bible describes him as a humble servant, but we also read he could pull the trigger a little quick when he got hot enough! Look what he did to the Egyptian when he saw him beating his fellow Israelite. He gets angry and kills him. Look how he responds when the Israelites badger him over and over about bringing them out to the desert to die. He gets angry and curses them. Look what happens when he comes down off the mountain with the Ten Commandments and finds the people worshipping a golden calf. He gets angry. It's probably justifiable anger, but anger nonetheless. Even for the most humble man, anger management was needed!

The Word says, "*in your anger—do not sin and give the devil a foothold.*" (Eph 4:26; Psa 4:1)

What happens when we speak the Word in anger? Does Elisha and the she-bears ripping apart children come to mind? Does doing something irrational and regretful come to mind?

On the flip side, what happens when we speak the Word in faith, believing it to be the power of God? Do you see the angry seas suddenly becoming calm, like when Jesus tells the waves to "be still"? Can you imagine your enemies bewildered as you bless them instead of cursing them?

I bring this up because it is an important issue to remember when you find yourself in trials, troubles, and tribulations. What we believe will most likely be represented in what we say.

Look at 2 Corinthians 4:13—*“It is written: ‘I believed; therefore I have spoken.’* This is a reference to Psalms 116:10 where the psalmist recounts some sort of salvation from death. But Paul rightly divides its usage to mean, “I believed that the one who raised Jesus from the dead will also raise us up—*so I say it is so!*”

Why is that important? Because as Paul continues: *“all things are for our sakes”*...or as the Message translates it: *“Every little detail is for your advantage!”*

A pastor friend of mine describes this verse as sort of the “spirit” of the one who believes what he’s talking about. Want to know what a person believes—listen to what he says and watch what he does. That’s the spirit of a person. In the same spirit as one who confesses his belief—he acts on what he believes. When one believes—one speaks it! That little detail is for our advantage, and we shall find out why!

When we study scripture we see a foundational principle that is engrained throughout the Word that is from the very nature of God. What God *says* is the absolute essence of His character. Words do not come randomly out of the mouth of God—much less from his prophets. If God says it—BELIEVE IT! Why? Because “in the beginning was the *Word*. *And the Word was God.*” His Word is Truth; He is the Word.

In the Bible, if a man gave his word, or made an oath by the swearing of his word, it was absolutely binding. (Numbers 32:2) This was also true for God. If He gave an oath, it was absolutely binding.

In Romans 10 we also read a discourse on the importance of what we say:

“The word is near you; it is in your mouth and in your heart,” that is, the word of faith we are proclaiming: That if you confess with your mouth, “Jesus is Lord,” and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For it is with your heart that you believe and are justified, and it is with your mouth

that you confess and are saved. As the Scripture says, 'Anyone who trusts in him will never be put to shame.' For there is no difference between Jew and Gentile—the same Lord is Lord of all and richly blesses all who call on him, for, "Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved. How, then, can they call on the one they have not believed in?"

The Hebrew for “word” is *dabar*.⁶ If you compare the derivatives of the root word of *dabar* (*DBR*) with the other uses of the original word it gets very interesting. This word in the original Hebrew has different connotations. A word is also thing; i.e. a word is a “verbal representation of the potential.” Also, to *speak* in the Hebrew connotation meant to be a leader. *DBR* also forms the root for the Hebrew word *midbar* or *wilderness*.

Modern Hebrew differentiates between the root with different vowels and additions of consonants, which are not found in the original. So today we would see leader written out as *dabbar*, or speech written as *dibbur*, but their original root letters of *DBR* (from which we derive *dabar*) are still the same.⁷

It is not our intent to discuss the natural language processes of Hebrew, but keep this in mind when studying the original language and its modern usage today. A Hebrew word may have many different layers of meaning.

The meaning of the word *dabar* (*word, thing, and leader*) is intuitive in many different aspects of our physical world. When you think of all the great leaders of world history, more than likely they were great orators. Their speech could motivate nations! Just think of the motivational oratory skills of Hitler, Winston Churchill and FDR during World War II.

As for us, what we believe in our heart will no doubt guide us and be expressed not only in our actions, but also in our words. Add the power of God behind our words and we can see some great potential.

But, what about Moses? Well, he claims to have had a speech problem. That wasn't just a small problem—it was a *big* problem. That's why Yahweh was upset with him when he asked for a speech

assistant. He was deflecting the Divine Word, the Divine call, and the Divine sovereignty of God.

When one digs around about the meaning of the spoken word in different cultures, you come across some interesting articles that explain how the Jews view the power of the spoken word. In “*Bridging the Gap*” by Avi Fertig, he says:

“Our involvement in creation is always the aspect of realizing potential, of bringing out that which is already there but not yet being fully expressed. Dibbur, or speech is one idea that reflects this phenomenon. Dibbur is related to dabbar, meaning to direct. Our task in the creative process is to allow the creation to say what it was designed to do. Page 161 of the Maharal’s ‘Nesivos Olam’ explains this connection between speech and the bringing out of potential.”⁸

You can find this idea in many other Jewish web sites that correlate to these writings. In Jewish tradition they have no problem in relating to the fact that the spoken word has definite power over reality.

[Numbers 30:2] “I believe that the Torah is here stressing the power of the word-- the word which can create reality and the word which can destroy reality, the word which can establish a relationship and the word which can besmirch a relationship. After all, we are the people of the word, the Ten Words (Dibburim, Dibrot), which were more powerful than the massive Egyptian pyramids and which continue to influence the standards of world morality to this very day.”⁹

To the orthodox Jewish mind, the *Torah* is the living, breathing, Word of God that one must study and experience. To study the *Torah* is to dive into the very essence of God and let the Word direct your life, your worldview, and bring one closer to the God one craves.

When John wrote his Gospel, The Holy Spirit directed him to start with the words, *“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was God.”* This was no accident. These words illustrated the heart of the Jewish way of thinking and the way God reveals Himself to man. His Word penetrates deep into the soul of everyone who instinctively craves for the living, breathing Word to be the very essence of their life.

This is illustrated in Scripture time and time again:

“Man does not live by bread alone, but by every Word that comes from God.” Duet 8:3

“When your Words came, I ate them, they were my joy and my hearts delight.” Jer 15:16

“The Word is in your heart” Rom 10:8

“Let the Word of Christ dwell in you” Col 3:16

“All Scripture is God breathed” 2 Tim 3:16.

“The Word of God is living and active” Heb 4:12

“You have been born again by the living and enduring Word of God” 1 Pet 1:23

“Crave the pure Spiritual milk” 1 Pet 2:2

“ [the prophets] spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit” 2 Pet 1:21

“This is what we proclaim concerning the Word of life.” 1 Jn 1:1

The Word is the essence of God. God says that a spoken word (an oath) is binding. The Hebrew understanding of the Word takes into account that the potential of the spoken word has power over reality. Paul states that what a man believes—he speaks to that with a word. Faith is demonstrated by the spoken word. Jesus even says this in the Gospels. Luke 17:6 says that if we *say* something with faith, it will obey us. In Mark 11: 22-23 we see that if we *speak* to the mountain in faith, it will move. Whatever we *say* backed up in belief is powerful.

So let’s be careful what we say. Be careful to speak of the truths of God. Be careful to not say negative things. Be careful to not say anything in anger that is harmful. Why?

Because words are powerful!

On the positive side: “*All God’s promises [Words of oath] are yes and Amen in Christ*” (1 Cor 1:20) Speak of the promises of God. Learn to say out loud the Word of Truth and watch how it works for our benefit.

Oh Boy! Now I can hear all the naysayers start to rant about Gnosticism, Word Faith, Positive Affirmation, and “Name it and Claim it” backlash.

So what are we saying here? Read it again: *words are powerful*. The Bible *speaks* to this and does *speak* clearly. We are being very careful to say this, but this is the truth from the Word of God—to *deny this is to deny The Word*. To say this is heresy and metaphysical deception is to turn aside the divine Word, the divine call, and the divine sovereignty of God. Don’t make that mistake.

We are not saying that you can get whatever you want just by speaking it. That’s where the enemy has crept in and caused many to go astray. We have already seen that when we have the proper servant motivation, we only want what God wants. We ask for our *needs* to be met, according to His riches in glory—not to fulfill our lustful, earthly wants.

As for the negative... “As a man thinks in his heart, so is he.” (Prov. 23:7). We should not think of ourselves as a loser. We should not think of ourselves as cursed. We should not think of ourselves as defeated. Nor should we cower in fear. We are none of these things when we examine the scripture as to whose children we are. To think these things after tasting of the riches of God is to internalize these lies. These lies eventually become a stronghold of the devil. It creeps into our spirit and it begins to permeate with lies spoken out loud. “*For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murders, adulteries, fornications, thefts, false witness, slanders.*” (Matt. 15:19) We turn away from the Truths of God and believe the lies of the serpent who says, “*hath God spoken?*”

Repent from this way of thinking! Set your mind on the things of God. “Whatsoever things are true, whatever is noble, right, pure, lovely, admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things [*and I shall add—speak it!*]...and the God of peace will be with you.” Phil 4:8

We are blessed! We are God's children! We have overcome the world. We have everything we need to further God's Kingdom . .

"I pray that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened, so that you will know what is the hope of His calling, what are the riches of the glory of His inheritance in the saints, and what is the surpassing greatness of His power toward us who believe. These are in accordance with the working of the strength of His might which He brought about in Christ, when He raised Him from the dead and seated Him at His right hand in the heavenly places, far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the one to come." (Eph 1:18-21).

We believe it—therefore we speak it! That is the real positive affirmation and Word of faith. We ask you, what is wrong with that?

We have heard respectable men say that this attitude is dangerous. Dangerous to whom? Dangerous to Satan—for sure! And dangerous to those who wish to enslave us with their rules and regulations! We honestly do not want to hear how we are supposed to walk around saying, "Woe is me, we're poor wretched sinners, who have no hope for the future." "We don't deserve anything and we're just dirty rotten, old sinners."

Well...*we were*! But if we have repented of our sins and asked God to forgive us, and have been redeemed by the Lamb of God and have been washed in the blood of the Christ, and have been grafted into the Vine by the hands of the Almighty ...then by God's Word it is time to *throw away the fear and start claiming the victory and blessings in our life that have been promised to us by the living Word of God!!!* Scripture is loaded with the promises of God for His people and His children. Name them—claim them—say them out loud! Lord have mercy on us if we refuse to do as God tells us to do!!

"...be filled with the Spirit. Speak to one another with psalms, hymns and spiritual songs. Sing and make music in your heart to the Lord, always giving thanks to

God the Father for everything, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.” (Eph 5:18-21)

You’ll be surprised how much saying God’s promises out loud will perk up your spirit. You’ll be amazed as the darkness lifts and the light of His pure Word shines throughout your heart and spirit. The chains of bondage fall from our psyche. The glorious riches of the Savior burst through in the wonderful hope of our redemption!

We can assure you and declare this from the rooftops—Satan does not want us to believe this! He does not want us to know the power of the Word of God. He wants us to believe that we are powerless to do anything. But let this be an assurance, “We can do ALL things through Christ who strengthens us!” We are strengthened by His powerful Word! Shout it! Sing it! Declare it! Give Thanks!

Let it give us confidence to endure as a good soldier to that which we bear, knowing that the testing of our faith will reap the benefits of heaven! Say it with us—“ALL things work together for good for those that love Him, who are called according to His purpose. ...If God be for us—WHO can be against us!”

Just don’t fall into the flip-side trap of claiming things for ourselves that are not part of God’s will for us. 1 John 5:14-15 says, “This is the confidence we have in approaching God: that if we ask anything *according to his will*, he hears us. And if we know that he hears us — *whatever we ask* — we know that we have what we asked of him.”

Does that sound like “running amuck” prosperity doctrine to you?

We already have riches in heaven...the Bible clearly states that! (see Phil 4:19 and Eph 1:) And our supply will be full according to HIS riches in glory in Messiah Yeshua (Christ Jesus). That sounds pretty full! Just remember we get *what we need* according to His will! *James 4:3 says, "You ask and do not receive, because you ask amiss, that you may spend it on your pleasures."* When we have a servant attitude, this shouldn’t even be a problem.

It’s not hard to understand that when we are in tune with God, none of this Word of Faith controversy is an issue. “*Godliness with*

contentment is great gain...people who want to get rich fall into temptation and a trap...” (1 Tim 6: 3- 12). We show our faith by the fruit of the Spirit and are not to desire things so that we gratify our earthly lusts. That is slapping God in the face with His Word. We don’t think you want to be doing that. That’s a bit dangerous.

The Cursing of Meribah

Now let’s get back to Moses for a moment. Since we now understand this principle of our words being powerful and how that was a problem with Moses, let’s jump ahead at another interesting picture that is given to us as an example of this principle.

Let’s look in Numbers 20.

Quite a bit has happened since we last looked at Moses and we had the incident at Rephidim. Moses went up on Mt. Sinai and met with Yahweh, where he was given the commandments from God. They have built the temporary “Tent of Meeting” or *Tabernacle* where God could dwell in the midst of the nation of Israel. There have been numerous uprisings among the people, and Yahweh dealt with them swiftly and severely because of their disbelief. At *Kadish-Barnea*, The nation of Israel was poised to go in and take the Promised Land, but most of the spies came back with negative reports, and Israel would not go in because they still did not believe God.

Moses, the leader of the nation of Israel, could not find the words to convince the nation to rise above their unbelief and go in and take the land. Although Moses was not ultimately responsible for Israel’s disbelief, because of his weakness of not speaking the Word, he failed in his leadership position to stir up their faith in God.

Kadish-Barnea was the last straw...the nation blew it. The people kept complaining about being brought out to the desert to die, so Yahweh gave them what they spoke. God said that generation would not enter into the Promised Land and would wander the desert for 40 years until every last one of them (except Caleb and Joshua) died in the desert.

Our God who is full of mercy and slow to anger could not take the constant grumbling and speaking against Him any more, especially after He had showed Himself faithful and capable time after time. The fullness of unbelief matured and reaped its fruit of destruction with the Israelites.

Here in Numbers 20 we find the nation once again at the place where there was no water. Does this sound familiar? And yes, they started to grumble and gripe once again to Moses, wishing they had never left Egypt, etc. (ad nauseam).

So Moses and Aaron went to the Lord. The Lord told them to first of all go get the staff; then gather all the people at the Rock; and finally *speak* to the Rock. That would bring water out of the rock for the entire community to drink.

Simple enough, right? Get the staff, assemble the community, and speak to the Rock—problem solved.

First of all, why did Moses need the staff? We've seen this staff since Yahweh first met Moses at the burning bush. Yahweh said to Moses: "What's in your hand?" He answered: "a staff."

We are assuming this is a typical shepherd's staff. When looking for references about Moses' staff we come across all kinds of fantastic stories of what the staff really was—especially from some of the oral traditions handed down in the Jewish Rabbinical Midrash. The book of Yasher (Jasher) is especially interesting. Although these stories are very interesting, and are the predecessor of much of today's folklore, we won't go there at this time.

According to Bible scholars and those who study such cultural phenomenon, the staff represented a leader with authority. Moses was an authoritative leader approved by God because of the miracles that were accomplished while in the possession of the staff. Aaron, who inherited the staff, had it bud into mature almonds as a sign of approval by God (Num 17).

This concept of the staff has been carried over into modern times as the scepter and crown of a monarch, the leader of a nation. It looks like Yahweh wanted some authoritative symbolism to be represented here, as Moses spoke to the Rock. I believe this is significant in the way God wanted to confirm the power of the words

Moses was to speak. He wanted no doubts as to who would be providing the water.

Next it's assembling the community. ...Done.

OK—time to *speak* to the Rock. ...Ooops!

Uh, Moses instead speaks to the crowd, then *strikes* the Rock! Something got a little mixed up here. What's up with that?

Moses then calls the crowd "*rebels*". The Hebrew word is derived from *marad*, And this could be a play on words, referring to another Biblical character named *Nimrod*.¹¹

Who was Nimrod? According to the Bible he was the grandson of Noah. But as we read and study the history of the Bible, other scholars, as well as the book of *Yasher* say that the name Nimrod (*The Rebel*) represented the despicable ancient Mesopotamian king/leader also called *Gilgamesh*. He was the forerunner of the Sumerian, Babylonian system (Remember the tower of Babel?), which was the most influential religio-politico system in the Middle East for 3000 years. He was the ultimate anti Yahweh rebel that there ever was! Out of despise and hatred for Yahweh destroying the entire world through the flood, he fathered the Babylon system. Assyria, Persia, Greece and Rome also grew out of this system. It was mainly noted to be predominately anti-YHWH, and violently so.¹²

Could it be that Moses in his anger calls the children of Israel—Nimrod/Gilgamesh, the same as the anti-God heathen dragon of all times? "*O be careful little mouth what you say*"—even if you are the leader of the Israelites! God says, "*I will bless them that bless you and curse them that curse you.*" A slip of the tongue for a prophet is no small thing.

Then instead of *speaking* to the Rock, which we now know is Yeshua haMeshiach (Jesus Christ) Himself, he *strikes* the Rock two times. Not only does he strike Christ, but he raises the authoritative staff of God (Ex 4:20) over his head as he did at the Red Sea, and when they fought the Amalakites (Ex 18: 8–18). This looks like he may have taken matters into his own hands...notice what he said before that—"*must WE bring you water out of this rock?*"

Ooops! Double whammy, TRIPLE whammy!

...Game over...

Did the most humble man on earth suddenly become proud in his anger and claim that he and Aaron would provide the water? It certainly sounds like words were misused and abused. We really don't know for certain which one of these scenarios was actually the last straw for Moses, but what we do know is that God was displeased.

Listen to what Yahweh says to Moses and Aaron, *"because you did not trust me enough to honor me as Holy in the sight of the Israelites, you will not enter the Promised Land!"*

Seems kind of harsh doesn't it? Just that little 'ole slip of the tongue and something done in anger and *boom*...the curse falls and you loose that one thing you have worked for all your life.

Let this illustration sink in and speak to us about the essence of God. Words are important. Words are powerful. If a prophet of God is commanded to speak, but instead strikes—that's a serious matter.

When we're commanded to *speak in faith* and instead we take matters into our own hands and manipulate the circumstances—we dishonor God's holiness and strip away His glory in the sight of the whole Body.

The whole thing was supposed to be a demonstration of the powerful living Word—instead it proved to be a living reminder that we need to obey God and do exactly as He says, or we may reap the consequences.

Since we're on this mouthpiece for God subject, James says: *"who can tame the tongue?" "The tongue is a fire, a world of evil among the parts of the body. It corrupts the whole person, sets the whole course of life on fire, and is itself set on fire by hell!" (Jas 3:6)*

O be careful little mouth what you say. The misuse of our words can bring devastating results. Negative words—negative results.

On the other hand, positive words—positive results.

There's one last thing about this sad chapter of Moses and the Israelites. Look where this takes place—it's a place called *Meribah*, *"where Israel quarreled with the Lord and where He showed Himself holy among them."* It was formally known as *Rephidim*, but Moses changed the name because of the quarreling.

This was the same place where Moses and Israel were supposed to have come to sure up their faith! Instead—their faith was “for sure to be found lacking”. Here at *Meribah* or what was formally known as *Rephidim*, this entire generation of Jews, along with the most beloved Hebrew leaders of Moses and Aaron, were denied access to the ultimate earthly blessings of Yahweh for the Jews.

Wow!

Remember, these things are written for our example. Learn from it. Take it to heart. Let’s rise above our circumstances and instead of complaining—bless the *Yahweh Elohim (Lord our God)* with all of our heart and with all of our soul and spirit. Give thanks! Let’s specifically do what God tells us to do. *Speak the Word out loud* and sure up our faith!

Remember: God’s ways are not our ways.

Therefore, you [rebel] kings [You Nimrods and Gilgameshes] , be wise; be warned, you rulers of the earth. Serve the LORD with fear [total respect] and rejoice with trembling. Kiss the Son, lest he be angry and you be destroyed in your way, for his wrath can flare up in a moment. Blessed are all who take refuge in him. Psalms 2

-----✘-----

Notes:

1. <http://www.ransomedheart.com/goingdeeper/newsletters.aspx>
(October 2003 newsletter)
Christianity Today, LeBlanc, Douglas August, 2004
2. Rephidim: supports, Easton Bible Dictionary
<http://www.sacred-texts.com/bib/ebd/ebd311.htm>
<http://www.ccel.org/e/easton/ebd/ebd/T0003100.html>
"Hoffmeier has suggested the word Rephidim appears to derive from the root RPD which means help, support, aid, reflecting the divine aid of Yahweh needed to defeat the Amalekites (p. 170. Hoffmeier). Seeley noted that somewhat late Jewish traditions sought to explain the name as derived from the verb RPH meaning to "relax, weaken, dishearten," because there Israel cast off the commandments of the Torah to test" or "provoke" God (cf. Jo Ann H. Seely. "Rephidim," Vol. 5. p. 678. David Noel Freedman. Editor. The Anchor Bible Dictionary. New York. Doubleday. 1992)"
<http://www.bibleorigins.net/RephidimExodusRufaiylTarfetelQidarein.html>
3. <http://www.lifeonnet.org/moringa.htm>
<http://www.treesforlife.org/our-work/our-initiatives/moringa/other-uses/water-purification/water-purification>
4. <http://www.keyway.ca/htm2002/manna.htm>
5. <http://www.survivaltopics.com>
6. <http://strongnumbers.com/hebrew/1697.htm>
7. Natural language processing of Hebrew: Indexing by Phonetic Script, Uzzi Ornan and Michael Katz <http://cis.upenn.edu/~cliff-group/sept 20>
8. "Bridging the Gap" Clarifying the Eternal Foundations of Mussar and Emunah for Today by Avi Fertig, Feldheim Publishers, Jerusalem, Israel
8. <http://www.ohrtorahstone.org.il/parsha/5763/matotmasei63.htm>
9. http://www.ancient-hebrew.org/3_al.html
10. <http://christiananswers.net/dictionary/nimrod.html>
11. *Ibid...I may be going out on a limb here by tying this "rebel" word with the anti-God leader, Nimrod / Gilgamesh. But the shoe fits.*

Chapter 12

Waiting on God

One of the hardest things for any believer to do is to wait on God, especially if he or she has been in the desert, or in a time of transition for some time. Let's take a short look at what it means to wait on God and why there are reasons to not get ahead of what God may be doing in our life.

To Wait is to Have Hope

"But they that wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings as eagles; they shall run, and not be weary; and they shall walk, and not faint" (Isa. 40:31)

In Hebrew, this word *Qavah* (*to wait*) collectively means to hope for, to anticipate, and to expect.¹ In the context of the Gospels, waiting on the Lord has within it a hopeful anticipation and trusting in the Lord. Waiting is actually an active process of faith, as we see in Hebrews 11:1

"Now faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see. This is what the ancients were commended for."

Waiting is associated with faith. Waiting sometimes means living with uncertainty, but tied in with faith, it is being certain of that which we wait for. It's basically *trust*. But how does one trust if one does not have experience with the One in whom we should trust?

Here we have an invitation: *"Be still and know that I am God" (Psalm 46:10) "Trust in the Lord with all your heart; and lean not unto your own understanding" (Prov. 3:5).* Psalm 46:10 encourages us to reflect on what God can do in the face of what we

are unable to do. Proverbs 3:5 admonishes us to have a strong faith in God that can go way beyond our experience, especially beyond what we humanly think or expect He can do.

Is it possible for us to trust in the Lord that much...or do we rely too much on ourselves and our own finite abilities to reason and solve perplexing problems?

"Wait on the LORD, and keep His way, and He shall exalt thee to inherit the land: when the wicked are cut off, thou shalt see it. ...For evildoers shall be cut off: but those that wait upon the LORD, they shall inherit the earth" (Psalm 37: 34,9).

A word study is needed here. There's much to be discovered about the Hebrew words used for "wait" that are not found within our culture and the translated English word "wait".

The actual Hebrew word used in Isaiah 40 is the word: *Qavah*.

H6960 *qavah* *kaw-vaw'* a primitive root;
to bind together (perhaps by twisting), i.e. collect;
(figuratively) to expect.
KJV: gather (together), look, patiently, tarry, wait (for, on, upon).

Notice the root word comes from the process of **binding together**, usually by twisting. It is a gathering together of facts and binding them together to form a faith that is strong, like the cords of a twisted rope. Or it can also be a gathering of sticks and wood to build a dwelling for one to shelter themselves from the elements.

This word *qavah* is also used in Psalms 37:9: "*For those who are evil will be destroyed, but those who hope [qavah] in the LORD will inherit the land.*"

In verse 7 of Psalms 39, it says: "*Be still before the LORD and wait [H2342 *chuwl*] patiently for him; do not fret when [wicked] people succeed in their ways...*" The word used for wait here is *chuwl* and once again has that "twisting together" meaning.

H2342 *chuwł khool or chiyl {kheel};*
a primitive root; properly, to twist or whirl (in a circular or spiral manner), i.e. (specifically) to dance, to writhe in pain (especially of parturition) or fear; figuratively, to wait, to pervert.
KJV: bear, (make to) bring forth, (make to) calve, dance, drive away, fall grievously (with pain), fear, form, great, grieve, (be) grievous, hope, look, make, be in pain, be much (sore) pained, rest, shake, shapen, (be) sorrow(-ful), stay, tarry, travail (with pain), tremble, trust, wait carefully (patiently), be wounded.

Another “twist” on the word used to wait is *duwmam*, and it is only found once in the *Tanakh* (Hebrew Scriptures). Lam 3:26:

“It is good that one should both wait [qavah], and that in silence [duwmam], for the salvation of Jehovah [Yahweh].” (Darby)

H1748 *duwmam doo-mawm' from H1826;*
still; adverbially, silently.
KJV: dumb, silent, quietly wait.

H1826 *damam daw-man'*
a prim root to be dumb; by implication, to be astonished

This waiting silently has the connotation of being astonished. In other words, *no words* can really describe the hope we have in the Lord because of what he has done and has shown Himself to be. Yahweh is one very awesome God indeed! When we put together all the facts of who our *Elohim* is and scrutinize what a faithful God He shows Himself to be, our faith is strengthened. Our hope is solidified. Our expectation is based on testimony. We are dumbfounded that we have not trusted Him with all our hearts, all of our hopes, and all of our needs!

Psalms 145:15 "The eyes of all wait [H7663, sabar] upon thee; and thou givest them their food in its season." (Darby)

H7663 sabar saw-bar'
a primitive root; to scrutinize; by implication (of watching) to expect (with hope and patience). KJV: hope, tarry, view, wait.

There are two other words used for wait. One is *Chakah* found in Isaiah 8:17; 30:18; Hab 2:3 and Zeph 3:8.

H2442 chakah khaw-kaw'
a primitive root (apparently akin to H2707 through the idea of piercing); properly, to adhere to; hence, to await. KJV: long, tarry, wait.

The other word is *yachal*. It is found in Micah 7:7

H3176 yachal yaw-chal'
a primitive root; to wait; by implication, to be patient, hope. KJV: (cause to, have, make to) hope, be pained, stay, tarry, trust, wait.

Hopefully, we see that to wait on God is to trust. To trust is to have hope. Our hope is not built upon shifting sand and wishes, but the truth of God pierces our hearts with His faithfulness. It is based on patient testimonies that God has preserved throughout the ages in His Word. This waiting, this hope, this trust *is seeing Yahweh* as He really is. *That is why Yeshua said He only did what He saw the Father do. (John 5:19)*

Sometimes our faith is put to the test through waiting on God's promises to be fulfilled. Noah had to wait 120 years for his faith to be vindicated in building an Ark. Moses spent 40 years waiting on God to show up and redeem His people, and then another 40 years shepherding the Children of Israel waiting for God to fulfill

His vision. Abraham waited 23 years for a promised son and then died without ever seeing the promise of “descendants countless as the stars in heaven, and the sands of the seashore.” Many Biblical characters only saw and welcomed the lot of their promises from a distance. (Heb 11:13) As a matter of fact, a whole host of Biblical heroes were commended for their faith, yet never received in the physical what was promised. *But they saw it*, because they saw God for who He was—One that could be always be trusted and always faithful to His promises!

Why Must We Wait?

Waiting can end up being a long drawn out process. So why must one wait?

Have you ever noticed when you read about Yeshua here on earth, He never seemed to be in a hurry? He even waited a while before He began His public ministry. Let’s face it...He showed extreme agility and knowledge at an early age in dealing with the Sanhedrin and Scribes. He could have launched into His ministry in His early Teens and still accomplished what He came to do. But He waited till the proper time. He waited for Father’s time. He waited till he was 30 something years old.

Even so, when He did start His ministry, or should we say His mission...whenever something urgent came up, like the sickness and death of his dearest friend (Lazarus of Bethany in John 11), He didn't rush to the scene even though it says He loved him so. He waited a little. Well, not just a little—4 days in this case. Lazarus died. It was tragic for all those who loved him...but not for Jesus. Jesus had a reason to wait. (He always does.) Jesus even says in John 11: 14 that He was *glad* He wasn't there.

Now...wouldn't it make much more sense for Yeshua to rush to the scene and heal Lazarus and let that in and of itself be a great miracle? Sure. It would have averted a lot of pain too, not only for Lazarus but also for Mary and Martha. Think of the sadness they must have gone through. It even disturbed Yeshua when He saw

them. He wept. He had a reason to wait, but yet it bothered Him that the ones He loved were so troubled. Everyone knew that if Yeshua would have been there, all of this could have been averted. But He waited still.

Makes you think doesn't it. He loves us so much to weep with us during our trials, but allows it to take its course for a good reason. Be encouraged. *"Thy Kingdom Come, Thy Will Be Done..."* He has a reason for the things He does.

But to wait is very difficult. To be that content and trusting is one of the ultimate tests of our faith. Even though the circumstances may be dire and the house falling around us, as believers we are strongly urged and commanded to persevere and keep trusting God with rejoicing that He has a plan.

Paul prays that we might be *"strengthened with all power, according to His glorious might, for the attaining of all perseverance and patience"* (Colossians 1:11).

Ron Julian wrote that it

*"takes the glorious might of God, the same power that hung the stars in the sky, to overcome the inertia of the human heart and bring us to patience. We continue in the face of heartache and suffering because we believe that our rescuer is coming..."*²

Think about what Paul said in 1 Corinthians 13: *"And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love."* Above all the acquired gifts and wondrous things we can have and accomplish through the power of the Holy Spirit—the three singled out traits of the saints that are above all are faith, hope and love. This Greek word used for *hope* here is *elpis*.

G1680 *elpis* el-pece' from a primary *elpo* (to anticipate, usually with pleasure); *expectation* (abstractly or concretely) or *confidence*.
KJV: faith, hope.

Elpis or hope has the connotation of *expectation and anticipation* (waiting) because of your faith. In other words when

you see the Father by the outworking of your *faith* [G4102 *pistis*; *persuasion*] (the credence shown in the faithfulness and consistent works of our Master), you therefore have expectations and are confident as to what the outcome will be. You can anticipate what our Father will do, because he always does what He says. He continues to do this because of love, which is the greatest gift of all!

Let's think just a moment about Abraham and Sarah.

Abraham was given this incredible experience with God where he was placed in an extremely important position of blessing with a covenant ceremony with Yahweh. He was told he would be the father of millions upon millions. El Shaddai changed his name from *Abram*, (honored father), to *Abraham* (father of many nations).³ Yet here he was without a child. And to top it all off—he was old, way beyond child bearing years.

Think how exciting that must have been to hear those promises and the joy of knowing you had been chosen by El Shaddai for a specific purpose in Elohim's overall plan for the ages. Yet...you wait. And you wait...and wait for the promise to happen, and nothing seemingly happens.

What do you do? How do you react? Where do you turn?

We read that Abraham believed...and he did. Sarah had her doubts, but was quickly rebuked by God and she believed. But still, they waited with no results. Abraham and Sarah did a logical thing and rationalized that maybe the promised child would be through one of their handmaidens. So Abraham conceived with Hagar and she had a son. This was a huge mistake on Abraham and Sarah's part. This was not the promised child. Because of that rationalization, history has been a violent clash between that seed and the real seed that came along later. It is always best to wait on God's perfect timing and will.

We could go on and on how we tend to rush ahead of God and do things that are not part of His plan. We end up making a mess of things. We have all done it. Rationally we all think we are doing the right thing, when in fact we are doing the opposite of what God wants us to do. In God's plan, it is always better to wait until He gives specific instructions to move.

Many questions arise. Much anguish is brought to bear and the lessons of waiting and patience hit hard into the very heart of our spirit. “Why does God make us wait?” “Why does He gives us a vision and promise to do something great and yet after the initial excitement—there comes a period of waiting?” “What’s His purpose?” “What is it we need to learn from it?” “Why must we be constantly taught lesson after lesson that Yahweh will do what He says in His time and in His way?”

We must be reminded that God’s ways are not our ways, and it just doesn’t happen on our own terms, or in the time frame that we conjure up before God.

Learning to Wait is Our Gain

Most of us feel that we can honestly say—“We get the message!” We understand that Yahweh is faithful and true to his Word. We have been shown this great truth, and take to heart that His ways are not our ways. But why must there be this agonizing period of wait and anxiety?

Or do we get it—*really*!?! Is this the proverbial head knowledge versus experience thing? Is this where the rubber meets the road and we learn truths, but not really learn them till we experience them? Is this where faith meets the practical and obliterates all opposition to God and His perfect will? Is this where faith and expectations meet *silence*, as we contemplate His great faithfulness?

Honestly, we don’t know for sure what all the ramifications are for the waiting period, but we seem to be in good company when it comes to this subject. Yes, God always knows what He’s doing and has a perfect plan in the way He accomplishes His will and plan for the future. We just have to trust Him and really see what we believe about Him is true. He has shown it over and over again with many accounts in Biblical History, and the experiences of the saints and believers throughout the years of history. Somehow this waiting period tends to sure up our faith. It takes us out of the position of

trying to be the judge of God's actions in our limited understanding, as we ponder and go through the agony of trying to figure all of these things out. It's suffice to say, "It's just needed." Any other reaction is just wasted energy when we already know that our *Elohim* is faithful and just, and will do what He says He will do. But always in His way, His time.

The lesson here is *trust*. Think about it. When we trust God, are we really supposed to be anxious? We read that we are to be "*anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let our request be known unto God.*" (Phil 4:6)

The kicker is that God already knows everything there is to know about our situation. He already knows our requests and needs. YET—He says we are to pray for these situations. Why? Is trust not enough? What are we missing here? What's the underlying lesson we need to know?

Yeshua spent a huge amount of time in prayer. He wasn't in a hurry. He knew that everything had a time and purpose and all that He was doing was going according to plan. Still, He made time for prayer and communion. He needed to see what the Father was doing. (This should be a key to waiting right here. This is why Yeshua was never in a hurry!)

Yet on the other hand, we see that we are to take advantage of the time, "*for our days are short*". (John 9:4; James 4:14; I Cor. 7:29-31) Where is the balance between all of this? Where is the fine line between being still and waiting on God, and getting up and going to take advantage of the day when we've been given a task and vision?

If the vision is clear, yet many times the way and the financing of the situation is not clear...how should we then proceed? Should we rush in and make a mockery of the plans of God? If we plan and plan and still have no viable options of choice, where do we go and what do we do with the situation? We obviously have to wait...but what are we waiting on? Why is there the urgency of a vision, but yet the seemingly laxness on the part of reality? We stand ready to pounce but we have nothing to pounce on.

This constant attention tends to make us edgy, tired and weary. So that when the time actually comes to move, we are hesitant and many times too tired and discouraged to move. Of course the fault is not God's...but what is the lesson we need to learn from all of this?

We know that a logical, reasonable and sensible course of action is what we are always taught in our present day teaching...but is it always God's way? How do we know what is God's way? If the Bible doesn't clearly spell out your situation and yet you need an answer...where do you get it? Our example is Yeshua. We do what He did.

Listening to God

Here is a *vital* thing that Hilda and I have learned from our desert wandering and washing from the Word. *Listening to God's voice* is a key element and lifeline in being able to do the will of the Father. Now I can hear all of the rustling in the chairs of conservative Christian scholars as they start to point out all of the pitfalls of listening to voices in our head and claiming they are revelations from God...but bear with us a minute or two as we reason this out.

How does one hear God's voice? In the Gospel of John, Jesus said that "*my sheep hear my voice and I know them and they follow me.*" (John 10:27) OK. We know from understanding that sheep will only follow their true shepherd's voice when called out, and Jesus even explained that in verses preceding the one just quoted, but the question still remains, how do they *know* his voice?

It must come from being familiar with the Shepherd. They hear it day in and day out. When a stranger calls you on the phone, you don't recognize their voice and would probably ask who it is. You do not recognize it. But if a family member from your home calls, you probably don't even have to think about whose voice it is, because you are thoroughly familiar with it.

A pastor friend of mine explained it to me this way...

“Say I sat down everyday at a specific time and wait to hear the voice of God. So I wait and I hear things that I believe are from God. My heart confirms it, as only a believer knows in his heart of hearts. My mind confirms it by checking it out with Scripture. And my Spirit accepts it to be true because of the testimony of the Holy Spirit which resides in me to guide me into all truth. I learn from experience that the voice I hear is in fact—God’s. I check it out by the truth of the Scriptures, and I test it with the verbal confirmation that the Messiah (Yeshua) has come in the flesh and risen from the dead. (See I John 4)

Everyday I come back to this place and I listen for God’s voice. I get so familiar with that voice that eventually I don’t need to be in this same place to recognize that the voice I hear is from God. I now know it when I hear it. ”⁴

Now, I can hear the thunder of warnings rumbling within halls of modern day religiosity about the dangers of claiming to hear from God in an inner voice.

Well, we know what the dangers are.

The danger comes if we listen to a voice that we secretly desire to be God’s, when in fact it is our own ego or even worse a deceiving Spirit. We sometimes may exalt wisdom that our society teaches and that which is expected of us, lifting that up as the Word of God. We may listen to the “voices” of reason where cultural norms predominate with our bias of traditional understanding. Thus we have to be constantly on guard of deception and test the spirit as to whom or what it really is. We know this all sounds rather mystical, but it is still a principle taught in the Bible that many refuse to acknowledge.

Even conservative Christianity will agree that when we read the Scriptures, the Holy Spirit will illumine some passages for our understanding. He may clarify something about His character, His Word, or His will by this inner movement of knowledge that only we as Christians experience everyday. Fellowship with God requires that we pay attention (*listen*) to that inner small voice.

It is proper to call it “*intuition*”. Watchman Nee insists that anything coming from the Spirit will be known in our intuition, and we learn to translate this *knowing* into a voice by our experience and fellowship with the Spirit.⁵

Check out the Westminster Confession of 1647. It dealt with this subject with a “confession” or “creed”.

*“We may be moved and induced by the testimony of the Church to an high and reverent esteem of the holy Scripture; and the heavenliness of the matter, the efficacy of the doctrine, the majesty of the style, the consent of all the parts, the scope of the whole (which is to give all glory to God), the full discovery it makes of the only way of man’s salvation, the many other incomparable excellencies, and the entire perfection thereof, are arguments whereby it doth abundantly evidence itself to be the Word of God; yet, notwithstanding, **our full persuasion and assurance of the infallible truth, and divine authority thereof, is from the inward work of the Holy Spirit, bearing witness by and with the Word in our hearts.**”—*
*Westminster Confession, 1647.*⁶

Some may say God only speaks through the written Word, and any “voice” we hear is only a trumped up ego or even worse, a seducing spirit. Yet when a situation arises when one needs specific guidance from God and prays for some kind of understanding or knowledge of His will that isn’t spelled out in Scripture, they most likely will receive an answer in their intuition or *in their spirit*. Their response is that they don’t always know how they know, “they just know”. And here is where we say that the reason they know is because the Holy Spirit resides in our hearts and “speaks” to us through intuition and utterances that only we as Christians recognize as God’s voice. We as sheep—“hear His voice and we follow.”

Limiting God

Let's face it—our God is mysterious and full of wonder. His ways are light years beyond anything that we can possibly think or know. Much of the mind and will of God is hidden from our puny worldview, and it is a wonder that we can get anything right. We rationalize and try to limit the power and ways of God to fit our limited experience and scrawny reasoning to say God cannot operate outside our written, Scriptural record.

That is what is wrong with most of modern day Christianity. It is this "limiting box" we try and stuff God into by reasoning that God can only work a certain way or in a certain manner because of our cultural experience, or so-called modern, scientific knowledge. Here one might say, "God is bound by the book."

Please don't take us wrong here. This is not to say that God is not bound by His Word. If God makes an oath by His Word, it is binding. God's promises are *always* true! If God says it—believe it!

Hilda and I honor the written word that we have in the Bible as God-breathed and inspired of God, useful for teaching, reproof, training and guiding our knowledge in the way of righteousness. (I Tim 3:16) The Bible is our standard of measurement for realizing who God is and what He has revealed to mankind as it pertains to our salvation and His nature. But it is by no means *all conclusive* as to what we can know of God's Word or what He may have us to do in our walk with Him.

God must look on us with amusement and pity as we try and define the limits of His power and understanding! We have been taught that God *ONLY* speaks to us through the written and canonized Scriptures. Thus we cannot know God's will unless the Scriptures speak to it. We also have been force fed to believe that miracles have ceased, because God shut down all gifts that had to do with the supernatural when the written and canonized Scriptures were completed. Prophecy is not valid any more unless it was recorded before the 1st century...and certainly not after the three councils that solidified the "Canon" as we know it--the Council of Hippo in 393

AD, Third of Carthage in 397 AD, and the Sixth of Carthage in 419 AD.⁷

Much confusion and *misinterpretation* have arisen because many fail to realize the difference between our "Canonization of the Scriptures" and the "Word of God".

Mark Mattison of True Grace Ministries does a good job of defining this confusion between the Bible and the Word of God:

"The word "Bible" comes from the Greek word Biblos, which means "book." The Bible then, is the "book" of the church. This is an excellent description of its place and function in the Christian community. However, the Bible never uses this term to describe itself.

*Many Christians refer to the Bible as "the word of God." The intent is to affirm and reinforce the divine inspiration of the Bible. However, the Bible never calls itself "the word of God" either. Why not? **Because "the word" cannot be distilled to written words on a page. "For the word of God is living and active" (Heb. 4:12a, NIV).***

God sends forth His word, and it does not return to Him until it has accomplished its purpose (Isa. 55:10,11). The word of God spreads on earth (Acts 6:7a). We are "born again...through the living and enduring word of God" (1 Pet. 1:23,NIV).

*The word of God lives in us (1 John 2:14). Through God's word all things were made (John 1:1-3). Jesus' name is the word of God (Rev. 19:13). The word of God, the revealed truth of God, is not a book, even though our book reveals many things about God. But the two are not synonymous. "*⁸

We cannot emphasize enough about the way God speaks to us and wants to speak to us through *His Word*. But we limit God to a defined measure in our culturally imperfect Christian society. How can we as finite humans limit a God who has an infinite nature? We do not want to get into any kind of philosophical discussion here, but

the Spirit has taught us that *we can* hear the voice of God in our hearts! Just because man rationalizes that the canonized Scriptures are complete and therefore God is limited to only speaking through them, *does not make it so.*

Hear ye the Word of the Lord:

*“Elohim Yahweh, El Shaddai is not bound by
our canonized Book.”*

Unfortunately, the result of this limitation is that the distilled written words become our God. We end up worshipping the Book—the Canon—and the Church's decrees. Decrees and cultural interpretation limit our faith. Decrees and cultural interpretation limit our diversity. Decrees and cultural interpretations must constantly be upgraded to explain their explanations and limitations. The end conclusion is that God is not a personal God—He is a historical God. God cannot possibly show up in worship, personal communion or in prayer. This half-baked collective says that God can only be heard through our Scripture lesson, and anything else is just trumped up imagination.

As touchy as this subject is, how utterly sad, misguided, and totally deceived for one to say something like this!

We believe this attitude is walking in the flesh and not in the Spirit. This attitude relies on the intellect, placed above the Spirit of God. However, we are not saying we turn off our intellect completely. Hilda and I have learned some extreme things in our desert experience about God and His love, ourselves, and especially our limited understanding. The vital *key* in all of our understanding is that we have learned to check our intellectual bias at the door when it comes to receiving things that the Holy Spirit wants to teach us. But we have also learned to check all things under the light of His living Word before we accept anything.

When we sat down to put into words some of the amazing things we learned, we asked God to give us just a small glimpse of His amazing love that we could share with His followers. After just a few minutes of amazing illumination into the Love of God, it seemed as if

the heavens opened up and we were inundated with a ferocious barrage of amazing love that we tried in vain to catch and convey within our small paper cups of intelligence. It was so overwhelming and paralyzing that we couldn't write anything for days—for weeks—for months! We instead just fell to the floor in amazement, wonder, and awe to worship the most high God who loved us beyond anything we could think or imagine. It's just like what John said at the end of his Gospel: *"Jesus did many other things as well. If every one of them were written down, I suppose that even the whole world would not have room for the books that would be written."* (John 21:25) His love has no limits! His Word has no boundaries! Yahweh, Yeshua and His Spirit are not enslaved by our reasoning, interpretations, and human understanding.

A Puritan by the name of Samuel Rutherford has a quote that fits here:

*"... For if you should see a man shut up in a closed room, idolizing a set of lamps and rejoicing in their light, and you wished to make him truly happy, you would begin by blowing out all his lamps, and then throw open the shutters to let in the light of heaven."*⁹

It's really a little too simplified to put in just one small quote, but literally what we are trying to do here with this narrative is to blow out the limiting and dim lantern of cultural bias and tradition, and open up the shutters of the *WORD of GOD* to let the glorious and infinite light of heaven shine down into our spirit!

"Oh taste and see that the Lord is good!" Let the Father wrap you in His loving arms and whisper to you that He loves you beyond amazement and that you are His child. Let Yeshua speak to you as only the Good Shepherd can to calm your spirit and restore your soul. Let the Holy Spirit fill you as the great Comforter with the Words of God that bring peace that passes all understanding.

HERE is a solid reason for "the waiting" for God to accomplish His perfect will in your life. Here is why Yahweh must constantly remind us that *He is in control*, and His ways are way beyond our limited faith and boxed up resources. Here is where the

Word of God perfects our faith and strengthens our knowledge even in the depths of mystery. Here is where we drop our man-made bricks of Babylon and become “*Living Stones*” (1 Peter 2:5) in the Kingdom of God!

If our faith would just click in strong enough to believe ALL that God says is true and will come to pass—what a load of grief we would spare ourselves each day as we turn to Him and acknowledge that only He knows what is best. In the wait, He may be working behind the scenes to set something up that will be wonderful, and way beyond anything we could ask or think. In the wait, He may be waiting on something else to fall into place before His perfect plan can blossom into a beautiful testimony of God’s faithfulness and provision. In the wait, He may be perfecting your faith to discover that when we are in perfect harmony with what God wants—by GOD—“That tree is running and doing back flips to get to the sea!”

The resultant fruit of waiting (*hope*) is patience. The Holy Spirit uses perseverance to work His supernatural character into us to perfect our faith and trust. The wait is the vehicle in which this character comes to perfect His work in us. The result is peace that passes all understanding coupled with a faith that can move mountains. The outcome is God’s perfect will in our lives—and He being glorified.

THE KEY that unlocks all of the mystery is learning to listen to God’s voice. Only then will we truly know who Yahweh, Elohim, El Shaddai really is!

To reach this understanding involves humility as a servant understands his role with the master. Humility may mean that we realize we have nothing in and of ourselves that is worthy of anything. Humility may be to realize we don’t have all the answers, even though our education thinks we do. Humility may be to limit our ego to stop trying “to do” and instead “*listen*” to what God has to say! “*Be still and know that I am God.*”

God reaches out and says, “I love you...not because of what you do, but just because I choose to do so.” ONLY because of God’s love are we blessed. ONLY because of God’s love – we can do all

things through Christ – because HE strengthens us. ONLY because of God's love He says, "Here, this is what I want you to do, *now go do it.*"

Yes, humility is complete dependence. The moment we start to throw up our rationalized plans and how we want things to happen—it all comes to a screeching halt! Let's face it. We are not worthy of ANYTHING. Our talents are filthy rags. Our plans are shifting sands. Our thoughts are puny, unintelligent, unimaginative and worthless. (But God...*BUT GOD!!*) ONLY Yahweh knows what is best for us, and thus we wait on Him for our orders.

God's plans are perfect!

If we grow weary and start to lose heart in the waiting, remember this testimony of Godly men and women in Hebrews 11 who endured so much for their faith, and yet waited on God's promises as true. And since we have this great cloud of witnesses, let's throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles us. Dare we say that the sin that so easily entangles us is our *lack of patience to see our faith through?*

Sometimes we must just be content and peaceful about a spiritual nudging or inner knowing we may receive. But learn to listen and be grateful for those illuminating moments of brighter light and clearer understanding of hearing God's personal voice telling us of His love and the plans He has for us, and helping us to see El Shaddai as the all powerful Elohim! (Jer.29:11. See also Psa 139.)

A Jewish Rabbi once commented that a vision may come at a time when all around us is dark. It's sort of like a lightening flash in a terrible storm. Danger is at every step. All around us could be raging winds, wild animals, and rising water. Evil is at every level. But in a split second, a sudden burst of light lets us see the destination to which we labor to reach. It could be a mountain peak off in the distance that we long to conquer. It could be a port of destination that has been lost in the storm. It could be an inviting village in which we have longed to dwell. It's there, but for the moment we can't see it

because of the darkness and the storm. But in that split second we are granted a glimpse of that goal; an encouraging flash sets our feet back on the path in which we struggle. It may take a while to get there, but we know God's promises are true, and we hope (*or wait*) for the fulfillment of what God says will happen. *And we then see it will happen!*

Now... if we can just keep ourselves from running ahead of God and screwing things up!

-----✱-----

Notes:

1. See Strong's Number: 6960
2. " Waiting for God" by Ron Julian. www.mckenziestudycenter.org/theology
3. en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Abraham
4. Pastor Richard Lambert, Dover Delaware
5. "The Spiritual Man", Watchman Nee Volume II Section Five: the analysis of the spirit—the intuition, the fellowship, and the conscience
6. <http://www.bible-researcher.com/canon.html>
7. Ibid
8. <http://www.auburn.edu/~allenkc/openhse/whatbible.html>
9. <http://www.bulletininserts.org/bitter.html> (James McAlister)

Chapter 13

Living in Yeshua haMeshiach (The Messiah, Christ Jesus)

"Abide in me and I in you." John 15:4

"If there be one truth of the Gospel that is fundamental, and underlies all else, it is this: A new life in Christ Jesus. He, Himself, clearly and forcibly expressed it in John 15:4: "Abide in me and I in you." By a matchless parable our Lord there taught us that all believers are branches of the Living Vine, and that, apart from Him we are nothing and can do nothing because we have in us no life. This truth finds expression in many ways in the Holy Scripture, but most frequently in that short and simple phrase we are now considering -- in Christ Jesus."

Arthur Tappan Pierson 1837-1911 ¹

The Journey

What a journey this is! We find ourselves in the desert and in the desert we find life! Why? ...*Because God is here!* Truth be known, He was always here with us. But as we are stripped of our comfortable surroundings and traditional settings, God reveals Himself to us in a wonderful and different way.

We were searching for spiritual fulfillment in our lives, but not finding it in the many man-made paths that claim to be the way to know God. Actually we were closed minded to the leading of the Spirit and not open to the Lord's teaching because of traditional and cultural bias that had made our walk with God a pattern of man and not of the Word in Yeshua haMeshiach (Christ Jesus).

We only learn this through the washing of the Word and the teaching of the Spirit who is leading us through the wilderness. This

is “*The Desert LIFE*”, as we search out the things God wants us to know about living. It’s living in *Yeshua haMeshiach* (*Christ Jesus*).

With the help of *El Shaddai* (*God Almighty*), we have to tear down all the strongholds that have misled us in our world view, theology, and spiritual perception. Most of these strongholds are deceptions that we have built our "spiritual house" upon . . . and now it has fallen with a mighty crash!

The Deception

The biggest deception was that *we thought* we were building on the Rock of our Master and Savior, our Messiah (our Lord Jesus Christ). But sadly we were building on tradition and religion.

As we searched for the Truth and who God is, trying to throw off the shackles of deception, we found that even His name was not given to us as He originally intended. And just so there is no confusion as to who Jesus Christ is, we shall explain how we got the translated Greek name from His Hebrew name of *Yeshua HaMeshiach*.

Jesus is actually a poor translation of the Hebrew name *Yehoshua*, or as we know it: Joshua. *Yeshua* was used as the more common, shortened version of *Yehoshua* in His time because most Jews did not want to accidentally say the name of *Yahweh* within the literal meaning of *Yehoshua* (*Yahweh saves us*). Out of respect, the Hellenistic Greeks transliterated the Hebrew name into *IHSOUS*. (*I’m not really sure why, but research may point to a common pagan persuasion whereby common Greeks would know it had some Divine influence.*)² Later within the Middle Ages, the “J” sound originated and was added to the transliteration and became *Jesus*, a purely Anglican, King James version of the original – added to the Scriptures for whatever reason the King wanted it to be so.

Christ is the English translation of the Greek *kristos*, which literally means “*rubbed on*”, which was used to describe the Hebrew name of *Meshiach* or “anointed one” in Hebrew. (Messiah in English).³ *Kristos* was first used by Hellenized Jews who translated the Septuagint (LXX). It was the closest word they could find to translate the unusual Hebrew word for *anointing*. Anointing was purely a Hebrew custom, and the closest word they could find in Greek was to rub something into one’s skin—*kristos*. Not exactly an endearing term is it. But it has no pagan influence that I know of, and for the most part is known in English as the title “Messiah”.

So there is no confusion as to who “God” is, we shall explain the nebulous pagan term of “*God*” as that which is derived from “*the invoked one*” of the Babylonian and Eastern religions.⁴ It is ultimately less confusing to use His proper Hebrew names as given to us: *El Elyon, Elohim, Yahweh, El Shaddai*. (*The most High God, The Lord God Almighty*.) See *Psalms 91: 1-2*. However, “*God*” within Christian circles is relatively known as the God of the Hebrews. This is not so among the many other major religions throughout the world.

Elohim is used all throughout the *Tanakh* (*The Hebrew Scriptures*) and we are introduced to Him in Genesis chapter 1. *Elohim* is actually the plural form of *El*. He was introduced as *Yahweh* (*I am*) to Moses at the burning Bush. Abraham also knew Him as *Yahweh* (*Gen 12:1*). But He was also introduced as *El Elyon* (*The most High God*) to Abraham by Melchizedek (*Gen 14*). *Yahweh* also used the name *El Shaddai* when speaking with Abraham during his covenant blessing in *Gen 17:1*.

Jehovah is a rather embarrassing and poor Anglican choice for the name of God. Not only did the “J” sound not originate until 500 years ago, but with the Masoretes tradition of adding the vowels from *Adonai* (*Hebrew word for Master or Lord*) into the Tetragrammaton *YHWH* (*Yahweh*) and coupled next to this “J” sound, it became the standard of representing the name *Yahweh* in the Western world. The King James Bible of 1611 went even further and then translated all references to *Yahweh* as *LORD* (All capital letters), and that tradition exists in most translations still today.⁵

We know a lot of this may seem strange or unusual to some, but after months and months of good solid research, and listening to the teachings of the Holy Spirit, there is good indications that we should move away from the Hellenistic terms we have adopted for the God of the Hebrews and Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. Many of these westernized names have their roots in pagan affirmations.⁶

This is not a legalistic thing by any means, but more of a personal understanding to bring clarity as to whom we serve. There is much confusion about names, and even confusion as to why there is confusion about the names of God as introduced by the translations of the original languages. Many may refuse to budge from what they have taught and heard all of their lives. That is OK, as long as you know in your heart of whom you serve.

But as for us and our house—we will serve *Yahweh!*

We may still interchange the Hellenistic and Hebrew names and terms depending on who we're talking to. Mainly to the Christians in our western society, we generally know who we mean. (*Or do we!?!*) But to the unbeliever, "God" is mostly a relative term. Even the term "Christian" is confusing, and at best a hodge-podge of different meanings, terms, and definitions within the context of religion.⁷

There is so much controversy here, and we really don't want to confuse anyone. Just know there are many things we have accepted throughout the 2000 years of church history as truth, mainly because we were taught these things by leaders we trusted. These leaders are passing on what they learned from other leaders, which was passed down from the higher learning institutions of men. It is men learning from man's reasoning and customs.

Just because a doctrine is old, does not mean it is truth. It is a good idea to delve into what we have accepted as truth, and reverse some of these things that may not line up with what Yeshua taught, and the disciples lived. During the take-over of the Apostles' teaching and the original faith, by Constantine in the 4th century, many pagan traditions and customs were adopted as festivals and holidays within this institutionalized "church" machine of Rome. Although traditional scholars and church teachings deny this, much pagan influence is seen

in the Christian ceremonies, decrees, and doctrines adopted by the church.⁸

It's like this...

In our walk as a believer in Yahweh, and in His plan as "Sons of Elohim", within His salvation (who is Yehoshua haMeshiach)—are we following a tradition (man-made custom) in our beliefs and terms that we use...possibly as an occult attempt at "syncretism"... or are we following Yeshua?

Do we really know? Do we need to care? Does it matter to anyone else? ...To Yeshua? ...To Abba??

It was made clear to us that we were building on misleading and ambiguous *Hellenistic* Greek philosophy. We trusted our *Hellenistic* traditions and religious teachings more than *Elohim*. What we heard coming from the pulpit and our popular Christian personalities was just accepted as *bonafide* truth, instead of listening to the Spirit and searching the Scriptures for ourselves as to whether these doctrines were true or not. We have learned since to put our trust ONLY in *Elohim*, keeping our bias in check and listening to *Yeshua's* voice as He teaches us with His Word through His Spirit!

As we see it, the historical church, denominations, and many Christian organizations have had a hidden agenda. They want their interpretation or slant on Yahweh's Word to be prominent and the only true set of guidelines for the faithful. Look at the way the Bible has been translated for two centuries and you will see what we mean. As much as the scribes wanted and tried to keep their bias from entering into the original texts, *it did*. Just one or two words here and there, a certain punctuation or capitalization of a word, chapters and verses inserted that split up thoughts and phrases, and even texts of discourse inserted that were not found in the original, along with mistranslations and changing of names and "*whammo*"—a certain

doctrine is emphasized, a certain slant is reinforced, and subtle deception has entered in sheep's clothing. In this way, our whole process of canonization is suspect when looked under the microscope of the Word and the Spirit.

Inspired books have been a controversy since the time of Ezra. When it really gets down to it, there was no major consensus of the Canon until the invention of the printing press—but even then, as well as now, canonization still has its questions.

Do not take us the wrong way—we honestly believe we have verbally inspired books (in the original languages) in our Bibles, but many others that may have been inspired were rejected because of certain doctrinal bias and agendas of keeping us from "knowing" many things that El Elyon had put into play.

Take it all with a grain of salt, but there are many things we don't know . . . because religious "leaders" throughout church history have kept it from us to guard their traditional integrity. Even to say what we are saying right now would have warranted *instant death* from the "*doctrine police*" of the day. Some still claim they have all the answers and have appointed themselves as official "keepers of the truth" and try to call down fire on anyone who does not believe what they believe about their "God" and what man has set up.

One can see why some of these other books were not considered, as they have the fingerprints of man all over them...but what book doesn't, except maybe the *Torah*. Even the *Tanakh* has had some good questions raised about it.⁹ The translations we have now are suspect because all of the various writings can have such a cultural slant to them, that they lose their original meaning.

We had to blow the dust off of our concordances and start doing some real word studies of our own! We let the Spirit show us what He means by the words He chose! We all have to *entirely* depend on the Holy Spirit to guide us into all truth! Especially now that we have the "tree of the knowledge of good and evil" (the Internet) at our fingertips! Most arguments now center around who has the real set of facts!

Nevertheless, by the grace of Yahweh we have a Book that does speak from the Spirit of Truth and these Words have been

carefully preserved and reconfirmed so that we can understand that Yeshua was part of the process from the beginning. We must be careful to listen to these Words and what He has to say to us, and examine everything that is presented to us under the “light” of the living Word. (2 Corinthians 4: 1-6)

Yeshua said to the religious Pharisees of His day in John 8: 21-47 that they would not believe in Him because *they did not have room for His Words!* This is no small thing coming from the Messiah. Although the Pharisees were the common society of Jews, they were extremely sophisticated and a scholarly class. And though they had much truth to their credit, they still insisted however, that Moses also received some “*oral interpretations*” of the Torah (The Law) on Mt Sinai. They collected a group of their oral interpretations in writings that dissected the Torah into micro catechisms that they felt would live out the Word in their proper interpretation.¹⁰

They had the verified living Scriptures of Moses and the Prophets, but instead they relied and interpreted it with their own set of writings from the Talmud, which Jesus said was like listening to a false voice—“that which they heard from their father”, who in this case was the Devil. The argument from the Pharisees to what Jesus had said was, “We are children of Abraham”. A literal paraphrase is that “We don’t need you to explain our own cultural heritage.” In other words, our cultural position, bias, and oral tradition dictate what truth is found in the Word, because it was given to the Hebrews. Although we recognize that Scripture should be interpreted through the light of this cultural setting, we see here a clear example of how a cultural bias (*even brought under a legitimate and rational claim*) can also lead one down the wrong paths. Sadly, Jesus said that they trusted in lies and deception even though they had the truth. Jesus was telling them the truth, but they wouldn’t accept it because of their *interpretation* from their Talmad of the truth.

"Jesus would not submit to the tyranny of those who were closing the door to Truth." Jesus came preaching the kingdom of God, but the predominate Jewish system illustrated here had become a dead system of works that blinded men from the Truth of the

*Word and placed harnesses of heavy burdens on God's children."*¹¹

It's easy for us to see this because it is spelled out for us in the text by Jesus himself. But those caught up in it could not see it and were offended—to the point of calling Jesus "a demon possessed Samaritan" (The most derogatory term they could use at the time) because He went against their *interpretation* of the Scriptures.¹²

Matthew 15:6 "...Thus you nullify the word of God for the sake of your tradition."

Isaiah 29:13 "...They worship me in vain; their teachings are but rules taught by men."

Colossians 2:8. "...See to it that no one takes you captive through hollow and deceptive philosophy, which depends on human tradition and the basic principles of this world rather than on Christ."

Please realize that we are in no way trying to undermine the Word of God, the book of Scriptures, the doctrines of our salvation, and the holiness of God. What we are trying to do is *clarify and preserve* the Word of Truth from being polluted by the ways of the world and distorted with deception and doctrines of men. This distortion is done by adding or subtraction from the intent of Scripture, and lifting up a false standard as the only standard, where by we must interpret God's Word. Our sitting at the feet of Yeshua and listening to the voice of the Shepherd, along with the illumination of the Spirit has shown us that the institutions of man are *utterly corrupt* and not to be trusted.

Babylon was not a story of building a tower to get to heaven; it is a story of man replacing God with what he can achieve. Our entire wilderness journey of the last 10 years has been to not only see Yeshua for who He really is...but also how utterly corrupt, twisted, and vain the systems of man really are—especially in how it relates to *Elohim* and the counterfeit that Satan has tried to build from day one.

Under the blood of the Lamb, we have unbound our spirits from the doctrines of men and demons that have tried to form us into Babylonian bricks, raising a tower of man-made systems and decrees. This counterfeit kingdom is a far cry from what Yahweh wants to establish through his Son and the sheep that have been given to Him. We are being formed as “Living Stones”, chiseled and fashioned under His Word to be fit into the new temple of the Kingdom of Elohim, in the Body of Meshiach.

Now before we jump into any arguments on the validity of our claim, we must state this: *in our personal experience, and after forty eight years of exploring, searching, studying, listening and discovering—no matter what evidence is thrown to the forefront on either side, it all boils down to faith in the Truth. For us, we have accepted by faith that what we are being taught by the Holy Spirit is the Truth.*

“... He has given us the Spirit as a deposit, guaranteeing what is to come.” 2 Cor 5: 5

“But when he, the Spirit of truth, comes, he will guide you into all the truth...” John 16:13

For us it comes to that which God has confirmed in our hearts by the Spirit through His Word. His Spirit bears witness with our Spirit that we are His children, (Rom 8:12-17) and His Word is Truth. (John 1:1; John 17:14-17)

1 Corinthians 2 :6-16 “We do, however, speak a message of wisdom among the mature, but not the wisdom of this age or of the rulers of this age, who are coming to nothing.

No, we speak of God's secret wisdom, a wisdom that has been hidden and that God destined for our glory before time began. None of the rulers of this age understood it, for if they had, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory. However, as it is written:

*"No eye has seen, no ear has heard, no mind has conceived what God has prepared for those who love him" **but God has revealed it to us by his Spirit.***

The Spirit searches all things, even the deep things of God. For who among men knows the thoughts of a man except the man's spirit within him? In the same way no one knows the thoughts of God except the Spirit of God.

***We have not received the spirit of the world but the Spirit who is from God, that we may understand what God has freely given us.** This is what we speak, not in words taught us by human wisdom but in words taught by the Spirit, expressing spiritual truths in spiritual words.*

*The man without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him, and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually discerned. The spiritual man makes judgments about all things, but he himself is not subject to any man's judgment: **"For who has known the mind of the Lord that he may instruct him?" But we have the mind of Christ.**"*

It sounds a little too simple, but listening to the Spirit is what it is all about. As we listen, read, and study His Word, the Spirit reveals to us the Truth. But we have to be diligent that our own bias or slant on knowledge does not try and interpret His Word with our own words or as someone else says it must be interpreted. *Emotions must be tabled here and personal preferences must be set aside.*

Revelation of any sorts will have its roots in the Hebrew Scriptures. It is probably why the verse in Acts 17:11 jumps out at us when we hear someone telling us they have some sort of new revelation.

"Now the Bereans were of more noble character than the Thessalonians, for they received the message with great eagerness and examined the Scriptures every day to see if what Paul said was true."

Paul was sent with the message of fantastic news—a great mystery explained! The mystery was that salvation came by grace and all of scripture was pointing to the fact that Yeshua haMeshiach had to die for all and become our propitiation for sins. The Gentiles (non descendants of Judah) were also included. It's the Gospel Message, the Good News. Paul based all that was revealed to him within the Hebrew *Tanakh*, and that is the scripture that the Bereans used. The New Testament hadn't been written yet. It's obvious that most missed what Yahweh had intended within written Scripture. Yeshua explained it to the apostles, and had to send a messenger, along with the Counselor to continue to explain it to them after the work of the cross was completed.

So we have to ask ourselves: Can the Spirit reveal to us things that are not clearly spelled out in Scripture? Can we understand the incredible mysteries of Meshiach in us without a commentary, as Paul states that he was called to disclose? Can we really understand the deep things of El Elyon without an intellectual spelling it out to us? How about just simple things? Can we really trust that which The Spirit says is not our own ego? How do we really know? What keeps us from lifting up our personal standard and proclaiming that only we have the truth and everyone else is wrong?

The Truth

Here is where it all boils down to faith.

As Yeshua said to Peter in Matthew 16:17, (and we stand with him also): *"...this was not revealed to you by man, but by my Father in heaven."* We also stand with the healed blind man in John 9:25: *"...all I know is, once I was blind, and now I see!"*

* By faith we know that Elohim loves us. (Jn 3:16)

* By faith we are justified. (Rom 5:1)

* By faith we receive the truth of His Word
(Rom 10:17)

- * By faith we must live in Truth (2 Cor 5:7)
- * By faith we rely on the Spirit to guide us into all Truth. (John 16:13)

But for the most part, our personal bias tends to distort the Truth. We have to continually ask the Holy Spirit to reveal to us those thing in which we need correction and that which we need to share with our fellow believers. We *“study to show ourselves approved of God, workmen that need not be ashamed, rightly dividing the Word of Truth.”* (2 Tim 2:15). Yes, we have to use our reasoning, and we try and study all the different sides of an issue—and they can be as varied as the species of the sea. But we ultimately have to rely on the Spirit to guide us into the Truth because the new life that we have in Yeshua *is Spirit*. (Jn 6:63-65; Rom 8:9-11)

The Bias of Understanding

We really need to dive deeper into this issue of *bias* so you realize what it is and how you can be aware of it and put checks on it as you live out your life in Yeshua haMeshiach.

We are often amazed, but then again not, at how we tend to filter our world view with our own set of rules, biases and outlooks. Psychologists have one thing right, in saying that we are made up by our experiences and environment.

Just as an example: how we view one another is often based on a first time impression or negative flaws we have picked up in that first encounter. We then have the tendency to hold to those impressions no matter what the other person says or does. Our ongoing impression is stamped and interpreted from that first encounter.

"...first impressions are easy to form and difficult to overcome...What's more, there is a well documented asymmetry between the impact of bad first impressions versus good ones. Consider the following: We are quicker to both form and recall bad impressions, and

*are also more likely to do so. We also tend to be more confident about bad impressions, take less time to arrive at them, and require less information to be convinced of them -- that is, relative to good impressions. Finally, once a bad impression is formed, we seal it away from revision or interference."*¹³

Also, our traditional and cultural bias in which we interpret truth is easily formed from an early age by our environment. For example in the early church, the issue of eating pork or not depended if you were from Jerusalem or Corinth.

For some to eat meat sacrificed to idols was not wrong. To others it was a huge problem. But Truth be known as Paul states it—*"food does not bring us close to God. We are no worse off if we eat, and no better if we don't."* (I Cor. 8: 8). In this case, the Biblical stance was a matter of conscience and/or whether it offended your weaker brother. But as you can see, cultural bias (of being a Jew or a Gentile) played a very important role as to the legality to these early believers.

On the other hand, as for the *absolutes of Scripture* and the *commandments of Yahweh*, there is no cultural norm. Sexual immorality was wrong in either city.

When we rise above circumstances and shake off the strongholds that hold us captive to a viewpoint, philosophy or bias, it's another thing entirely. These days this is really difficult to do. We live in a technological world that can reinforce any viewpoint, theory or assumption by holding on to, discussing, and lifting up certain "factoids" or "truthiness" that tend to reinforce our own view; and many times we will use these factoids as trump cards to wipe out any other real fact that goes against what we have already judged to be true. A "factoid" along with "truthiness" is a spurious (unverified, incorrect, or invented) "fact" intended to create or prolong public exposure or to manipulate public opinion.¹⁴

"We humans have an innate preference to seek out information that confirms our world view. That's just

how our brains work: If given a chance, we'll avoid news facts that we don't like.

Digital technology allows us to indulge those human desires better than we could in the past. On the Web, television, radio, and all manner of new devices, today you can watch, listen to, and read what you want, whenever you want; seek out and discuss, in exhaustive and insular detail, the kind of news that pleases you; and pursue your political or social or scientific theories, whether sophisticated or naive, extremist or banal, grounded in reality or completely insane.

*... in the last few years, pollsters and political researchers have begun to document a fundamental shift in the way Americans [as well as the rest of the world] are thinking about the news. No longer are we merely holding different opinions from one another; we're also holding different facts. Increasingly, our arguments aren't over what we **should** be doing -- but, instead, over what **is happening**. You can go so far as to say we're now fighting over competing version of reality." ¹⁵*

So, to quote Francis Schaeffer: "How then should we live?" We obviously have to go to an authoritative source and rely on that as our guide into truth. We as believers of course hold the Bible as our authoritative Truth when it comes to our standard to live by. But here again our bias and world view play an important part in how we interpret and judge truth.

How do we judge the truth? We often hear the phrase, "Don't be judgmental." Being judgmental in this context is a negative term we use to describe those who think they can scrutinize another's actions because of their incorrect world view of morality. It has the overtones of being "better than others" because they follow their list of moral "do's and don'ts" that you or others may not adhere to entirely.

We often tend to think that we shouldn't judge because we misquote Jesus' words, "*Judge not, that ye be not judged.*" But in our real world we have to make judgments about things constantly

through out the day—every day. Yes, we have to make a judgment about a particular person as to whether we want to associate with them (or not) based on their character and impressions of who they are as a person. We also have to judge whether a particular action is worthy of our acceptance ...or not.

Maybe the problem lies in our definitive rules. Is a “judgment” a personal observation, opinion, or a moral conclusion?

"All things, big and small, invite your judgment. The condition of the weather, political matters, the taste of your food, a television program- at every moment of the day, something or other is inviting your judgment of it. And so often, and so willingly, you render it, without being aware of the consequences, without taking care of the responsibilities entailed.

You judge, and then to make matters worse, you believe in your judgment. You've looked at the evidence, you've made a judgment - it must be right! There couldn't possibly be any other conclusion to arrive at but the one you've chosen, could there?" ¹⁶

Even in our seeking the Truth and learning how to live in Christ Jesus, we have to be careful of how we interpret our methods of seeking that truth in “judgment” by our opinions and observations.

We are a strange bunch of people, we humans. We like to think we have all the right answers. We like to think we are always right. We like to think we are the special ones with all the right philosophy. But in reality, our truth in our own world view is highly suspect. When it comes to what or whose methodology and philosophy we choose to interpret as to what we know as truth, there is a fundamental problem that this bias will overshadow any other reasoning process we employ.

So what do we do? How do we proceed to judge in truth? What is the real way to judge truth God's way, apart from personal opinions?

"When a person judges, he also forms an opinion. But an opinion is not necessarily the same as a

judgment. Opinions are often framed by our fears, pride, or ignorance. If all we had were human opinions, we might agree with those who say we should never judge.

Judgments are opinions that we form only after we have made a serious effort to know the facts, and, for those of us who are Christians, only after we have consulted the moral teachings of Scripture and prayed for Spirit-informed discernment. Any lazy or biased fool can have opinions; making judgments is the hard work of responsible and compassionate people.

... Nobody with a beam in his eye can see things clearly. He is dangerously low on discernment. And, since we all have this distorted perspective, we need either to be very humble or else leave judging to God alone. We have a moral responsibility to judge the moral behavior of others — but only if we are humbly aware that we will sometimes be dead wrong and never totally right. We must remember that our ability to judge is limited and especially that we are sinful people who will ourselves, one day, come under judgment.”¹⁷

Now please don't think we are pointing fingers at any one person, organization, institution or church as being overly biased or judgmental in all their truth. *We are all biased* to the extent as each one of us stresses our viewpoint as the ultimate truth. And as we said before, most institutions of men are corrupt to the core. But we must remember there are different sides to every subject and how we internalize it may depend on where we are in our lives in relation to that subject, or for that matter—where we live!

In matters of judgment, The Spirit has revealed to us that the main key in all of our judgmental discernment should be "love". "Love your neighbor as yourself." "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you." James 3: 17 says that "*wisdom from above is first of all pure, then peace-loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial and sincere.*" We would hope as Christians we would strive to look for the good things: i.e. "whatsoever things are pure, lovely, of good report", etc. (Phil 4:8-9)

And this is my prayer: that your love may abound more and more in knowledge and depth of insight, so that you may be able to discern what is best and may be pure and blameless until the day of Christ, filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ—to the glory and praise of God. (Philippians 1: 9-11)

We all have a tendency to focus on the negative. Instead we need to train ourselves on focusing on the positive. That's the difficult part. That's where Elohim has to take over as we yield to the Spirit's guidance in Yeshua, the Messiah.

However there is a time to look at the negative—especially as it relates to what Yahweh tells us and how the rest of the world tries to negate it or add to it.

Living out Righteousness

What we see in today's "Christian" society once the rose colored, filtering glasses of bias, culture, and tradition are taken out of the way is that we have replaced the simplicity of the Gospel with a set of codes, systematic Theology, ordinances, and moral lists that we hold up as the Gospel Truth. We need to get back to the basic principals of the Gospel and preach Yeshua as the Messiah—not a Christ-like religion.

In our evangelism, we say to the world: "be like us", when the world doesn't want to be anything like us. There's nothing attractive about our religiosity. They don't want another religion that spells out what they must *ritualistically do* in order to have a fulfilled life. If they are seekers of God, what they do want is their spiritual thirst and hunger to be satisfied with a passionate relationship with the one true Elohim. Only Yeshua can do that. Our Christian "religion" and "dogma" fall way short.

“For none of us lives to himself alone and none of us dies to himself alone. If we live, we live to the Lord; and if we die, we die to the Lord. So, whether we live or die, we belong to the Lord. For this very reason, Christ died and returned to life so that he might be the Lord of both the dead and the living.” (Romans 14:7-9)

“For through the law I died to the law so that I might live for God. I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.”

(Galatians 2: 19-20)

“...filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ—to the glory and praise of God.” (Philippians 1:9-11)

“So then, just as you received Christ Jesus as Lord, continue to live in him, rooted and built up in him, strengthened in the faith as you were taught, and overflowing with thankfulness. See to it that no one takes you captive through hollow and deceptive philosophy, which depends on human tradition and the basic principles of this world rather than on Christ.”

“...Therefore do not let anyone judge you by what you eat or drink, or with regard to a religious festival, a New Moon celebration or a Sabbath day. These are a shadow of the things that were to come; the reality, however, is found in Christ...”

(Colossians 2:6-8;16ff)

These are things we can stand sure on, as the Word has revealed to us: *Yeshua HaMashiach* (Jesus Christ, the Messiah) was both Elohim (God) and man. He was of virgin birth (He was born of the Spirit), died in our place on the cross (as our Passover Lamb) and rose again from the dead (Conquering sin and death). There is no other name, means, or other ways by which we can be righteous before Yahweh and be eternally saved. Because of this, and the placing of our faith in the Messiah and this good news—our sins are forgiven. We have been given the gift of eternal co-existence and

fellowship with the Almighty Creator—Elohim, the eternal YHWH, and the El Shaddai of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob; and He has given us the gift of His Holy Spirit as a seal or down payment that what He has promised in this salvation will come to pass. He expects us to live out our life in the righteousness of a Spirit filled life. That does not mean following a code of religious norms and activities. In means we are to *live our lives in Yeshua haMeshiach*.

What is this fruit of righteousness in a Spirit filled life that comes through Yeshua haMeshiach?

*It is the Fruit of the Spirit in Galatians 5:20:

...Gentleness, goodness, kindness, love, joy, peace, long suffering (patience), faithfulness and self control.

*It is the "love list" of I Corinthians 13:

...it suffers long; is kind, does not envy; does not parade itself; is not puffed up; does not behave rudely; is not provoked; does not think evil nor rejoices in sin; rejoices in Truth; bears all things; believes all things; hopes all things; endures all things.

*It is the list of worthy things to think about in Philippians 4:8:

...whatsoever things are true, noble, just, pure, lovely, of good report, of virtue and worthy to be praised.

*It is what we as a follower of Messiah should clothe ourselves with in Collosians 3:12-16:

...tender mercies, kindness, humility, compassion, gentleness, and patience

*We are further instructed to:

...bear with one another; forgive one another; love; let the peace of God rule our hearts; be thankful; have the Word live in us abundantly; teach and admonish one another; sing with grace in our hearts.

*It is becoming like Yeshua!

*It is *living in* Yeshua, our Messiah!

Unfortunately, we as followers of Yeshua get bogged down in how deeply marred we are by sin, and we fail to live out this “fruit” as proof that the Spirit is at work in us. So what we tend to do is try and work ourselves out of this bondage in our own strength and once again bind ourselves to a new legalism in obeying rules rooted in law, and not living in the freedom of Yeshua as a soul which grows through the Spirit's work in us to bear good fruit. (Galatians 4:8-9 & 5:1; John 15:5)

Instead we need to turn back to the Spirit Counselor, and trust that our Yeshua will be working to change us, working till the Kingdom of Yahweh is consummated, molding us to be more like Yeshua as a spotless Bride *This is living in Christ Jesus.*

If you have been in the desert and have learned these truths to which we speak, then as a new work in Adonai (*The Master*), you have the opportunity to not make the same mistakes we have made in our 2,000 year church history. We must follow Yeshua and not stumble in the ways of man. *This is living in Christ Jesus.*

Unity is also a fruit of righteousness as Paul wrote in his epistles in Colossians and Ephesians. Peter wrote in I Peter 2:17 that we should “love the brotherhood of believers.” Yeshua prayed that we would be unified in love. Only then will the world know that we are his disciples! (John 17: 20-26) Yet the Church can only be truly whole when it embraces and sustains the whole Truth of the Word in the bond of peace, in the full measure of joy from the Messiah, and in coming together in the unity of LOVE. (John 17:1-19; see also Ephesians 4:1-16). *This too is living in Christ Jesus.*

Be Encouraged

We have got to ask ourselves what must we do with this rediscovered revelation and illumination of Elohim and exactly what is it that He wants us to know and do.

We need to look at the truth of Scripture with the fires of prayer burning in our hearts— to live out our lives in the fruit of the Spirit of righteousness in Yeshua haMeshiach.

As we shake the dust from our lives and drink in the living water of His Word, we let the Spirit blow through our minds and hearts with this encouragement:

Finally, my brothers, rejoice in the Lord! It is no trouble for me to write the same things to you again, and it is a safeguard for you. Watch out for those dogs, those men who do evil, those mutilators of the flesh. For it is we who are the circumcision, we who worship by the Spirit of God, who glory in Christ Jesus, and who put no confidence in the flesh

... whatever was to my profit I now consider loss for the sake of Christ. What is more, I consider everything a loss compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them rubbish, that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ—the righteousness that comes from God and is by faith.

I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, and so, somehow, to attain to the resurrection from the dead. Not that I have already obtained all this, or have already been made perfect, but I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me.

Brothers, I do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of it. But one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus.

All of us who are mature should take such a view of things. And if on some point you think differently, that too God will make clear to you. Only let us live up to what we have already attained.” (Philippians 3: 1-16)

Be encouraged! Go forth and “sow in peace, raising a harvest of righteousness.”

*This is Desert **Life**! And it is to be lived in Yeshua haMeshiach!*



Notes:

- 1 <http://www.whatsaiththescripture.com/Voice/In.Christ.Jesus.html>
- 2 <http://thesaurus.com/opt/Jesus-Hebrew-Name;>
<http://www.seekfirst.com/node/257> see also:
<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Christ;>
www.hebrew4christians.com/Names_of_G-d/names_of_g-d.html
- 3 <http://jacksonsnnyder.com/arc/2003/g-d.htm>
- 4 "[Barne's Notes on the Bible](http://bible.cc/isaiah/65-11.htm)" <http://bible.cc/isaiah/65-11.htm>
- 5 <http://jacksonsnnyder.com/arc/2003/g-d.htm>; see also:
<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jehovah>
- 6 <http://www.jewishencyclopedia.com/view.jsp?artid=2&letter=B#ixzz17RuloQKD>; <http://elijahuw.webs.com/worshippingwho.htm>
- 7 http://www.religioustolerance.org/alt_mean.htm

- 8 *The Two Babylons* – Alexander Hislop.
[www.whitehorsemedia.com/docs/THE TWO BABYLONS.pdf](http://www.whitehorsemedia.com/docs/THE_TWO_BABYLONS.pdf)
 See also: “*Pagan Christianity*” by Frank Viola and George Barna;
 “*Fossilized Customs*”, by Lew White
<http://www.fossilizedcustoms.com>.
- 9 <http://freethought.mbdojo.com/canon.html> (Use caution here in this site.
 Trust the Spirit to guide you.)
10. [http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/History/sadducees pharisees
 s_essenes.html](http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/History/sadducees_pharisees_essenes.html)
11. [http://www.biblehistory.com/Samaritans/SAMARITANSJesus_and_the S
 amaritans.htm](http://www.biblehistory.com/Samaritans/SAMARITANSJesus_and_the_Samaritans.htm)
- 12 <http://www.christiantimelines.com/Samaritans.htm>
- 13 Eric Schwitzgebel, Associate Professor of Philosophy University of
 California at Riverside.
[http://schwitzsplinters.blogspot.com/2008/03/judging-others-when-its-
 bad-its-worse.html](http://schwitzsplinters.blogspot.com/2008/03/judging-others-when-its-bad-its-worse.html)
- 14 Wikipedia, <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Truthiness>;
<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Factoid>
- 15 Farhad Manjoo, the author of “*True Enough*”
[http://www.well.com/conf/inkwell.vue/topics/330/Farhad-
 Manjoo-True-Enough-page01.html](http://www.well.com/conf/inkwell.vue/topics/330/Farhad-Manjoo-True-Enough-page01.html)
- 16 Anonymous... <http://www.well.com/user/queerjhd/sxonthefoolishness.htm>
- 17 Lewis B. Smedes, Fuller Theological Seminary
<http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2001/october1/29.70.html>

COMING SOON:

ENTERING THE PROMISED LAND

LIVING IN KINGDOM TRUTH

Ken and Hilda *Korpi*

can be contacted at :

1590 Temperance Rd
Franklin, KY 42134
USA

Phone:

Hilda: 270-963-0196

Ken: 270-205-0030

Home: 270-586-1607

Email:

Hilda: hk0112@gmail.com

Ken: ksk1015@gmail.com

Look for these coming Internet sites:

<http://desertlifeministry.com>

<http://agrainofsalt-kk.blogspot.com/>
