

**Things
We Take
For Granted**

Things We Take For Granted

Pleased To Make a Contribution

Paul had a tremendous desire to preach the word, especially to those who had never heard. “For this reason,” he says to the Christians: in Rome, “I have often been hindered from coming to you,” (Romans 15:22). He then lists his desires to come to Rome to see the saints:

- “With no further place for me in these [Mid-Eastern] regions”
- “I have had for many years a longing to see you”
- “I hope to see you in passing on my way to Spain”
- “I hope to be helped by you on my way to Spain,”
- “And to enjoy your company.”

“But now,” he informs them, “I am going to Jerusalem serving the saints” (Romans 15:25). After the meeting in Jerusalem over the issue of circumcision, recorded in Acts 15, the apostles and elders asked Paul and Barnabas to remember poor saints in Jerusalem and Judea (Galatians 2:10). Then, they began an organized effort to arrange for a gift from the Gentile churches in the Roman Empire to churches in Judea.

- Macedonia - a Roman province in northern Greece including the city of Philippi and Achaia - a Roman province in southern and central Greece including Corinth - were pleased to make a contribution to the poor among the saints in Jerusalem.
- They were pleased to do so, because they were indebted to them. The churches in Judea sacrificed materially to get the gospel to the Gentiles. So, since the Gentiles had shared in their spiritual things, they were indebted to minister back to the Judean churches in material things.

Paul was specially involved in this particular offering. Representatives from each of the congregations were to accompany the offering to watch over and ensure honesty in all transactions, and Paul would be among their number when they presented it to the elders in Jerusalem. “Therefore, when I have finished this, and have put my seal on this fruit of theirs,” he says, “I will go on by way of you to Spain. And I know that when I come to you, I will come in the fulness of the blessing in Christ” (Romans 15:28,29).

But Paul anticipated that troubles were to come:

- “I urge you, brethren, by our Lord Jesus Christ and by the love of the Spirit, to strive together with me in your prayers to God for me...
- That I may be delivered from those who are disobedient in Judea
- That my service [the gift] for Jerusalem may prove acceptable to the saints
- That I may come to you in joy by the will of God and find rest in your company.”

“Now may the God of peace be with you all. Amen” (Romans 15:30-33)

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Greetings

Even though Paul had not been to Rome, he knew a number of the brethren there. This indicates relative freedom of travel in the Roman Empire, and shows evidence of good communication and fellowship among individuals and congregations in the first century church. He most likely sends this letter with Phoebe, a willing servant of female gender of the church in Cenchrea [the sister port city along the isthmus of Corinth] with these words of commendation:

- Receive her in the Lord in a manner worthy of the saints
- Help her in whatever matter she may have need of you
- She herself has been a helper of many, including Paul himself.

Then follow his greetings to various individuals in Rome:

- Prisca (Priscilla) and Aquila - Paul had first met this couple in Corinth, working as a tentmaker with Aquila until Timothy and Silas brought money from Philippi in Macedonia. They helped Paul again in Ephesus, straightening out Apollos and sending him to Corinth, clarifying the difference between John's immersion and immersion into Christ, and being generally helpful. Now they were back in Rome from which they had been driven to Corinth earlier. "My fellow workers in Christ Jesus," he calls them, "who for my life risked their own necks, to whom not only do I give thanks, but also all the churches of the Gentiles; also greet the church that is in their house" (Romans 16:3-5).
- Epaphroditus - "My beloved, who is the first convert to Christ from Asia [the Roman province centered around Ephesus]."
- Mary - "who has worked hard for you,"
- Andronicus and Junias - "My kinsmen, and my fellow prisoners, who are outstanding among the apostles, who also were in Christ before me." A brief greeting, one easily read over, to a couple of really outstanding Christians; apostles sent out, apparently by a church which directed them to Rome.
- Ampliatus, Urbanus, Stachys, Apelles, and the household of Aristabulus - are all noted as beloved, approved, and fellow workers in the Lord.
- Herodion, Paul's relative, the household of Narcissus, and Tryphaena and Tryphosa receive honorable mention.
- Persis - "the beloved, who has worked hard in the Lord."
- Rufus - "a choice man in the Lord;" with greetings to Rufus' mother, affectionately called "his mother and mine" by Paul.
- Asyncritus, Phlegon, Hermes, Patrobas, Hermas, and the brethren with them.
- Philologus and Julia, Nereus and his sister, and Olympas, and all the saints with them merited Paul's attention.
- "Greet one another with a holy kiss." The customary greeting in the first century.

After sending his personal greetings, he adds, "All the churches of Christ greet you" (Romans 16:16). Father, may we have hard working, beloved, choice men and women in the Lord to which we today can send our greetings.

Things We Take For Granted

Watch Out! For Deceivers

Anyone who thinks the first century churches were pictures of peaceful assemblings of perfect Christians has never carefully read the inspired record. The epistles were written to help those congregations keep on track as they experienced all kinds of people problems from within, and persecution, invasion, and destruction from without. Listen to these solemn words from Paul:

“Now I urge you, brethren, keep your eye on those who cause dissensions and hindrances contrary to the teaching which you learned, and turn away from them” (Romans 16:17).

- His urging the brethren in this matter shows how important this section is.
- The apostle says, “Keep your eye” on those who cause dissension contrary to the apostle’s doctrine. This is a serious matter, and there are those who really bear close scrutiny.
- The apostle Paul himself tended to be one who stirred up a lot of controversy wherever he went. The big question was, “Who is the real troubler in Israel?” We always need to be like the noble-minded Thessalonian Jews who were willing to search the scripture to see if the new teachings of Paul were true.
- But there are those, whose real purpose is to cause dissension and hindrances contrary to the scripture. There are those who are not really interested in solving problems, but simply in using problems as a cover for their own drive for power.
- The test is to bring everything back to scripture. Is the individual in question interested in communicating a doctrinal point, or does the word of God really mean nothing to him?
- Paul is blunt about trouble-makers: “Turn away from them.”

Here is the divine analysis: “For such men are slaves, not of our Lord Jesus Christ, but of their own appetites; and by their smooth and flattering speech they deceive the hearts of the unsuspecting” (Romans 16:18). Ultimately the burden rests upon us as individuals. Will we be spiritual enough to recognize these workers of Satan among us, or will we be sucked in by their smooth and flattering speech? To the brethren in Rome, Paul warns:

- “The report of your obedience has reached to all; therefore I am rejoicing over you.”
- “But I want you to be wise in what is good, and innocent in what is evil.”
- “The God of peace will soon crush Satan under your feet,”
- “The grace of our Lord Jesus be with you.”

Are you wise in what is good? Are you so familiar with truth and righteousness that you easily recognize lies and evil? You will have the opportunity to find out! Watch out for those who cause dissension and hindrances contrary to the teachings of the apostles.

Things We Take For Granted

The Revelation of the Mystery

As Paul closes out his letter to the saints in Rome, he lists those who were with him: Timothy, Tertius (whose hand actually wrote the letter) and others. Then he explodes in a final burst of praise to the only wise God, magnifying Him in these terms:

“Now to Him who is able to establish you:

- “according to my gospel and the preaching of Jesus Christ”
- “according to the revelation of the mystery
- this mystery “has been kept secret for long ages past but now is manifested”
- this mystery “has been made known to all the nations” - as prophesied by the Old Testament scriptures of the prophets in accordance with the commandment of the eternal God - “leading to the obedience of faith” [among the Gentiles] “to the only wise God, through Jesus Christ, be the glory forever. Amen” (Romans 16:25-27).

It is interesting that God is primarily praised for what He does for people. In this case God is praised for being able to establish the Christian; that is, to give Him a firm foothold and a secure possession.

God first establishes the Christian through the gospel and the preaching of Jesus Christ. It is clear that continually hearing preaching is necessary in order for the child of God to maintain his faith. The old, old story needs to be told and heard again and again.

The saint is also established by the revelation of what Paul calls “the mystery.” This mystery was hidden for long ages but has now been made known to all the nations as the prophets foretold. Obviously the mystery is very important. But what is the mystery?

The mystery is “Christ in you” (Colossians 1:27). “Christ in you” is another name for the indwelling Spirit of God (Romans 8:9-11). Throughout the Old Testament pieces of information concerning the indwelling Spirit were given, but they were in hidden or code form, and the information was not decipherable until the revelation was given to the apostles. The indwelling Spirit was spoken of in these terms:

- The blessing of Abraham – Genesis 12:3
- Rivers of living water – Zechariah 14:8
- Showers of blessing – Ezekiel 34:26

Remember, it is the revelation of the mystery, which leads to obedience of faith and thus establishes us. May those who preach Jesus Christ and the mystery do so with great boldness and with clarity of speech. And may you be established in that preaching, to the glory of God through Jesus Christ my Lord. Amen.

Things We Take For Granted

Salvation

Why does God allow tragedy? Why does He let agony continue, suffering increase, and evil men grow worse and worse? Why does disease rage, and death sweep her deadly scythe over the standing harvest of mankind?

The word of God does not directly answer these questions; but one thing is for certain - if there is no tragedy and if there are no emergencies, then there can be no rescuers.

God has so arranged this universe and man's existence in this universe so that the testimony of God's involvement is clear. The lessons are there, to be studied and learned by those who will observe and contemplate. "We know," says the apostle Paul, "that the whole creation suffers the pains of childbirth together until now" (Romans 8:22). This extreme pain runs throughout the entire universe; the only hope the creation has is to be somehow set free, to be rescued. Hence the suffering continues, and the tragedy goes on with an occasional heroic rescue of some kind; so that the entire race of man becomes aware of physical death and physical salvation.

God touches man at the physical level; then, to those who are willing, He raises their sights to the spiritual arena. Having given man the strong lesson of physical suffering, physical death, and physical rescue, the Almighty has His soil prepared for the following spiritual lessons:

- **There is spiritual death** – The separation and the sense of loss at the death of a loved one communicate to us the separation, which occurs between God and man when man sins. This lesson needs to be driven home: "And you were dead in your trespasses and sins" (Ephesians 2:1).
- **There is eternal suffering** – This eternal suffering commences when a person physically dies outside of Christ, without being reconciled to God. Those who have been burned physically can relate to this description of those who have transgressed God, and who will suffer in the second death of eternal fire: "And the smoke of their torment goes up forever and ever; and they have no rest day and night . . ." (Revelation 14:11).
- **And there is rescue from such a fate** – The Lord Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom each of us must recognize that he is foremost.

Let us be certain, then, that we do not take this spiritual salvation, which was purchased for us by the blood of Jesus Christ, for granted. Emotionally and intellectually, we need to be in constant awareness of the lesson of physical suffering and rescue going on around us, and then thank God for our spiritual rescue from the "fate worse than death." "Now to Him who is able to keep you from stumbling, and to make you stand in the presence of His glory blameless with great joy, to the only God our Savior, through Jesus Christ our Lord, be glory, majesty, dominion and authority, before all time and now and forever. Amen" (Jude 24,25).

Things We Take For Granted

The Lord's Supper

When Joseph was in slavery in Egypt, in prison, he interpreted the dream of the king's butler and baker. "Within three days Pharaoh will lift up your head and restore you to your office," he told the cupbearer. "Only keep me in mind and when it goes well with you, please do me a kindness by mentioning me to Pharaoh, and get me out of this house" (Genesis 40:13,14). The chief cupbearer was restored to Pharaoh's service. But listen to these sad words: "Yet the cupbearer did not remember Joseph, but forgot him" (Genesis 40:23).

Our progress in life has been similar to that of Pharaoh's butler. We have been guilty of lapses, called sin, and the result has been that the King has been furious with us, and has banished us to the prison for sinners. And our future was foretold also, by Hosea, in a dream: "Come, let us return to the Lord. For He has torn us, but He will bandage us. He will revive us after two days; He will raise us up (in the third day that we will live before Him)" (Hosea 6:1,2). Just as the cupbearer was lifted up on the third day and restored to service, so we also have been lifted up with Christ on the third day and restored to service of the King.

When our Lord was in prison, so to speak, with us, as He participated in the Passover meal, He told us: "This is My body, which is for you; do this in remembrance of Me," and "This cup is the new covenant in My blood; do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of Me" (I Corinthians 11:24,25). He did not want us to follow in the footsteps of Pharaoh's butler and forget; He wanted us to remember. And He wanted us to joyfully take time to remember every first day of the week in a re-participation of what He shared with His first disciples.

How's our gratitude attitude? Do we take the Lord's Supper for granted, and then just get tired of the Lord's Table? Maybe we need to listen to the words of Malachi the prophet in a somewhat similar situation in Judah of old: "But you are profaning it, in that you say, 'The table of the Lord is defiled, and as for its fruit, its food is to be despised.' You also say, 'My, how tiresome it is!' And you disdainfully sniff at it" (Malachi 1:12,13).

As one who has been rescued by the Lord Jesus from the black burning recesses of hell, I want to remember Him about His table. I appreciate His offer to drink the fruit of the vine anew with me in His kingdom, and, as one who has come to the spirits of righteous men made perfect, to sit down with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in the kingdom in the presence of the King. I count it a great joy to remember daily also, and am thankful for the weekly remembrance, which keeps it uppermost in my mind. And since He is so much greater than Joseph, and did so much more than Joseph did for the cupbearer, I never want to miss any weekly observance in remembrance of Him, keeping in mind His words, "For I am a great King, and My name is feared among the nations" (Malachi 1:14).

Things We Take For Granted

Opportunity for Repentance

Jesus was blunt. “Unless you repent,” He said, “you will all likewise perish” (Luke 13:5). Now, contrary to the belief system of many, that is not a threat. It is a simple statement by Jesus of what will happen to us if we do not repent. If we continue to think as we have always thought, we will continue to “get what we have always got.” If we continue to think “garbage” thoughts, we must end up in the garbage dump of eternity. Jesus’ statement is not a threat; it is a simple pronouncement of what will happen to us if we do not repent. Repentance is an opportunity, not a demand to be complied with in gritted-teeth obedience.

What is repentance? Repentance comes from the Greek word, which means to “change the mind.” In other words, repentance has to do with changing how we think. The basic idea of the New Testament is that change, or metamorphosis, flows from within, from the inner man. If we renew, or reprogram, the mind, we will be transformed. The test of repentance over a period of time is a change in behavior. If there has been no alteration in behavior, then there has been no repentance. “A certain man had a fig tree,” explained the Master Teacher, “which had been planted in his vineyard; and he came looking for fruit on it, and did not find any. And he said to the vineyard keeper, ‘Behold, for three years I have come looking for fruit on this fig tree without finding any. Cut it down! Why does it even use up the ground?’ And he answered and said to him, ‘Let it alone, sir, for this year too, until I dig around it and put in fertilizer; and if it bears fruit next year, fine; but if not, cut it down.’” (Luke 13:6-9).

What is the source of our repentance? Why should we change? The true answer to that question is always found in our devotion to the man Jesus Christ. It is Christ who died on our behalf; it was not Paul, nor any other brother, who was crucified for us. It is in Christ that are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge. In Christ is the only place to find all the spiritual blessings and grace. The grace and truth of God were always there, but “grace and truth were realized through Jesus Christ” (John 1:17). It took the appearance of the “kindness of God and His love for mankind” - Jesus Christ - to really open us up on a personal basis, and set in motion the things which would cause us to take advantage of the opportunity to be transformed.

- It is the personal kindness of God through Jesus Christ, which causes us to change. “Or do you think lightly of His kindness and forbearance and patience, not knowing that the kindness of God leads you to repentance” (Romans 2:4).
- Anyone can change. God is willing to extend mercy to any individual, regardless of present performance, God is “patient toward you, not wishing for any to perish, but for all to come to repentance” (II Peter 3:9).

Ever since sin entered the world through Adam, every man lest One has fallen before its onslaught, and has become enslaved to sinful thinking. Praise God for the opportunity to change that through Jesus Christ, and to be strengthened with power though His Spirit in the inner man.

Things We Take For Granted

A Clean Conscience

The world pays a high price for guilty consciences. Mental hospitals are crammed with people who couldn't deal with their guilty consciences any more, and chose: to live in la-la land rather than face the awful truth of their own sinfulness. Doctor's offices are jammed with multitudes whose bodies are breaking down under the stress of an evil conscience. Guilty consciences are the reasons most lies are told, and they are the reasons so many things go on under the cover of darkness. And if you are not properly immersed into Christ, and following through in setting your mind on the things of the Spirit, you have a guilty conscience also.

But it is possible for an ardent believer - in Christ to have somewhat forgotten what a blessing it is to have a clean conscience. It is possible to forget what renewing power the Spirit of God has in the Christian's life, and to forget what price was paid for the clean conscience that only God can give. Maybe it is time to take time to review once again:

- The Old Testament sacrifices never offered a clean conscience. "Accordingly both gifts and sacrifices are offered." says the Holy Spirit, "which cannot make the worshiper perfect in conscience, since they relate only to food and drink and various washings, regulations for the body imposed until a time of reformation" (Hebrews 9:10).
- Only the blood of Jesus provides a clean conscience. "For if the blood of goats and bulls and the ashes of a heifer sprinkling those who have been defiled sanctify for the cleansing of the flesh, how much more will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered Himself without blemish to God, cleanse your conscience to serve the living God" (Hebrews 9:13,14).
- Only those who have been immersed into Christ can have clean consciences. Immersion into Christ immerses one into the death of Christ; it was in His death that His blood was shed for forgiveness of sin, and to purchase clean consciences. Hence Peter says that "immersion now saves you - not the removal of dirt from the flesh, but an appeal to God for a good conscience -through the resurrection of Jesus Christ" (I Peter 3:21). Immersion, by God's grace, is a legal demand for a clean conscience, and a demand, which He really wants to honor.
- The Christian has the obligation to keep a clean conscience. Paul told Timothy to keep "faith and a good conscience, which some have rejected and suffered shipwreck in regard to their faith" (I Timothy 1:19).

Do not take a clean conscience for granted. Remember that only God can supply a good conscience, and that He only does so when the terms of the gospel are met. Cherish it, praise God for it, and maintain it. He who forgets his purification from his former sins ends in being blind or shortsighted (II Peter 1:9). Be on the alert, therefore. Stand firm in the faith. Act like men. Be strong. Let all you do be done in love. Whether, then, you eat or drink or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God (I Corinthians 16:13,14; I Corinthians 10:31).

Things We Take For Granted

The Wisdom of God

The Holy Spirit informs us, “The world through its wisdom did not come to know God” (I Corinthians 1:21). If there is any basic knowledge a man should know, it should be the knowledge of God. Yet it is clear that man’s wisdom cannot bring us to even this basic knowledge. It ought to be evident that man’s wisdom is considerably lacking.

There is a danger, however, that a Christian might take for granted God’s wisdom, that He might forget the superiority of God over man, and revert back in his thinking to the frailty of man’s wisdom in the conduct of his daily life. To help you maintain your focus on God’s wisdom, we offer the following points to jog your thinking:

- Wisdom shouts in the street, she lifts her voice in the square; at the head of noisy streets she cries out; at the entrance of the gates in the city, she utters her sayings: . . . “Turn to my reproof. Behold, I will pour Out my Spirit on you; I will make my words known to you” (Proverbs 1:23).
- “I, wisdom, dwell with prudence, and I find knowledge and discretion . . . The lord possessed me at the beginning of His way, before His works of old . . . When He established the heavens, I was there, when He inscribed a circle on the face of the deep, when He made firm the skies above, when the springs of the deep became fixed, when He set for the sea its boundary, so that the water should not transgress His command, when He marked out the foundations of the earth; then I was beside Him, as a master workman; and I was daily His delight, rejoicing always before Him, rejoicing in the world, His earth, and having my delight in the sons of men” (Proverbs 8:12,22,27-31).
- “In all wisdom and insight He made known to Us the mystery of His will, according to His kind intention which He purposed in Him with a view to an administration suitable to the fulness of the earth” (Ephesians 1:8-10).
- “But we preach Christ crucified - to the Jews a stumbling block, and to the Gentiles foolishness - but to those who are the called, both of Jews and G reeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God” (I Corinthians 1:23,24).

God has much wisdom for us, and wisdom has much to offer us. But you will notice that the wisdom of God is all summed up in Christ, and that this has been set forth for us since, in God’s ways of dealing with all mankind, the suitability of the times has come. Thus it is, in God’s wisdom, that Christ - the power of God and the wisdom of God - is preached. Believe that preaching, and obey that preaching, and you will be wise.

“But if any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask of God, who gives to all men generously and without reproach, and it will be given to him. But let him ask in faith without any doubting, for the one who doubts is like the surf of the sea driven and tossed by the wind. For let not that man expect that he will receive anything from the Lord, being a double-minded man, unstable in all his ways” (James 1:5-8). Do not take God’s wisdom for granted. Be searching the scriptures for the wisdom of Christ, and be praying always without doubting.

Things We Take For Granted

The Importance of Preaching

Some preaching is interesting; some isn't. Some people hold our attention; some don't. Some subjects jerk at our heartstrings; some of the important foundational material has to be endured. But God is committed to preaching, for reasons best known to Him.

Our society is much like the Athenian society of old, we are constantly engaged in hearing or telling something new. Thus the audience in the assembly of the saints - the believers and the God-fearing among the Gentiles - tend to want something new instead of the old, old story. But, in spite of that, God is committed to preaching, for reasons best known to Him.

- “For since in the wisdom of God,” the apostle Paul tells us, “the world through its wisdom did not come to know God, God was well-pleased through the foolishness of the message preached to save those who believe” (I Corinthians 1:21). In God’s wisdom, He uses preaching to separate those who are perishing from those who are being saved. The world is interested in mass numbers; God is interested in reaching the remnant. The world compromises everything away in order to put on a pleasing song-and-dance show; God compromises away nothing to put on a straight forward presentation of the message concerning His Son. “Indeed,” says the apostle again, “Jews ask for signs, the Greeks search for wisdom; but we preach Christ crucified . . .” (I Corinthians 1:22,23). God was not just pleased to have the message delivered through preaching, He was well-pleased. Don’t take preaching for granted.
- “How then shall they call upon Him in whom they have not believed?” Paul asks in another place. “And how shall they believe in Him in whom they have not heard? And how shall they hear without a preacher? And how shall they preach unless they are sent? As it is written, ‘How beautiful are the feet of those who bring glad tidings of good things!’” (Romans 10:14,15) God has a plan, from which He does not deviate. The message of salvation is always carried by men to men through the agency of preaching. Philip preached to the Ethiopian in the chariot. The angel told Cornelius to send for Peter. The thousands saved in the book of Acts were all saved through preaching. Don’t take preaching for granted.

The church grows and is sustained by preaching Love it; look forward to it; enjoy it; get others excited about it. But don’t take it for granted.

Things We Take For Granted

The Church

In some people's minds there is a problem with the church. It consists of other people. As long as the church is conceptualized as a building, there is no problem with the church; but once an individual begins to understand that the church is not a building but people, then he may have problems with the church. And he may take the church for granted.

Jesus knew from the beginning, however, that the church would consist of people. Yet listen to His voice as He describes the church:

- The church (as the kingdom of heaven) is worth all that a man has (Matthew 13:44-46).
- Jesus loved the church as His bride and gave Himself up for her (Ephesians 5:22-26).
- Jesus is willing to make the church His fellow-heir of all His riches and glory (Romans 8:16,17).
- The manifold wisdom of God is made known through the church. (Ephesians 3:10).
- The church is the body of Christ, of which He is the head, and in consequence is the means by which Christ gets things done on earth (Ephesians 1:22,23).
- The church is the family of God, He being the Father, Jesus being the elder brother, and Christians being born from above to enter this family.
- The church is the temple in which true love, which comes from God (Romans 5:5), abides. The love of God does not exist apart from the church.

There are many more portraits of the church, which the Spirit of God paints in His inspired presentation, but these suffice to give us a general outline of what God thinks of the church. Sometimes the pressure of daily living, and the personal growth and discipline, which the individual Christian undergoes can obscure the picture of the church in the Christian's mind. He can get to the point where he focuses so much on problems that he takes for granted all the blessings which come to him daily through the church of the living God, and loses heart because he feels overcome with other difficulties.

Don't take the church for granted. Remember what she is to Christ, and see her in that way.

Things We Take For Granted

The Love of God

Here are some important words from the apostle John: “And we have come to know and have believed the love which God has for us” (I John 4:16). One of the more difficult projects for the Christian is to understand that God really does love him, and that the Almighty only has the best interests of the child of God at heart.

But, having understood that point, there is another danger - the Christian might take the love of God for granted, and therefore fail to respond to his heavenly Father as he ought. Parents occasionally experience this. Their offspring, having grown up in an atmosphere of love and care, may take this love and care as an automatic “given,” not even understanding what life would be without it, and therefore not appreciating that love.

There are some words of wisdom from the word of God, which will help us to be in constant remembrance of the love, which God has for us, which in turn will enable us to keep our love and response to Him fresh and genuine:

- **“But God demonstrates His own love toward us,** - in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us” (Romans 5:8). The cross is the demonstration that God loved us enough to send His only begotten Son. One of the major purposes of the Lord’s Supper is to remind us of that demonstration.
- **“We know love by this, that He laid down His life for us;** - and we ought to lay down our lives for the brethren” (I John 3:16). Not only is the cross the demonstration of God’s love toward us, it is also the definition of what love is - this how we know love. Golgotha’s hill was not exactly a romantic Hawaiian beach scene, yet Golgotha and not Hawaii is the definition of love. That is why the message of Christ and Him crucified needs to be continually preached, in order that the hearers of the word might be constantly reminded of what love really is.
- **“We love, because He first loved us.** - If someone says, ‘I love God,’ and yet hates his brother, he is a liar, for the one who does not love his brother whom he has seen cannot love God whom he has not seen. And this commandment we have from Him, that the one who loves God should love his brother also” (I John 4:19-21). The true demonstration on our part that we are aware of God’s love toward us is our love of the brethren. And love of the brethren requires laying our lives down on their behalf, and any lesser necessary sacrifice.

When we take the love of God for granted, we become selfish and self-interested. Without constant awareness of the sacrifice of Jesus, we lose sight of our own need for forgiveness and love, and this translates into “doing our own thing” and ignoring the desires of God. “By this we know that we love the children of God, when we love God and observe His commandments” (I John 5:2). The second of the great Old Testament commandments - “Love your neighbor as yourself” - really was like the first - “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your mind and with all your soul.” Be constantly aware of the cross and God’s love for you, and translate that into love of the brethren.

Things We Take For Granted

The Peace Which Surpasses Comprehension

This world does not really offer much in the way of peace. External peace is broken by wars, death, and the neighbor mowing his lawn. Thievery, robbery, graft, and endless power grabs all contrive to deprive an individual of peace on earth. Internal peace is also ravaged by heartache, a sense of failure, and a guilty conscience. Worry about the future, anxiety about where the next dollar is going to come from, marital problems (or lack of marital problems), and concern about relationships with children all combine to deprive an individual of peace on earth.

But...listen to Jesus as He talks to the apostles about the coming Holy Spirit. "Peace I leave with you; My peace I give to you; not as the world gives, do I give to you. Let not your heart be troubled, nor let it be fearful" (John 14:27). It is no accident that nearly every epistle in the New Testament contains greetings of peace; peace is what Jesus came to bring to the troubled hearts of men in any part of the world in any generation in any situation. "My peace I give to you," He said, "not as the world gives."

How does Jesus give peace to us?

- **Peace is fruit of the Holy Spirit** - (Galatians 5:22,23). Without the indwelling Spirit of God -given only a penitent believer is immersed in the name of Jesus for the forgiveness of his sins - a person can never have the peace of God. Without the indwelling Spirit, his conscience will continue to ravage his inner man. Without the Spirit, the individual will continue in some sort of rage as an enemy of God without hope and without God in this world.
- **Peace comes through prayer** - "Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, rejoice! Let your forbearing spirit be known to all men, The Lord is near. Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all comprehension, shall guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus" (Philippians 4:4-7). Without consistent prayer as a habit, the Christian is not letting all his requests be made known to God, and as a result is anxiously carrying the load himself.

And what a peace! Peace that surpasses comprehension. A peace that is able to guard a person's heart and mind. Do you want this peace? Do you have it, and have begun to take it for granted?

Remember the price of this peace. Remember that we have been justified through Jesus' blood in order to have peace with God. And that once we have peace with God, we can pursue peace with all men. Don't take it for granted.

Things We Take For Granted

The Existence of Satan

Recent polls have indicated one of the inconsistencies of the thinking of the American public. Significantly more than 50% claim they believe the Bible is the word of God, and significantly less than 50% believe in the existence of the devil. Now it's a simple fact that, if you believe in the Bible, you are going to have to believe in the devil also. Jesus was tempted by the devil; Jesus called him the god of this world: and Jesus, in speaking to some recalcitrant Jews, said, "you are of your father the devil, and you want to do the desires of your father. He was a murderer from the beginning, and does not stand in the truth, because there is no truth in him. Whenever he speaks a lie, he speaks from his own nature; for he is a liar, and the father of lies" (John 8:44). Jesus' teaching about Satan is consistent with the rest of the Bible, beginning with the account of Adam and Eve and onward.

But the Christian has a different problem. It isn't that he doesn't believe in the existence of Satan; it is that he takes Satan's existence for granted, and forgets about him. And that is dangerous.

- The very name *Satan* means "adversary." The scripture makes it very clear that Satan is at war with God, and that the battleground is the minds of men. "We know that we are of God," said the apostle John, "and the whole world lies in the power to keep us from falling back into it. But the Christian must do his part; he must be continually aware of the power of his Adversary.
- The devil operates on deception. "We are not ignorant of his schemes," said Paul (II Corinthians 2:11). The basic idea of deception is that the one defrauded is not aware of it, at least at first. The Christian must be well-informed as to the teaching of the scripture, and generally well-informed as to the goings on around him, so that he may not be pulled in by one of those schemes.
- Satan works through the lusts of the flesh to get at the individual Christian on a personal basis. "For all that is in the world, the lust of the flesh and the lust of the eyes and the boastful pride of life, is not from the Father, but is from the world" (I John 2:16). When the Christian is falling into some temptation, he needs at that point not to take the devil for granted, but be aware that Satan is moving in on him.
- Satan works on a mass scale also to create a false impression of what is true and what is false. "And you were dead in your trespasses and sins, in which you formerly walked according to the course of this world, according to the prince of the air, of the spirit that is now working in the sons of disobedience" (Ephesians 2:1,2). By having evolution accepted on a mass scale, for example, the devil can have a lot of people automatically discount the truth of the Bible and thus turn them away from God. The Christian must be aware of the mass scale movements that are a part of Satan's great push against God and His word as the devil seeks to deceive the nations in the four corners of the earth.

Do not take the existence of the devil for granted. "Be of sober spirit, be on the alert. Your adversary, the devil, prowls about like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour. But resist him. Be firm in your faith, knowing that the same experiences of suffering are being accomplished by your brethren who are in the world" (I Peter 5:8,9).

Things We Take For Granted

Sound Doctrine

Everyone needs a guide to the scripture. When the Ethiopian was traveling in his chariot, reading the prophet Isaiah, his comment to Philip was that he could not understand what he was reading without someone to guide him. We have the need, and therein the devil has his opportunity.

Jesus, as He was explaining the nature of the Pharisees to His disciples, informed us both as to our need and our danger. “They are blind guides of the blind,” He said. “And if a blind man guides a blind man, both will fall into a pit” (Matthew 15:14). Billions of people all over the world are following their blind guides into the eternal pit. Hindu and New Age Gurus explain to their followers, “There are many paths to God, my sons. Follow me on a shorter way. I will teach you to find God inside yourself.” Moslems insanely follow one mad leader after another into the latest *Jihad*, a “holy war in Allah’s name.” Teachers routinely “freeze” their “targets” in the ice of humanism in government schools all across the western world. The baby sprinklers day by day lead millions down the broad way of destruction, “in the name of Christ.” The “accept Christ into your heart” crowd aggressively perverts the gospel and misleads millions of well-meaning people, while the Mormon missionaries and the Jehovah’s Witnesses pound door after door in making others twice as much the sons of hell as themselves. And the followers? Into the pit!

If you have been taught what the Bible says concerning the way of salvation, praise God, and don’t take it for granted. “For the time will come,” Paul tells Timothy, “when they will not endure sound doctrine; but wanting to have their ears tickled, they will accumulate for themselves teachers in accordance to their own desires, and will turn their ears away from the truth, and will turn aside to myths” (II Timothy 4:3,4).

So what is sound doctrine? “Sound” has to do with something solid, something with substance. False doctrine is always at some point based on thin air; there is nothing to base it on, no substance on which it rests. Those who believe in the book of Mormon base that entirely on a “feeling.” The doctrine of “accepting Christ into your heart” is: emotionally based, not scripturally based. Those who try to talk about “the rapture” and “the second advent of Christ” admit in their own literature that they have arbitrarily come up with an imagined distinction. And the baby sprinklers have not one scripture backing their *rhantizing* of infants (or adults, for that matter).

“But as for you,” Paul tells Titus, “speak the things which are fitting for sound doctrine” (Titus 2:1). Along the same line, he informs Timothy, “And the things which you have heard from me in the presence of many witnesses, these entrust to faithful men, who will be able to teach others also” (II Timothy 2:2). Sound doctrine is a rare commodity in this world. Don’t take it for granted. And appreciate those who have the courage to teach it, proclaim it, and entrust it to faithful men in an increasingly hostile world.

Things We Take For Granted

God's Grace

Man in general is a cantankerous, "ornery critter." Every family is a rebellious house; most are stiff-necked, uncircumcised in heart and ears; every generation is perverted and wicked. It's only by God's grace He didn't torch the whole works off right from the beginning, and just forget about man. "But Noah found favor in the eyes of the Lord" (Genesis 6:8). And the Lord has given the rest of us opportunity to find favor in His eyes also, through Jesus Christ.

But even those who come into Christ have a tendency to push God to the limit, not having left behind the fleshly nature as they ought. Listen to these warnings:

- "For you were called to freedom, brethren; only do not turn your freedom into an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another" (Galatians 5:13). There is freedom in Christ, but that means there is also the opportunity for you to try to take advantage of God's grace. Don't do that.
- "Act as free men, and do not use your freedom as a covering for evil, but use it as bondslaves of God" (1 Peter 2:16). There is freedom in Christ, but that means there is also the opportunity for you to try to take advantage of God's grace. Don't do that.
- "For certain persons have crept in unnoticed, those who were long beforehand marked out for this condemnation, ungodly persons who turn the grace of God into licentiousness and deny our only Master and Lord, Jesus Christ" (Jude 4). There is freedom in Christ, but that means there is also the opportunity for you to try to take advantage of God's grace. Don't do that.

Note that the above scriptures are directed at those who are in fact Christians. There is that natural tendency to rebel at God, to "push the envelope." If you find yourself in that condition, you need to be rebuked, and to get yourself back on the right track, otherwise you are one of those who has long beforehand been marked out for condemnation. Don't take God's grace for granted.

The key to standing in the grace of God is our desire, if we desire to please men, and use the cover of godliness as a means of currying favor with same, in order to use them, then God has marked us out for condemnation. We need to have the heartfelt attitude of the apostle Paul, "I count all things to be loss in view of the surpassing value of knowing Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them but rubbish in order that I may gain Christ, and may be found in Him, not having a righteousness of my own derived from the Law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness which comes from God on the basis of faith, that I may know Him, and the power of His resurrection and the fellowship of His sufferings, being conformed to His death; in order that I may attain to the resurrection from the dead" (Philippians 3:8-11).

Do not take the grace of God for granted. Think about it. Appreciate it. Praise Him for it. "For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all men, instructing us to deny ungodliness and worldly desires and to live sensibly, righteously and godly in the present age" (Titus 2:11,12).

Things We Take For Granted

The Significance of the Good Confession

“I believe Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the living God!” You make this statement in the process of becoming a Christian, with perhaps all the good intentions of a follower of Jesus Christ. But this world has another question ready for you: “Do you really?” And in the providence of God, He lets the world ask the question in some rough ways, “a fiery ordeal among you,” He called it, “which comes upon you for your testing” (I Peter 4:12).

Before a person can be immersed into Christ, and thus be granted forgiveness of sins and the indwelling Spirit, God requires that he publicly profess his faith in Jesus as Lord. The Ethiopian, recorded in Acts 8, was required to confess his belief that Jesus was the Christ before Philip would immerse him. Thus it is written. “that if you confess with your mouth Jesus as Lord, and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you shall be saved; for with the heart man believes, resulting in righteousness, and with the mouth he confesses, resulting in salvation” (Romans 10:9,10).

But what does that confession that Jesus is Lord mean?

- In Old Testament times, Jews were afraid to write or pronounce God’s name, Jehovah (or Yahweh), taken from the four letters roughly translated as “I am who I am.” Thus they simply spoke of the Almighty as The Lord, and even most modern versions of the Bible do not translate His name either, usually noting the Name as *Lord*. Thus the confession, “Jesus is Lord,” made in the presence of Jewish society, is a declaration that Jesus is Jehovah. It is easy to see why Jews regarded those early Christians as blasphemers; an individual they simply regarded as another man was called, in effect, Jehovah by the followers of Christ, and hence they were worthy of death. As Jesus said, “They will make you outcasts from the synagogue, but an hour is coming for everyone who kills you to think that he is offering service to God” (John 16:2).
- The statement that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, has essentially the same meaning. When Jesus healed, on the Sabbath, a man who had lain crippled for 38 years at the pool of Bethesda, the Jews were persecuting Him, His reply, “My Father is working until now, and I myself am working,” signed His death warrant. As the apostle John explains, “For this cause therefore the Jews were seeking all the more to kill Him, because He not only was breaking the Sabbath but also was calling God His own Father, making Himself equal with God” (John 5:18). The declaration, then, that Jesus is the Son of God would also be blasphemy to the Jewish audience, and any person stating that belief could expect a strong effort to put him to death by stoning.
- It is the resurrection and ascension of Jesus, which brings it all together. On the day of Pentecost, the apostle Peter quoted the sweet psalmist of Israel with regard to David’s own Coming Descendent. “The Lord said to my lord, ‘Sit at My right hand, until I make Your enemies a footstool for Your feet.’” Peter then explains: “Therefore let all the house of Israel know for certain that God has made Him both Lord and Christ - this Jesus whom you crucified” (Acts 2:34-36). It was the resurrection, which established Him as both Jehovah and Messiah; thus the good confession is that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the living God, or that Jesus is Lord. As the apostle Paul put it, we must believe with all our heart that God raised Him from the dead in order for our confession that Jesus is Lord to be valid.

When you are instructing someone in the Lord’s way of salvation, don’t take for granted the good confession. When you thoughtfully consider, as a Christian, what it means to hold fast the confession, or what it means to testify the good confession, don’t take it for granted. “And who is the one who overcomes the world, but he who believes that Jesus is the Son of God?” (I John 5:5).

Things We Take For Granted

Prayer

Until a person is immersed into Christ, he is separated from God by his sin. The result: God does not hear his prayers. As the Lord Himself spoke through Isaiah, “Behold, the Lord’s hand is not so short that it cannot save; neither is His ear so dull that it cannot hear. But your iniquities have made a separation between you and your God, and your sins have hidden His face from you, so that He does not hear” (Isaiah 59:1,2). Cornelius, a good man, and the first Gentile to obey the gospel, had *prayers* which ascended as a *memorial* to God (Acts 10:4), and a prayer - which resulted in the gospel being preached to him. But to try to pretend that God generally hears the prayers of those outside of Christ is to deny the sacrifice of Christ, and the reconciliation accomplished only through Him. Our boldness and confident access to God is only through Jesus Christ (Ephesians 3:12).

The Christian, however, may soon forget what a tremendous privilege it is to have the resources of heaven at his beckon call; he may lose sight of the surpassing greatness of God’s power toward us who believe; and he may take prayer for granted. Here are some major steps the follower of Christ can take in his own life to make sure that he prays earnestly every day - not just trying to get through to God on an occasional emergency basis:

- **Recognize the value of praising God** – God’s purpose in saving us in the first place is to prepare for Himself a people who will praise Him. We have been set aside as a holy nation, says Peter, “that you may *proclaim the excellencies of Him* who has called you out of darkness into His marvelous light” (I Peter 2:9). Through Christ “let us continually offer up a *sacrifice of praise to God*, that is the fruit of lips that give thanks to His name (Hebrews 13:15). Praising God gets His attention, and alters us so that our minds may dwell in the midst of the praiseworthy (Philippians 4:8), and our direction is such that we are now useful to God.
- **Recognize the importance of thanksgiving** – The Gentile world plunged into darkness, because “even though they knew God they did not honor Him as God, or give thanks” (Romans 1:21). When a Christian fails to give thanks, he demonstrates that he is an ungrateful child of God. On the other hand, when the follower of Christ keeps alert in prayer with an attitude of thanksgiving, he is filled with the Spirit, and he knows that the Father hears him in whatever he asks, and that he has the requests which He asked of the Almighty. “*In everything give thanks*, for this is God’s will for you in Christ Jesus” (I Thessalonians 5:18).
- **Recognize the answers when they come** – It is a well-known fact of human nature that in order to keep doing any task with enthusiasm, you must stress the benefits. Thus it is with prayer. Paul prayed thus for the Philippians, “And this I pray, that your love may abound still more and more in real knowledge and all *discernment*, so that you may approve the things that are excellent . . .” (Philippians 1:9,10). When a disciple of Jesus can in all honesty discern answers to his prayers, his faith grows, and his commitment to prayer intensifies. As he increasingly understands the value of knowing Jesus his Lord, he will eagerly look to his time in the prayer closet, and enjoy the fellowship of the Father in praying without ceasing.

Christian, don’t take prayer for granted. Recognize what an exciting privilege it is, and learn to pray as our Lord Jesus prayed.

Things We Take For Granted

The Power of God

Does God really have any power? A person might wonder, with oil crises, and savings and loan crises, and drought and earthquakes and hurricanes, and murder and starvation and human suffering. Does God really have any power to do anything to help people, or does a person just have to do the best he can, and praying doesn't change circumstances at all? Teddy "Blue" Abbott, one of the cowpunchers who drove the trail herds into Montana over a hundred years ago, and married into Montana's earliest pioneer family, said that he had attended a few revival meetings, and heard the circuit riders preach about God. But he said that he couldn't see where God made any difference on the open range - you still had to depend upon yourself whether you lived or died (*We Pointed Them North*).

The apostle Paul prays, "that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened,

- "So that you may 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" (Ephesians 1:18,19).

God has power - in fact, He has something called the surpassing greatness of His power - but it is power, which can only be seen with "the eyes of the heart." God, for man's benefit, has to let suffering and death occur, so that man can understand, by contrast, life and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit. With all the suffering and death brought in by sin, man still has an extremely difficult time recognizing how destructive sin is; suffering and death will continue as long as earth exists, that some might understand, and seek God's remedy. So God's power is more subtly demonstrated to the discerning spiritual mind. Here is how the power is defined: "These are according to 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" (Ephesians 1:19-21).

Such great power! But such little physical manifestation. Remember, our spiritual eyes need to be enlightened to see this power. And this power is toward us who believe! Don't take it for granted. I pray, then, that you will "be strengthened with power through His Spirit in the inner man" (Ephesians 3:16).

Things We Take For Granted

The Joy of Forgiveness

It may surprise you (and I hope it won't) that there is forgiveness in Jesus Christ. When any person on the face of the earth believes that Jesus is risen from the dead, when he is willing to repent, when he confesses that Jesus is Lord, and when he is immersed by Jesus' authority for the forgiveness of sins, he receives forgiveness of sins.

Correspondingly, there is joy in that forgiveness. But there is joy only if certain points are recognized in the mind of the individual:

- **That all sin committed is sin against God** - In the words of David after going into Bathsheba, and murdering Uriah the Hittite, her husband, "Against You [God], You only, I have sinned, and done what is evil in Your sight" (Psalm 51:4).
- **That sin creates a huge separation between the sinner and God** - "But your iniquities have made a separation between you and your God, and your sins have hidden His face from you, so that He does not hear" (Isaiah 59:2).
- **That, in sin, the individual is an enemy of God, and is leading a conscience-stricken, painful existence** - Speaking of our former lives as slaves to sin, Paul writes, "For when you were slaves of sin, you were free in regard to righteousness. Therefore what benefit were you then deriving from the things of which you are now ashamed? For the outcome of those things is death" (Romans 6:20,21). Each person is ashamed of sin; he needs to recognize it, and not cover it.
- **The sinner lives in a state of fear, constantly expecting the wrath of God to come down upon him** - Abundant jokes about hell show that the whole population is nervous about God's judgment, and is trying to alleviate the strain on its conscience. The sinner's goal, unless he can turn to God, becomes the suppression of truth, so that he does not have to think about it. As Jesus told His brothers in the flesh, "The world cannot hate you, but it hates Me because I testify of it that its deeds are evil" (John 7:7).
- **But when a man turns to the Lord, and is reconciled to Him, he experiences the release of forgiveness, and the joy of restored fellowship with God** - In the case of the Ethiopian who had been to Jerusalem, and who had the gospel preached to him by Philip, after his immersion into Christ, he "went on his way rejoicing" (Acts 8:39).

The Christian, then, who confesses his sin to God, and has confidence through what is written that God is faithful and righteous to forgive him his sin, is conscious of the joy of fellowship with God. As Peter says concerning Jesus, the One who came to save us from our sins, "Though you have not seen Him, you love Him, and though you do not see Him now, but believe in Him, *you greatly rejoice with joy inexpressible* and full of glory, obtaining as the outcome of your faith the salvation of your souls" (I Peter 1:8,9).

Things We Take For Granted

“In Faith” rather than “Under Law”

The law, said the apostle Peter, was a “yoke which neither our fathers nor we have been able to bear” (Acts 15:10). “The Law,” said the writer of Hebrews, “made nothing perfect” (Hebrews 7:19). In fact, it was set aside because of its weakness and uselessness.

But multitudes of church leaders the world over put God to the test by trying to put the disciples under the yoke of law. In a vain effort to produce external holiness in their congregations, they attach their disciples to a failed system, to a ministry, which can cause nothing but death. If you have to submit to decrees such as “do not handle, do not taste, do not touch,” in order to have some appearance of holiness in your life, you have demonstrated that you are still in slavery to the elementary principles of the world, and do not have the basic maturity required to be a son of God.

“Did you receive the Spirit by works of the Law, or by hearing with faith? Are you so foolish? Having begun by the Spirit, are you now being perfected by the flesh?” (Galatians 3:2,3). It is clear that faith produces results, which the Law could never accomplish. So how does faith produce fruit?

- Faith produces a picture of the risen Christ in the mind of the Christian. We behold, with our spiritual eyes, Jesus on the throne, seated at the right hand of the Majesty on high. We see His glory, glory as of the only begotten from the Father, full of grace and truth.
- By keeping that spiritual picture continually in front of us, faith produces change into the likeness of that picture. We are not conformed to this world; we are transformed by the renewing of our minds, we are conformed to the image of Christ. By faith, we in admiration of Him adopt His qualities.
- The Spirit, given through faith and not Law, is involved in the transformation process. Our liberty in Christ, as contrasted to no liberty in Law, is in the Spirit. In that liberty, we are transformed into the image of Christ, from glory to glory, from the Lord, the Spirit.

The Law, which required outward conformity, failed. Faith, which produces the image of Christ in the inner man, succeeds.

Don't take faith for granted. Many kings, prophets, and righteous men desired to see what you see, and did not see it. For thousands of years, men labored under law, and those who were declared righteous could only hope that somehow God would justify them, as they were conscious that the yoke of law condemned them.

Don't take the grace of faith for granted. “Act as free men, and do not use your freedom as a covering for evil, but use it as bondslaves of God” (I Peter 2:16). “For you were called to freedom, brethren; only do not turn your freedom into an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another” (Galatians 5:13). “For certain persons have crept in unnoticed, those who were long beforehand marked out for this condemnation, ungodly persons who turn the grace of our God into licentiousness and deny our only Master and Lord, Jesus Christ” (Jude 4).

Keep your eyes on Christ, on things above, not on the things of this earth. Don't take faith for granted.

Things We Take For Granted

The Blessed Hope

When hope dies, the man dies. Without hope, there is no motivation. In the economic realm, without hope of profit there is no reason to produce. Without hope, a woman's affection for her husband slowly dies. Even in the gospel, "the plowman ought to plow in hope, and the thresher to thresh in hope of sharing the crops" (I Corinthians 9:10).

One of the sins which so easily besets the Christian is to fix his hope on any of the uncertainties of this life. Consider:

- **Fixing your hope on securities and investments, man-made retirement plans.** The moths of inflation are at work; the thieves; have broken into the banking and exchange industry and are stealing away; the rust of corruption in governments in the Middle East and America are rapidly rotting away any fortune a man might have made.
- **Fixing your hope on your family.** People die. Husbands pass away and leave widows. Women die, and leave their men unattended. Sons are killed in wars. Daughters are abducted and never seen again. Cousins move to distant parts.
- **Fixing your hope on property.** Property has often been seized. Houses have been taken as army headquarters. Land has been appropriated. Safety deposit boxes have been locked. People have been ripped open to get at the gold and silver they swallowed.
- **Fixing you hope on yourself.** Health fails; the strongest men are sometimes struck down in an instant. You may find yourself in the middle of events over which you have no control; you may find yourself in a cattle car to a slave labor camp in Siberia or northern Canada. You may find yourself committed to a mental institution - Bethesda Naval Hospital, maybe - for your beliefs in Christ; or in a federal penitentiary, for some trumped-up income tax charge.

Everything in this life is shaky. Nothing in this life is solid enough to pin your hopes on.

But the Christian has a tremendous advantage. He knows that Jesus is going to return, and "the body of this humble state" conformed to the body of His glory. "For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all men, instructing us to deny ungodliness and worldly desires and to live sensibly, righteously and godly in this present age, looking for the blessed hope and the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior, Christ Jesus" (Titus 2:11-13).

Don't take this blessed hope for granted. Remember that the rest of the world is without hope and without God. Keep in mind that everything in this life can be taken; yet the Christian is positively motivated by the constant hope of his resurrection at Jesus' return. And that makes all the difference.

Things We Take For Granted

The Blessings of Challenge

The animal nature of man doesn't like challenges. The flesh, it seems, would like to drift along, taking it easy. So when circumstance rears her head, showing a new wrinkle or presenting an unusual difficulty, then the carnal nature demonstrates sour attitudes, throws temper tantrums, and in general behaves like a spoiled brat.

But the Christian, praise God, has buried his carnal nature with Christ in immersion; he has laid aside the old self with its evil practices, and has put on the new self who is being renewed to the true knowledge of the risen Christ. To this perpetually new self, this new creation, the bondservant James writes: "Consider it all joy, my brethren, when you encounter various trials, knowing that the testing of your faith produces endurance. And let endurance have its perfect result, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing" (James 1:2-4). The child of God needs to realize that the challenges of life really are blessings - in disguise, maybe - and he needs to overcome his fleshly nature to see them in the right light. Reflect on these points from James and the Holy Spirit:

- **Consider it all joy** – The language the Holy Spirit uses here lets us know that everything in life is viewed through some kind of perspective. The lens may be colored, murky, foggy, or clear, depending on the attitude of the viewer. We are here informed that when Providence deals us a circumstance, we are to adjust our attitudes so that our response is one of joy! So many people try to depend on circumstances to make them happy; the result is that their happiness is short-lived, and they are generally miserable. The Christian, taught by the Holy Spirit how to live, knows that he is to be happy regardless of his trials; thus the Christian experiences the joy of Jesus in every circumstance.
- **Testing of faith produces endurance** – Our spiritual "muscles" are strengthened by stress and trial. Just as the endurance of the physical body is increased by subjecting it to increasing stress, so the spiritual man conditions his spiritual endurance by encountering trials. Christians rejoice in those trials; they know that they will have the necessary endurance for the evil day.
- **Endurance makes the Christian perfect and complete** – The goal of Jesus, the goal of every preacher and shepherd who follows the word of God, is to present every man complete in Christ (Colossians 1:28). But no one can be perfect and complete without endurance. And no one can have endurance without trial.

Trials are blessings from God. Next time you are tried - sorely tried, as the expression goes - don't take it for granted. Don't avoid it, and don't have a bad attitude about it. Consider it all joy, knowing that the endurance produced is your special stepping stone to the perfection you so earnestly desire.

Things We Take For Granted

The Multiplied Harvest

One of the great truths in the spiritual realm is stated as follows: “Do not be deceived, God is not mocked; for whatever a man sows, this he will also reap” (Galatians 6:7). This is an inexorable law - it is just as true as the law of gravity; it is just as fixed as the second law of thermodynamics. And, depending on what a man has been sowing, it can be very encouraging, or discouraging.

But the principle of the harvest is intended to be encouraging. Consider the following points connected with sowing and reaping:

- **This means the individual can make the decisions, which determine his destiny.** He is not dependent on “fate,” He is not a leaf caught in a fall whirlwind, swept along life’s course, totally governed by events beyond his control. The individual can make a decision, regardless of life’s circumstances, to keep sowing good seed, and knowing that he shall reap eternal life.
- **It means that the individual will be rewarded for doing right.** On the surface, it seems that those who lie, cheat, steal, and kill have every advantage over those who are honest and good. But the power of God stands behind those who do right; they will be rewarded. “And let us not lose heart in doing good, for in due time we shall reap if we do not grow weary” (Galatians 6:9).

We must not take this great truth for granted; whatever a man sows, this he will also reap.

But there is another great aspect of sowing and reaping that we must not take for granted either. What you sow comes back to you *multiplied!* From one kernel of corn, you expect several ears, each with a hundred or so kernels. From one grain of wheat, you expect a head with some 15 to 30 new grains. In nature, you harvest more than you sow. God gave us the physical harvest so that we can understand that the same point is true in the realm of the spiritual harvest - what you sow comes back to you *multiplied!*

Our Lord Jesus used this principle in a discussion on the Golden Rule: “Give,” He said, “and it will be given to you; good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over, they will pour into your lap. For by your standard of measure it will be measured to you in return” (Luke 6:38). What you give out not only comes back to you, it comes back multiplied.

Here, then, is a tremendously powerful principle from the Lord Himself. If you give encouragement, encouragement will come back to you-later-multiplied. If you give out smiles and enthusiasm, smiles and enthusiasm will come back to you-later-multiplied. If you give love, concern, or help, or praise, or truth, or any other good quality, it will come back to you - later - multiplied.

Don’t take the multiplied harvest for granted. Make it work for you, and not against you.

Things We Take For Granted

The Training from Discipline

When the Lord God decides to whip one of His children, He does not miss. The stripes are laid on, justly and unflinchingly; the lashes precisely placed. Hence it is written: “All discipline for the moment seems not to be joyful, but sorrowful” (Hebrews 12:11). The faint-hearted Christian may decide to leave the faith when the Lord brings His hand down, but to those who endure, “afterwards it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness.

So many times the Christian looks at discipline from the perspective that “I get disciplined when I do something wrong.” But God has a much larger view, and the training from discipline each follower of Christ receives is very valuable, and not something to be taken for granted.

We as Christians need to realize that there is a great spiritual war going on - the dragon, the serpent of old, has gone off to make war with the church of Christ. In this war, the Lord Jesus is the Commander-in-Chief, He being the Head as well as Savior of the body. To win the victories He needs to win against the forces of darkness, He needs disciplined offensive units who will move and function at His direction. These disciplined offensive units - the local congregations - must be developed through training, discipline, and direction. Their endurance must be increased. They, as platoons in the Lord’s army, must develop the teamwork and communication necessary to function as efficient units. People must be developed for each of the skill positions, as well as replacements in case of injury or death.

What I’m driving at is a very significant point: Discipline from the Lord may come, not because the Christian is doing anything wrong, but because the Lord is preparing that Christian to play a particular position as part of an effective scoring machine. It is true: “But now God has placed the members, each one of them, in the body, just as He desired” (I Corinthians 12:18).

Don’t take God’s discipline for granted, and don’t get angry or sulky when the discipline comes. “Those whom the Lord loves He disciplines, and He scourges every son whom He receives” (Hebrews 12:6). Rejoice! The Lord is “whipping us into shape,” preparing us for the action in the next battle to come.

Things We Take For Granted

The Bible as The Word of God

Foundations are critical, but not generally eye-catching. Much effort is expended in putting up a nice, brick front of the house. Long hours went into the agonizing decision as to what color the carpet should be. Drapes and furniture are all selected on the basis of comfort and color schemes. But what about the foundation? Poor old foundation - nobody looks; nobody notices, nobody cares. Until disaster strikes, that is. When the flood waters are swirling around the house, then someone wonders, "Will the foundation hold?" But by then it is too late to do anything about it; the foundation will either stand secure, or collapse.

"Everyone who comes to Me, and hears My words, and acts upon them, I will show you whom he is like," said Jesus. "He is like a man building a house who dug deep and laid a foundation upon the rock; and when a flood rose, the torrent burst against that house and could not shake it, because it had been well built. But the one who has heard, and has not acted, is like a man who built a house upon the ground without any foundation; and the torrent burst against it and immediately it collapsed and the ruin of that house was great" (Luke 6:46-49). The basic difference in the two houses was the foundation.

What a blessing it is to have built your life on the word of God! Don't take the security it offers for granted.

- When the most violent of storms buffet our lives, it is powerful medicine for the soul to know for certain that we shall be resurrected from the dead. It's because the Bible says we shall, that's how we know. Don't take it for granted.
- When you are in a discussion about immersion and remission of sins, it is powerful medicine for the soul to know for certain that sins are forgiven when a person repents and is immersed by Jesus' authority. It's because the Bible says that's how it is; that's how we know. Don't take it for granted.
- When you are in a discussion about morals, it is powerful medicine for the soul to know for certain that right is right and wrong is wrong. It's because the Bible says there is sin and there is righteousness; that's how we know. Don't take it for granted.
- When everything around you is confusing and it's hard to see your way, it is powerful medicine for the soul to know for certain that there are answers in the word of God. It's because the Bible contains everything pertaining to life and godliness; that's how we know. Don't take it for granted.

Like a compass or gyroscope, regardless of the storms or confusion on life's seas, the Bible stands as a blazing light, steadily pointing the right way to go. As Isaiah says to us under the new covenant, speaking (somewhat metaphorically) of the Bible, "And your ears will hear a word behind you, 'This is the way, walk in it.'" (Isaiah 30:21).

Things We Take For Granted

Lessons Children Teach Us

Assuredly God did not have to perpetuate the human race through the process of “progressively developmental progeny,” better known as children. He could have used some (cloning process, or had us picked - ripe and fully developed - from a tree. But He kicks off each new generation with a squalling, helpless infant who needs to be nurtured and molded, patiently and persistently guided into the maturity of full-bloomed adulthood. And in this process, all who are involved - aunts, uncles, members of the local family of God - learn some important lessons in regard to the spiritual realm of our heavenly Father. These lessons children teach us are not to be taken for granted.

- **Children require care** – From the helpless infant state to the turbulence of teens, kids need care. Their diapers must be changed, their schooling provided for, their morals instilled and strengthened, their emotional needs met, their confidences built. Much of this must be done, especially in the earlier years, without the children even having a clue that the guiding hand of the parents are anticipating and meeting their needs. Knowing this makes us understand, appreciate, and follow this advice from the apostle Peter: “Humble yourselves, therefore, under the mighty hand of God, that He may exalt you at the proper time, casting all your anxiety upon Him, because He cares for you” (I Peter 5:6,7).
- **Children need to know they are loved** – Part of growing up is making mistakes and exercising poor judgment. Children need to know, in spite of the broken window or the crookedly-sewn seam, that they are loved just because they are what they are. When Peter and six other disciples exercised poor judgment in returning to fishing after Jesus’ resurrection from the dead, the Lord Himself waited for them on the shore as they were coming in from an unsuccessful night’s work. To these men—strong men, hard-working callous-handed men—He spoke. “*Children,*” He said, “you do not have any fish, do you?” *Children,* He called them. *Children,* who were loved in spite of poor judgment. The character of our Lord is thus more understandable. “But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us” (Romans 5:8).
- **Children need rescued** – It is not uncommon for a child to be talked into participating in activities, which are unwholesome or dangerous by older kids or scheming adults. When this happens, the child cannot escape by his own efforts; he has, in a sense, been trapped or kidnapped by a more wily adversary. The child needs to be rescued by strong arms. Similarly, those in the image of God, through the gospel, “may come to their senses and escape from the snare of the devil, having been held captive by him to do his will” (II Timothy 2:26).

Your own children are special; they are your favorites. They have access to you at any time they really need your attention. The whole world can be put on hold while you attend to your offspring. They need, as those in your favor, special care, love, and rescuing. Similarly, Christians are those who are in the favor or grace of God, and come under that special care. “See how great a love the Father has bestowed upon us, that we should be called the children of God; and such we are” (I John 3:1). Don’t take it for granted.

Things We Take For Granted

The Boundaries of Our Habitation

There is a hand, which guides and governs in the affairs of men. It is the same hand which hid Moses in the cleft of the rock, and which was stretched out toward an unbelieving and unrepentant Israel. The early Christians had confidence in that hand. Listen to a portion of their prayer when the first persecution came on the church. "For truly in this city;" they said, regarding the crucifixion of the Lord Jesus in Jerusalem, "there were gathered together against Your holy servant Jesus, whom You anointed, both Herod and Pontius Pilate, along with the Gentiles and the peoples of Israel, to do whatever *Your hand* and Your purpose predestined to do. And now, Lord, take note of their threats, and grant that Your bond-servants may speak Your word with all confidence, while You extend *Your hand* to heal, and signs and wonders take place through the name of Your holy servant Jesus" (Acts 4:27-30).

There is a great need now, as the church approaches the 21st century, for Christians to be able to have the same trust in that hand as did the first century church. With former Council on Foreign Relations member and Trilateralist George Bush - now President of the U.S. - trumpeting that the "new world order" is now in place, Christians everywhere should understand that the tearing down of the Berlin Wall meant that a bigger wall, one that includes all peoples, had already been built. The savings and loan crisis continues in ever widening circles; over 1100 banks in America are in big time financial trouble, including eight major New York City banks (the collapse of any one of which would more than wipe out FDIC reserves). The drug and crime problem is increasingly rampant in a society whose morals have rotted away in the filth of humanism. Another war by the American government on the American people, as the Vietnam War, looms under the headlines of the Persian Gulf scenario. Those who in our day have taken their stand against the Lord and His Christ view their triumph as being at hand.

But listen to these words from the 64th Psalm:

They hold fast to themselves an evil purpose;
They talk of laying snares secretly;
They say, "Who can see them?"
They devise injustices, saying,
"We are ready with a well-concealed plot."
For the inward thought and heart of a man are deep.
But God will shoot at them with an arrow;
Suddenly they will be wounded.
So they will make him stumble;
Their own tongue is against them;
All who see will shake the head.
Then all men will fear,
And will declare the work of God,
And will consider what He has done.
The righteous man will be glad in the Lord, and will take refuge in Him;
And all the upright in heart will glory.

There is something I do not want to take for granted. There is a God who "made from one, every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth, having determined their appointed times and the boundaries of their habitation, that they should seek God" (Acts 17:26,27). My confidence is in Him who can shatter the opposition when He chooses to. If others squandered the legacy of freedom, I have not. If others were silent for fear, I was not. If others bent because of pressure, I did not. My time is not going to be spent in wringing my hands, and plaintively crying over a lost republic. My citizenship is in heaven; my God has sent me into the world for such a time as this. I have come to recruit soldiers into a resurrected army, and to foment a worldwide spiritual revolution. Join with me, and let God's hand guide and govern in the affairs of men. Don't take it for granted.

Things We Take For Granted

Fruitful Seasons

God is light (I John 1:5). Among other things that means “He causes His sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends His rain on the righteous and the unrighteous” (Matthew 5:45). Where light is, God is; and in this sense we are all His offspring, and in Him we live and move and exist (Acts 17:28).

Where God is not, all is darkness. This is why Jesus referred to hell as “the outer darkness; in that place there shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth” (Matthew 22:13). It is the outer darkness because it is away from the presence of God and from the glory of His power (II Thessalonians 1:9).

Men tend to forget about God, and the omniscience of His presence. They vainly imagine that the sun was set in its place by the processes of random action. They, as superstitious pagans, somehow think that chemicals magically organized themselves upwards to produce life, that over a period of time plants spontaneously spring from the ground. The Gentile societies of the world degenerate into these pagan beliefs because they do not “see fit to acknowledge God any longer” (Romans 1:28). They do not honor Him as God, or *give thanks*; they become futile in their speculations and their foolish collective heart is darkened.

There is something, then, that we don’t want to take for granted. God has given us something to remind us of His presence in the world, so that we don’t lapse into paganism and forget to honor God or give thanks. Here is what Paul and Barnabas had to say to the men of Lystra who tried to offer sacrifice to them as men, thinking them to be the pagan gods of Mercury and Jupiter: “Men, why are you doing these things? We are also men of the same nature as you, and preach the gospel to you in order that you should turn from these vain things to a living God, who made the heaven and the earth and the sea, and all that is in them. And in the generations gone by He permitted all the nations to go their own ways; and yet He did not leave Himself without witness, in that He gave you rains from heaven and fruitful seasons, satisfying your hearts with food and gladness” (Acts 14:15-17).

Those rains and fruitful seasons, to satisfy our hearts with food and gladness, are themselves a witness of the presence of God. They are to remind us of His goodness, and by contrast make us recognize what it would be like to be without God in the outer darkness. At harvest time, take time for honoring God and for thanksgiving. Don’t take the rains and fruitful seasons - witnesses of the presence of God - for granted.

Things We Take For Granted

Opportunity to Turn

God loves men and women. Sometimes we wonder why, or how He could, but He does. God our Savior “desires all men to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth” (I Timothy 2:4). But the history of men has been one of stiff-necked rebellion. From the time of Adam and Eve, man has willingly taken the whispered suggestions of the deceiver, and has knowingly flaunted the will of God.

But God loves men and women. So He gives each of us an opportunity to turn, an opportunity not to be taken for granted. And He gives us some good reasons to turn:

- **The penalty of the second death** – Physical death, with its final separation from our loved ones, its pain, its silencing of the carcass, communicates to us the awesome finality of the second death in the lake of fire. God prepared the eternal fire for the devil and his angels (Matthew 25:41). Unless a person is immersed into Christ and continues to obey the truth in running well, God’s justice forces Him to separate those who are still in their sins from Him.
- **The ravages of sin in this life** – Those who sow to the flesh shall from the flesh reap corruption (Galatians 6:8). The heartaches, destruction, discord, and strife, which result from a life in rebellion to God are high prices to pay. In contrast, those who sow to the Spirit, in addition to reaping eternal life, experience love, joy, peace, and many other of Zion’s sacred sweets. The spiritual blessings in Christ are a powerful call to turn to the Lord on His terms.
- **The kindness of God** – Kindness begets kindness. When an honest individual has even a vague glimmering of how much Jesus extended Himself to purchase eternal redemption for us, this kindness of God leads him to repentance (Romans 2:4).
- **The power to improve** – The word of God teaches us that when we turn to see the image of God in the face of Christ, we are transformed into the same image (II Corinthians 3:14-4:6). For an individual to realize that he can lay aside the old self, and put on a new self who is being renewed in the true image of the One who called him, is powerful and exciting. Who would not want to be strengthened with power through God’s Spirit in the inner man?

Worthy is our God to receive praise and glory and honor and dominion and authority. Don’t miss the opportunity to peer beyond your own spiritual darkness to see the blazing light of Him who sits on the throne, and to be blessed with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places in Christ. “For you . . . God raised up His servant [Jesus], and sent Him to bless you by turning every one of you from your wicked ways” (Acts 3:26).

Things We Take For Granted

Messages From Angels

Angels are messengers. Of angels, there are two kinds: those who carry God's messages, and those who carry Satan's messages. Of those angels who carry God's messages, there are three kinds: the angel of Jehovah (Jesus in the Old Testament), men, and spirit beings. These spirit beings with messages from God are the ones whom we commonly think of when we think of angels, and these and their communications we must not take for granted.

But let me make one point clear. The messages from angels that we are looking for are the messages recorded in the inspired word of God. Anyone today who informs you that an angel told them this or that will lie about other things too! God's message to man is complete; there is no need for further communications from angels of God.

Let us consider some of these communications:

- The first recorded message of angels was given to Lot and his family in Sodom. "A son-in-law, and your sons, and your daughters, and whomever you have in the city, bring them out of the place; because their outcry has become so great before the Lord that the Lord has sent us to destroy it" (Genesis 19:12). Furthermore, they said, "Escape for your life! Do not look behind you, and do not stay anywhere in the valley; escape to the mountains lest you be swept away" (Genesis 19:17). And you know what happened to Lot's wife when she took this message from angels for granted!
- Angels interpreted many of Daniel's visions for him. Daniel wrote: "And behold, with the clouds of heaven, One like a Son of Man was coming, and He came up to the Ancient of Days and was presented before Him. And to Him was given dominion, glory, and a kingdom, that all peoples, nations, and men of every language might serve Him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion which will not pass away; and His kingdom is one which will not be destroyed" (Daniel 7:13,14). The angel added these words, "But the saints of the Highest One will receive the kingdom and possess the kingdom forever, for all ages to come" (Daniel 7:18). Don't take it for granted.
- The angel Gabriel appeared to Mary, "Behold, you will conceive in your womb, and bear a son, and you shall name Him Jesus, He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High; and the Lord God will give Him the throne of His father David; and He will reign over the house of Jacob forever; and His kingdom will have no end" (Luke 1:31-33). Jesus in glory reigns, as the angel declared He would. Don't take it for granted.
- An angel appeared to Cornelius, Roman soldier and the first Gentile to become a Christian. He said, "Send to Joppa, and have Simon, who is also called Peter, brought here; and he shall speak words to you by which you will be saved, you and all your household" (Acts 11:13,14). The angel said Peter knew words, which would save people. Don't take it for granted.
- The apostle John bowed down in worship of the angel who brought him the revelation of Jesus. The angel spoke, "Do not do that; I am a fellow servant of yours and of your brethren the prophets and of those who heed the words of this book: worship God" (Revelation 22:9). Don't take those words for granted: heed the words of The Book!

From Genesis to Revelation angels brought God's messages to men. Consider those messages carefully, then act accordingly!

Things We Take For Granted

Old Testament Prophecies

The Old Testament record is a history. But it is more than history; it is the illustration of people and their characters; it pounds home the lesson that men must fear and obey the Lord God of Israel, who is obviously sovereign; and it records the details for sacrifice and offering to the Most High. In the midst of all that walks the foreshadow of the Lord Jesus. More than 750 prophecies [by my count] detail Him and His kingdom in prediction and predilection, in teaching and typology, so that an exact “laser image” of Him was created in the open minds of those who studied and believed their scripture. Thus, when He appeared, those who truly looked for the salvation of Israel recognized Him, and gave Him the proper reception as the Messiah. The rest stumbled over Him, having created a false image of the Messiah in their own minds.

But let’s listen to what the writings of the New Testament arrangement have to say about those Old Testament prophecies.

- When Jesus walked with the two men on the road to Emmaus, they were discouraged because they thought someone had stolen Jesus body from the tomb. Jesus spoke to them, “O foolish men and slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken! Was it not necessary for the Christ to suffer these things and to enter into His glory?” (Luke 24:25,26). To which Luke adds, “And beginning with Moses and with all the prophets, He explained to them the things concerning Himself in all the Scriptures” (Luke 24:27).
- Later, while the disciples were together, Jesus appeared in their midst, establishing that He had indeed risen from the dead. “Now He said to them, ‘These are My words which I spoke to you while I was still with you, that all things which are written about Me in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms must be fulfilled.’ Then He opened their minds to understand the Scriptures, and He said to them, ‘Thus it is written, that the Christ should suffer and rise again from the dead on the third day; and that repentance for forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in His name to all the nations, beginning from Jerusalem’” (Luke 24:44-47).
- The apostle Peter, in speaking to the Jews in the temple after healing a man who had been crippled from birth, emphasized the messages of the Old Testament prophets. “But the things which God announced beforehand by the mouth of all the prophets, that His Christ should suffer, He has thus fulfilled,” he said. Later, he added to his words on this point, “And likewise, all the prophets who have spoken, from Samuel and his successors onward, also announced these days” (Acts 3:18,24).
- The apostle Paul, making his own defense before the Roman governor and King Agrippa, also points to the importance of the Old Testament prophets. “And so, having obtained help from God, I stand to this day testifying both to the small and great, stating nothing but what the Prophets and Moses said was going to take place; that the Christ was to suffer, and that by reason of His resurrection from the dead He should be the first to proclaim light both to the Jewish people and to the Gentiles” (Acts 26:22,23).

Jesus and the apostles depended heavily upon what was written by the Old Testament prophets to prove their contentions. Let’s not take those great writings for granted.

Things We Take For Granted

God's Handling of History

“But when the fulness of the time came,” the apostle Paul states, “God sent forth His Son, born of a woman, born under the Law” (Galatians 4:4). God’s plan from the beginning had been to spread the message of salvation and the indwelling Holy Spirit to the entire world (Genesis 12:3). But in order to do so, the world had to be properly prepared for the coming of the Messiah and the gospel, which would follow His death and resurrection. Let us note the hand of God in history, setting the stage for “the fulness of time.”

- **The dispersion of the Jews** – From the time of the Babylonian captivity of 605 BC onward, Jews were successively scattered. By the time of Jesus, Jews were spread throughout northern Africa, and as far south as Ethiopia. They were in Europe, disseminated as far as Rome and Spain. In Asia, they were engaged in commerce with India and China, and were distributed far beyond the reaches of the Roman Empire. This scattering of the Jews - known as the *diaspora* - provided the base for the spread of the gospel in the first century.
- **The spread of Greek language** - The coming of Alexander the Great in 333 BC was also a major preparatory step in the broadcast of the gospel. Although Alexander, taught by Aristotle, lived as a conqueror for only ten years, he set in motion the *Hellenization* of the areas he swept into his empire. Throughout the “civilized world” at the time, the Greek language became standard, understood by most men everywhere. Thus, by the time of the first century church, the gospel could be proclaimed nearly universally in Greek and be understood. So widespread was the Hellenization that it was necessary for scholars to produce the Old Testament scriptures in Greek. This Greek Old Testament, known as the *Septuagint*, was translated from 250 to 200 BC, and was the one quoted by Jesus and the New Testament authors.
- **Roman protection** - Although the Roman Empire would later turn on the church, in the initial stages the Roman system of justice protected Christians from the Jews, particularly those who had Roman citizenship (such as Paul and Silas). This allowed for comparatively free travel throughout the Roman Empire, and for the free broadcast of the gospel to millions.
- **The development of the synagogue and its education** - When the Jews were sent into captivity in Babylon, they developed the synagogue. The synagogue was a local meeting place where the Old Testament scriptures were read on a systematic basis every Sabbath. In addition, it functioned as a school where Jewish children, particularly boys, were taught the Old Testament scriptures beginning at the age of 5, and the teachings of the rabbis at later ages. Thus, Jewish society everywhere was familiar with the scripture and prepared for the gospel message which was so clearly prophesied in their word of God. Furthermore, the structure of the synagogue set the pattern for the development of the New Testament church.
- **The ability of God to use rulers and others when necessary** - It was necessary, in order for the scriptures to be fulfilled, for the Messiah to be born in Bethlehem. But Joseph and Mary lived in Nazareth. So God went right to the top and had Caesar Augustus issue a decree for a head tax requiring individuals to be registered in the town of their ancestry. Thus Joseph and Mary made the trip to Bethlehem, and unknowingly fulfilled the scripture concerning the birth of the Christ child.

God arranged history so that when Jesus came into the world, everything was perfectly prepared for the spread of His gospel.

God handles history. Don't take it for granted, take confidence in it for the times ahead!

Things We Take For Granted

Jesus in the Flesh

The coming of Jesus in the flesh is much more than a babe in a manger, erroneously depicted with wise men, stars, and a “Madonna.” Jesus came in the flesh to accomplish some very specific and important tasks, and to communicate some very significant points to mankind. None of these should be taken for granted.

- **He became flesh to communicate to us that He understands** – “Therefore, He had to be made like His brethren in all things, that He might become a merciful and faithful high priest in things pertaining to God, to make propitiation for the sins of the people” (Hebrews 2:17). He has been made like us in all things; He understands, and has been willing to demonstrate that He understands. All of this inspires in me confidence that His desire is to help me, not just use me.
- **He came in the flesh to illustrate the love and grace of God the Father** – “For of His fullness we have all received,” the apostle John says, “and grace upon grace. For the Law was given through Moses; grace and truth were realized through Jesus Christ. No man has seen God at any time; the only begotten God, who is in the bosom of the Father, He has explained Him” (John 1:16-18). The grace and truth were always there; they simply were brought to realization through Christ. As the apostle Paul put it, “The kindness of God our Savior and His love for mankind appeared” (Titus 3:4).
- **He came in the flesh to demonstrate that man is justly accountable to God** – God, in sending “His own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and as an offering for sin, He condemned sin in the flesh” (Romans 8:3). Jesus met us in the flesh to establish that He was just as human as we, that it is right and just for God to condemn sin and the sinner. He was “tempted in all things as we are, yet without sin” (Hebrews 4:15). Those who maintain that Jesus did not sin because He was different than we, who maintain that man must sin, or that man is totally depraved, are just modern forms of the old Gnostics who taught that because man was flesh, he must sin. They therefore denied that Jesus came in the flesh, because if He came in the flesh as they were in the flesh, according to their thinking. He would have sinned. “For many deceivers have gone out into the world, those who do not acknowledge Jesus Christ as coming in the flesh. This is the deceiver and the antichrist” (II John 7).
- **Jesus came in the flesh to suffer** – Suffering is a characteristic of flesh. Pain, body breakdown, sickness, subjection to torture, and pressures to survive are all part of human existence. “It was fitting for Him, for whom are all things, and through whom are all things, in bringing many sons to glory, to perfect the author of their salvation through sufferings” (Hebrew 2:10). He is thus able to come to our aid.
- **Jesus came in the flesh to die** – The great characteristic of all flesh is that it is temporary; it dies. “Since then the children share in flesh and blood, He Himself likewise partook of the same, that through death He might render powerless him who had the power of death, that is, the devil; and might deliver those who through fear of death were subject to slavery all their lives” (Hebrews 2:14,15).

We occasionally speak of some energetic person “really putting himself into his message” in order to communicate to his audience his perspective. Consider the above points about Jesus in the flesh, and note that “He really put Himself into His message” - including suffering and painful death - in order to communicate to mankind His true perspective. Don’t take it for granted.

Things We Take For Granted

Jesus' Death on The Cross

When a businessman, or a coach, or some other leader is able to achieve two or three goals by one successful stroke, I stand in awe at the intelligence and shrewdness of the designer. Sometimes “the sons of this age are more shrewd in relation to their own kind than the sons of light” (Luke 16:8). But when I then consider the number of things, which God accomplished through Jesus’ death on the cross, my awe is greatly magnified, and my appreciation for the intelligence of the Great Designer is deepened and I bow more strongly before His Majesty. Note some of these goals accomplished in that one master stroke:

- **Deliverance and forgiveness** – “For He delivered us from the domain of darkness, and transferred us to the kingdom of His beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sin” (Colossians 1:13,14).
- **Peace and reconciliation with God** – “For it was the Father’s good pleasure for all the fulness to dwell in Him, and through Him to reconcile all things to Himself, having made *peace through the blood of His cross*; through Him, I say, whether things on earth or things in heaven. And although you were formerly alienated and hostile in mind, engaged in evil deeds, yet He has now *reconciled you in His fleshly body through death*, in order to present you before Him holy and blameless and beyond reproach” (Colossians 1:19-22).
- **Elimination of the Jew-Gentile barrier** – “But now in Christ Jesus you who formerly were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For He Himself is our peace, who made both groups into one, and broke down the barrier of the dividing wall, *by abolishing in His flesh the enmity*, which is the Law of commandments contained in ordinances, that in Himself He might make the two into one new man, thus establishing peace, and might reconcile them both in one body to God through the cross, by it having put to death the enmity” (Ephesians 2:13-16).
- **Elimination of the Law as a condemning force in the lives of Christians** – “And when you were dead in your transgressions and uncircumcision of your flesh, He made you alive together with Him, having forgiven us all our transgressions, *having canceled out the certificate of debt* consisting of decrees against us and which was hostile to us; and He has taken it out of the way, having nailed it to the cross” (Colossians 2:13,14).
- **The granting of a clean conscience to those in Christ** – “For if the blood of goats and bulls and the ashes of a heifer sprinkling those who have been defiled, sanctify for the cleansing of the flesh, how much more will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered Himself without blemish to God, *cleanse your conscience from dead works* to serve the living God?” (Hebrews 9:13,14). Thus “you have died and your life is hidden with Christ in God” (Colossians 3:3).

What a great God! What great intelligence and wisdom! To have actually designed and staged the drama of Christ in the world in such a way that the parts of the epic perfectly match our inner needs. Fall before Him in praise! Glory in the cross! Don’t take Jesus’ Death for granted.

Things We Take For Granted

The Character of Jesus

What is character? Character is the consistent demonstration of personality strengths or weaknesses, involving all aspects of human living. The individual may be loving and caring, or he may be cruel and selfish. He may show great personal discipline, or he may be a slob. The sum of these recognizable traits - appropriately called *characteristics* - make up the character of the individual.

It is important to note that when we recognize another individual, his *characteristics* are what we recognize - a certain way of walking, of certain words or phrases in talking, a certain way of doing things or working with other people. A person's flesh may age, or be ravaged by disease or accident, but we recognize the individual by his character.

Thus it was one evening. Peter talked six other disciples into going fishing with him (they apparently customarily did their net-fishing at night). "But when the day was now breaking, Jesus stood on the beach; yet the disciples did not know that it was Jesus. Jesus therefore said to them, 'Children, you do not have any fish, do you?'"

"They answered Him, 'No.' And He said to them, 'Cast the net on the right-hand side of the boat, and you will find a catch.' They cast therefore, and then they were not able to haul it in because of the great number of fish. That disciple therefore whom Jesus loved [John] said to Peter, 'It is the Lord.' And so when Simon Peter knew it was the Lord, he put his outer garment on (for he was stripped for work), and threw himself into the sea" (John 21:4-7).

How did John know that it was Jesus on the beach? Note these points:

- He could not physically recognize Jesus. It was still too dark and the distance was too great.
- Jesus had a certain way of acting and giving directions. First, He established their weakness - in their lack of fish. Then He gave a set of directions - to cast the net on the right side of the boat. Third, His words were true - the fish were indeed there.
- John recognized the *character* of Jesus in this circumstance. He had seen the Lord work in the same fashion in other situations, and He recognized Jesus' characteristic way of doing things.

What is really significant for us is that this event occurs after Jesus' resurrection. Even though Jesus had already transcended this life, His character remained the same. If you really want to know His character, you will have to begin by studying Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John to understand His nature, and truly recognize His characteristics. "Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, yes, and forever" (Hebrews 13:8). Don't take it for granted.

Things We Take For Granted

One Blessed Hope

When hope dies, the man dies. So what hope keeps the Christian living? “There is one body, and one Spirit, just as also you were called in one hope of your calling” (Ephesians 4:4). There is one hope - one hope that unites all Christians, one hope that imparts perseverance to all who follow in the footsteps of Jesus, one hope which is common to all believers in Jesus, one hope which overcomes all despair and destruction for those who are in Christ Jesus. What is that one hope?

- **It is connected with the second coming of Christ** – “For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all men, instructing us to deny ungodliness and worldly desires and to live sensibly, righteously and godly in this present age, *looking for the blessed hope* and appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ” (Titus 2:11-13).
- **Our bodies will be changed to His glory at His coming** – “For our citizenship is in heaven, from which also we eagerly wait for a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ; who will *transform* the body of our humble state into conformity with the body of His glory, by the exertion of the power He has even to subject all things to Himself” (Philippians 3:20,21).
- **This resurrection is the salvation (or redemption) of the body** – “And inasmuch as it is appointed for men to die once and after this comes judgment, so Christ also, having been offered once to bear the sins of many, shall appear a second time *for salvation* without reference to sin, to those who eagerly await Him” (Hebrews 9:27,28). Christians’ inner men have already been saved or redeemed (Galatians 3:13); it is the salvation of the body which we yet await. This, then, is the “helmet, the hope of salvation” (1 Thessalonians 5:8).
- **We eagerly wait for our hope, the resurrection of our bodies** – “We also, ourselves, having the first fruits of the Spirit, even we ourselves groan within ourselves, waiting eagerly for our adoption as sons, *the redemption of our body*. For in hope we have been saved, but hope that is seen is not hope; for why does one hope for what he sees? But if we hope for what we do not see, with perseverance we eagerly wait for it” (Romans 8:23-25).

The word *eagerly* keeps cropping up in regard to our resurrection from the dead. Slavery, jail, wars, beatings, starvation, oppression - no matter what the circumstances, the resurrection of the body pulls the Christian onward in hope. It is the one hope of our calling. There is one hope - one hope that unites all Christians, one hope that imparts perseverance to all who follow in the footsteps of Jesus, one hope which is common to all believers in Jesus, one hope which overcomes all despair and destruction for those who are in Christ Jesus. Don’t take it for granted.

Things We Take For Granted

One Lord

The seven points of the unity of the Spirit are centered, appropriately enough, about the “one Lord,” the Lord Jesus Christ. “For even if there are so-called gods whether in heaven or on earth, as indeed there are many gods and many lords, yet for us there is but one God, the Father, from whom are all things, and exist for Him; and *one Lord, Jesus Christ*, by whom are all things, and we exist through Him” (1 Corinthians 8:5,6).

The whole issue of lordship is of major importance to God. Your lord is the one whom you truly obey. “Do you not know that when you present yourselves to someone as slaves for obedience, you are slaves of the one whom you obey, either of sin resulting in death, or of obedience resulting in righteousness” (Romans 6:16). It is possible to bow the knee to some modern Baal, saying, “My master.” It is possible to confess the name of some modern potentate, saying, “Caesar is Lord.” But for the true child of God, there is one - exclusively one - Lord.

- **Jesus’ resurrection from the dead, and His ascension to the throne in glory established His Lordship** - “For it was not David who ascended into heaven,” said Peter, “but he himself says, ‘The Lord said to my Lord, “Sit at My right hand, until I make Your enemies a footstool for Your feet.”’ Therefore let all the house of Israel know for certain that God has made Him both *Lord* and Christ - this Jesus whom You crucified” (Acts 2:34-36).
- **In the process of becoming a Christian, the individual must confess that Jesus is Lord** - “If you confess with your mouth that *Jesus is Lord*, and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you shall be saved; for with the heart a man believes, resulting in righteousness, and with the mouth he confesses, resulting in salvation” (Romans 10:9,10).
- **Christians are to have Jesus as Lord in all that they do** - “And whatever you do in word or deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks through Him to God the Father” (Colossians 3:17). And, “whatever you do, do your work heartily, as for the Lord rather than for men; knowing that from the Lord you will receive the reward of the inheritance. It is the *Lord Christ* whom you serve” (Colossians 3:23,24).

“There is one Lord” (Ephesians 4:5). The exclusive Lordship of Jesus Christ unifies all true followers of Him as they carefully teach, preach, and practice in accordance with His word. Listen to some of His closing words: “All *authority* has been given to Me in heaven and on earth. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, immersing them into the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, *teaching them to observe all that I commanded you*; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age” (Matthew 28:19,20).

Things We Take For Granted

The One Faith

“God is not a God of confusion, but of peace” (I Corinthians 14:33). But there is a god of confusion - Satan, the father of lies and the master of misinformation. Whenever God has spoken, the serpent has hissed that God is not necessarily telling the whole truth. “You surely shall not die,” were his exact words to Eve (Genesis 3:4). Thus, when God speaks of one faith, Satan whispers, “It is not reasonable for there to be just one faith.”

In the face of such consistent pressure from the world to be “reasonable,” God has exhorted Christians to “contend earnestly for *the faith*, which was once for all delivered to the saints” (Jude 3). Consider these elements of “the faith” which must continuously be contended for:

- **The inspiration and authority of the Bible** – Without the recognition of the complete authority of scripture, nothing can be determined to be true. Those forces, which press for a belief in evolution really are trying to destroy the authority of the scripture, and evade the basics of the faith. “All scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness . . .” (II Timothy 3:16).
- **The basic teachings concerning Jesus** – The person of the Christ is the centerpiece of the word of God. His divinity, His virgin birth, His perfect life, His blood sacrifice, His resurrection from the dead and subsequent appearances, His ascension to glory, and His second coming must all be contended for with earnestness and conviction. “For the testimony of Jesus is the spirit of prophecy” (Revelation 19:10).
- **The essential actions for salvation** – “The Son of Man has come to seek and to save that which was lost” (Luke 19:10). It doesn’t do much good to accurately give the details of the character and life of Jesus, and then lie to people about what they must do to be saved. The scripture is clear - one must believe the testimony of scripture that Jesus rose from the dead, one must repent, he must confess that Jesus is Lord, and he must turn to the Lord by being immersed in the name of Jesus for the forgiveness of his sins, and receive the Holy Spirit.
- **The necessity of remaining steadfast to the end** – The Christian must walk in the light, abstaining from the lusts of the flesh, living righteously, sensibly, and godly in this present age. He must break bread with his brethren about the Lord’s table weekly, and be active in the local assembly in propagating the gospel, and edifying the saints. “Be faithful until death, and I will give you the crown of life” (Revelation 2:10).

There is only one faith (Ephesians 4:5). Let us in all honesty come to the unity of the faith, and not take it for granted.

Things We Take For Granted

There Is One Immersion

The Almighty has created “unity of the Spirit.” The apostle Paul, writing under inspiration of this same Spirit, noted that there were seven bases upon which our unity as children of the Lord rests:

1. One body
2. One Spirit
3. One hope of your calling
4. One Lord
5. One faith
6. One immersion
7. One God and Father of all

By the hand of the Lord, the one immersion is one on which all who follow the Lord must agree. Those who do not agree with the scripture on immersion are not following the Lord Jesus.

There are five immersions mentioned in the writings we call the New Testament:

<u>Immersion</u>	<u>Element</u>	<u>Purpose</u>
John’s immersion	in water	for forgiveness of sins
Immersion in fire	lake of fire	for judgment
Immersion in suffering	suffering	on behalf of the lost
Immersion in the Holy Spirit	noise like violent wind, tongues like fire, speaking in foreign languages	a sign for those of Jewish background; to begin church, accept Gentiles
Immersion in Jesus’ name	in water	for forgiveness of sins, into Christ, receive the indwelling Spirit

So which immersion would be common to all Christians? John’s immersion, the immersion of repentance, was an immersion while the Law was in effect; consequently pre-dating the new covenant. The immersion in fire is not for Christians; this is the consequence of sin, from which the gospel of Christ is to save the follower of Christ. The immersion in the Spirit only occurred twice - once to begin the church and once to open salvation to the Gentile: obviously this immersion is not for all Christians. Many Christians experience immersion in suffering and persecution; but some will pass from this life before they suffer for the gospel: this, then, is not the one common immersion. The one immersion is immersion in Jesus’ name.

Note some of these characteristics of this immersion:

- You must be born again (John 3:5; Titus 3:5)
- For forgiveness of sin (Acts 2:38; Acts 22:16)
- Into Christ (Galatians 3:27; Romans 6:3)
- Grants the indwelling Spirit (Acts 2:38; Acts 19:3,4)
- Saves (I Peter 3:21)

It is preposterous to think a person could be saved or have the unity of the Spirit if he does not believe in the one Lord - Jesus. It is just as preposterous to think a person can be saved or have the unity of the Spirit if he does not believe in and practice the one immersion. Don’t take it for granted.

Things We Take For Granted

One God and Father of All

“Hear, O Israel,” the great commandment had begun, “the Lord is our God, the Lord is one” (Deuteronomy 6:4). So who is this one God? Is He Allah? Is He some inner light, or some cosmic force resident in all nature? Who is He?

- **God is always defined through Jesus Christ** – Indeed, in this world, says Paul, “there are many gods and lords” (I Corinthians 8:5). Thus, when we say, “God,” we must, for the world’s benefit, explicitly state who He is. Paul therefore opens his greetings to the congregation in Colossae with these words, “We give thanks to God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ” (Colossians 1:3). Through the haze of all varieties of paganism, and through the fog of mysticism and nebulous concepts of God, the brilliant light of God shines in Jesus Christ: “I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father but through Me” (John 14:6). “He who does not honor the Son does not honor the Father who sent Him” (John 5:23).
- **He is the God and Father of all** – There is only One who created the heavens and the earth and all that is in them. None of the pagan gods, and none of the modern mechanistic concepts (substitute gods), have creative capacity - they are therefore impotent in contrast to Him who is omnipotent. As the Creator, He is worthy “to receive glory and honor and power” (Revelation 4:11). “For this reason,” said Paul, “I bow my knees before the Father, from whom *every family* in heaven and on earth derives its name” (Ephesians 3:14,15).
- **God is over all** – As the Creator, God’s power is decidedly greater than any of His creations. God is just in requiring obedience to Him, and to His Son. The Son, through the good pleasure of the Father, is the representation of this power. “And He [the Son] is the image of the invisible God, the first-born of all creation. For by Him all things were created, both in the heavens and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities; all things have been created by Him and for Him” (Colossians 1:15-17).
- **God is through all and in all** – There is a most important sense in which the Father dwells in the Christian and not in the non-Christian. “If anyone loves Me,” said Jesus, “he will keep My word; and My Father will love him, and we will come to him, and make our abode with him” (John 14:23). But all creation is suffused with life from God, and in that sense for all men He is through all and in all. “He Himself gives to all life and breath and all things” (Acts 17:25).

There is one God and Father. Know Him, and be known by Him, through His Son. Don’t take it for granted. Be in union with all who truly call upon His name.

Things We Take For Granted

We Received A Spirit of Love

“God has not given us,” said Paul to Timothy, “not a spirit of timidity, but of power, love, and discipline” (II Timothy 1:7). The Spirit of love is contrasted to being timid, or holding back because of fear.

The type of love, *agape*, which is consistent with the character of God is not easily understood. God’s love is not some silly, simpering, wispy stuff driven by quixotic emotional breezes. The way, which leads to an understanding of love is rough and rocky, following the bloodstained footprints of the Christ Himself.

- We exult in our tribulations.
- Tribulation brings about perseverance.
- Perseverance brings about proven character.
- Proven character brings about hope.
- This hope does not disappoint because of the love of God, which has now been poured out in hearts through the Holy Spirit.

Note that this love is not the kind of love that a non-Christian can have. Only those indwelt by the Spirit of God can have the love of God poured out in their hearts. Anyone who is not properly immersed into Christ, and who is not performing deeds appropriate to repentance, does not have the love of God. This love is indeed the fruit of the Spirit - the result of the Spirit working in the Christian’s life through time and tribulation.

The love of God is not recognized by those who are unspiritual. “God is love,” say the sacred writings; but the race of man persecuted, tortured, and crucified the embodiment of love. God’s love has to be learned before it really can be discerned.

- **Love rejoices in truth** - Truth is at the core of the coil of love. Lying and loving cannot in any sense co-mingle. Those who lie about eternal things - who lie in things pertaining to the soul and its eternal home - are the worst liars, and the most hateful people on earth. Those who would substitute sprinkling for immersion, or who would say that you are saved by “accepting Jesus into your heart” instead of being immersed for remission of sins, - do not love at all. Love rejoices in truth.
- **Love does not seek its own** – Love is willing to give all for the sake of someone else. Our Lord Jesus Christ is the absolute and perfect definition of this giving of Himself for our benefit. Those who love the souls of others extend themselves in time, energy, and money for their salvation. Just as a mother’s love for her child really begins in the travail of childbirth, so our love for the lost is carried out on the roadbed of tribulation.
- **Love bears all things, believes all things, endures all things** – Those who love have learned to put their hope and trust in God; mankind often slaps the blanket of love back into the giver’s face. But those who have learned to love as God loves emanate a steady, comforting, sounding bass into the score of life’s melodies, holding and ever-increasing orchestra on tune as they bear and endure trial in the hope and belief that God causes all things to work together for good.

We have received the Spirit of love. Don’t take Him for granted. It’s through Him the love of God is poured out in our hearts.

Things We Take For Granted

The Spirit of Power

No “fraidy-cats,”! The Christian is no timid soul. Upon his immersion into Christ, he was granted the indwelling Spirit of God, given “to those who obey Him” (Acts 5:32). This Holy Spirit is the “Spirit of power” (II Timothy 1:7).

These are times when men faint “from fear and the expectation of the things which are coming upon the world” (Luke 21:26). But the Christian is no mere man. The Christian is no timid soul. He has received the Spirit of power.

But this power is not an earthly, “might makes right” type of energy and strength. Our Lord Jesus set the stage when He instructed the apostles, “You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great men exercise authority over them. It is not so among you, but whoever wishes to become great among you shall be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you shall be your slave; just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many” (Matthew 20:25-28). Let’s consider, then, some elements of the *power to serve!*

- **Power in Jesus’ resurrection** – God’s power was defined in the Old Testament as His creative power in bringing the universe into existence; certainly an examination of the awesome power in the stars and galaxies brings an awareness of God’s glory in His handiwork. But God’s power in the New Testament is defined as that which raised Jesus from the dead, and seated Him on the throne of glory. The implication is strong; more of God’s power was exerted in bringing into existence the eternal through Jesus’ resurrection than was exerted in bringing into existence the temporal at creation.
- **The power of Jesus’ resurrection was exerted in our immersions** – When anyone, in obedience to the gospel, is immersed into the name of Christ, God’s power works. The individual is “buried with Him in immersion, in which you were also raised up with Him through faith in the working of God, who raised Him from the dead” (Colossians 2:12). This awesome power is not visible; consequently, it is “seen” by faith, understood through what is revealed in the word of God.
- **God’s power continues to operate in the life of the committed Christian** – Paul’s prayer was that the brethren in Ephesus might have the “eyes” of their heart enlightened, that they might know the “surpassing greatness of His power toward us who believe” (Ephesians 1:19). This is not an outer, physical power, but the compelling power of character, which can overpower weaker men, snatch men’s souls from fire, and shine with the light of Christ in a dark world. Paul prays again for the Ephesians, “that He would grant you, according to the riches of His glory, to be strengthened with *power through His Spirit* in the inner man” (Ephesians 3:16). God “is able to do exceeding abundantly beyond all that we ask or think, according to the *power* that works within us” (Ephesians 3:20).

The Christian is empowered by God’s Spirit. Don’t take this for granted: “I can do all things through Him who strengthens me” (Philippians 4:13).

Things We Take For Granted

The Spirit of Discipline

When confronted with some dark horror from the pits of the abyss, the unit in the army of God does not break rank and flee in terror. No, they continue to march in confidence, singing praises to Yahweh, knowing that Satan shortly will be crushed under their feet. They are able to march in rank victoriously because they did not receive a spirit of fear, but a Spirit of discipline (II Timothy 1:7).

For the army of the Lord to be effective, there must be two layers of discipline. Each Christian himself must exert self-control, and the local body of Christ must be able to function together as a disciplined offensive unit. The Holy Spirit, the Spirit of discipline, works to produce both levels.

- **Personal discipline** – “My son,” says the Father to each Christian, “do not regard lightly the discipline of the Lord, nor faint when you are reprovved by Him; for whom the Lord loves He disciplines, and He scourges every son whom He receives” (Hebrews 12:5,6). Each soldier must be able to carry his load. Any flab that he has accumulated must be melted away under rigorous regimen. Training in the offensive use of weapons, training in the defensive use of weapons, training in footwork, in hand drill, training, training, training . . .

The American Christian tends to have a problem with discipline. He tends to be a consumer, not a soldier. He shows up for a Sunday smorgasbord, instead of for drill and instruction. But, “it is for discipline that you endure; God deals with you as with sons; for what son is there whom his father does not discipline” (Hebrews 12:7). The child of God needs to welcome this discipline. “But if you are without discipline, of which all have become partakers, then you are illegitimate children, and not sons” (Hebrews 12:8).

- **Corporate discipline** – Not only is the individual disciplined, but the local congregation is molded by God through discipline. The very concept that the church is a body implies teamwork; a team requires discipline to function together. “All the members of the body, though they are many, are one body” (I Corinthians 12:12). So how is the body disciplined?

The discipline comes through evangelists and church leaders. In the church in Corinth’s case, the apostle Paul wrote, “For this reason I am writing these things while absent, in order that when present I may not use severity, in accordance with the authority which the Lord gave me for building up and not tearing down” (II Corinthians 13:10). And to Titus, evangelist for the churches on the island of Crete, “For this reason I left you on Crete, that you might set in order what remains . . .” (Titus 1:5). “Obey your leaders,” says the writer of Hebrews, “and submit to them, for they keep watch over your souls” (Hebrews 13:17).

Discipline is tough to take, both when it comes personally and when it comes corporately. “All discipline for the moment seems not to be joyful, but sorrowful; yet to those who have been trained by it, afterwards it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness” (Hebrews 12:11). But we received the Spirit of discipline; and instead of taking it for granted, we “are disciplined for our good, that we may share His holiness” (Hebrews 12:10).

Things We Take For Granted

The Goal of Our Instruction

There are true goals, and there are pretended goals. The wolf in sheep's clothing pretends to be concerned about the sheep, while his true concern is his ravenous appetite. The scripture warns of those who walk in craftiness and who adulterate the word of God. "For many walk," says Paul, "of whom I often told you, and now tell you even weeping, that they are enemies of the cross of Christ, whose end is destruction, whose god is their belly, and whose glory is their shame, who set their minds on earthly things" (Philippians 3:18,19).

"But the goal of our instruction," says the apostle in another place, "is love from a pure heart and a good conscience and a sincere faith" (I Timothy 1:5). It is significant that these three desirable items - love and a good conscience and a sincere faith - result from the right kind of instruction. False instruction, and false instructors, will not produce them. Thus Paul adds, "For some men, straying from these things, have turned aside to fruitless discussion . . ." (I Timothy 1:6)

- **Love from a pure heart** – In order for love to flow from a pure heart, there must first be a pure heart. A pure heart can only be produced by the pure gospel of Christ, which, in the language of James, "is sown in peace by those who make peace" (James 3:18). There are many imitators of pure love, but love from a pure heart can only come from those who are truly Christians. Only in Christ can we love as He loved.
- **A good conscience** – A good conscience is a gift granted only by God. The heart of man, according to the prophet Jeremiah, "is more deceitful than all else and is desperately sick" (Jeremiah 17:9). "All have turned aside," adds Paul, quoting the sweet psalmist of Israel. "Together they have become useless. There is none who does good, there is not even one" (Romans 3:12). Man's desperate conscience-stricken condition requires the sacrifice of Christ, and our willing obedience to the gospel. By being "immersed into His death," wherein His blood was shed. Christ's blood will then cleanse our "conscience from dead works to serve the living God" (Hebrews 9:14). Only when we have been instructed properly can we obey properly, and receive this great blessing.
- **A sincere faith** – "Faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of Christ" (Romans 10:17). If you haven't heard the right things from God's word, you can't have a sincere faith.

There are true goals, and there are pretended goals. If you, by the grace of God, have been taught the word of God by those who make it their goal for you to have love from a pure heart, a good conscience, and a sincere faith - if it has been their goal for you to have these true, unadulterated Biblical precepts in the life of you and your family - praise God, and appreciate those who have so ministered to you. Don't take it for granted. Then go and spread this pure word to someone else.