

# *Program Transcripts*

For July 2016



IN  
**SEARCH**  
OF THE LORD'S WAY <sup>®</sup>

# **SEARCH PROGRAMS**

**July 2016**

*Topics subject to change without notice*

## **JULY 3 – SAYING NO TO GOD**

You can say yes to God or you can say no to God; but if you say no, you must realize there is a high price to pay and much to lose. In this lesson we're going to explore the cost of rebelling against God's will.

## **JULY 10 – IS MARRIAGE OBSOLETE?**

A recent report reveals that four-in-ten Americans say marriage is obsolete. Is marriage obsolete? Does God approve of couples who live with each other but remain unmarried? Does marriage matter?

## **JULY 17 – A CHURCH MEMBER?**

Many people want Jesus, but they are not sure about the church. Some have quit organized religion and others have started worshipping at home. What does the Lord say about being a member of a church? Is church membership the will of God?

## **JULY 24 – IS SATAN REAL?**

Should we take Satan seriously? Does he really tempt us and want to steal our soul? Should I be afraid of Satan? What does the Word of God say about the devil and what should I know about him?

## **JULY 31 – IS HELL REAL?**

Recent surveys say many people are questioning whether or not the lost will face punishment after this life is over. Is hell real, and will God really send the lost there for eternity? People need to know what God says about hell.

## Saying "No" to God

You can say "yes" to God or you can say "no" to God; but if you say "no", you must realize there's a price to pay and much to lose. Today, we're going to explore the Scriptures about saying "no" to God. The Bible teaches the love and the grace of God; it gives us an unchangeable standard of truth and righteousness. The Scriptures provide both an anchor for the soul and a north star to guide us in the right path. It not only helps us to know more about God, the Bible provides a mirror for our souls. The more we study God's Word, the more we understand about ourselves. We need to be able to see ourselves as God sees us so that we may make the changes necessary to please Him.

I can think of few things more precious than a newborn baby. I love the thought of something so fresh from heaven. Sweet Jackie and I have twelve grandchildren. We had four daughters of our own, and now we enjoy the love and the blessing of our grandchildren. They're such a joy! When a little one gets to be about 18 months to 2 years, however, they learn a word that starts a challenge that lasts for a lifetime. They learn to say the word "no"! They've heard it from their parents, and now they're telling their parents "no."

Many think challenging authority is the way to freedom! Some never imagine that "doing your own thing" could be more costly than it's worth. Saying "no" to God, challenging His authority doesn't go unnoticed by God. He sees and knows what we do and why we do it. We can't expect to live by our own rules, to act outside the morals of the Scriptures, to ignore the Word of God, and to escape the judgment of Jesus Christ on the last day.

Our reading today is from the second epistle of Peter, chapter 2, verses 4 through 9. "For if God did not spare angels when they sinned, but cast them into hell and committed them to pits of darkness, reserved for judgment; and did not spare the ancient world, but preserved Noah, a preacher of righteousness, with seven others, when He brought a flood upon the world of the ungodly; and if He condemned the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah to destruction by reducing them to ashes, having made them an example to those who would live ungodly lives thereafter; and if He rescued righteous Lot, oppressed by the sensual conduct of unprincipled men (for by what he saw and heard that righteous man, while living among them, felt his righteous soul tormented day after day by their lawless deeds), then the Lord knows how to rescue the godly from temptation, and to keep the unrighteous under punishment for the day of judgment." The battle of a lifetime is one inside our hearts. Ultimately, it's the battle for our souls. Will you do your own will or will you follow authority? The first authority is our parents. In time we learn that God is the supreme authority in our lives. The Bible urges us to be careful how we deal with our inner person. Our hearts are important. Proverbs 4:23 says, "Watch over your heart with all diligence, For from it *flow* the springs of life." If we let our hearts grow selfish and indulgent, we can ruin our lives by a moment's foolish choice.

Rebellion is an act of the heart and will; it's an act of defiance or resistance to one in authority. God gives us all freewill, and we can say "yes" or "no" to God. We can do God's will or we can follow our own desires; God won't stop us. You can choose to do what you wish. You can say "no" to God, but saying "no" to God comes at a great price. God is gracious to the penitent and the willing; but when people rebel against him, there's a price to pay. That price is always higher than you think.

In the days of Isaiah, hundreds of years before Christ, the people of Israel had drifted

away from God and began living immoral lives that pleased themselves. The Bible says, “‘Come now, and let us reason together,’ Says the LORD, ‘Though your sins are as scarlet, They will be as white as snow; Though they are red like crimson, They will be like wool. If you consent and obey, You will eat the best of the land; But if you refuse and rebel, You’ll be devoured by the sword.’ Truly, the mouth of the LORD has spoken” (Isaiah 1:18-20).

Bible history shows that when people said “no” to God, they shut Him out of their lives and they did it to their own destruction. God gave Adam and Eve only one boundary in the Garden of Eden. They could not eat of the “tree of the knowledge of good and evil.” God said, “in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die.” But they listened to the lies of the devil, and they chose to say “no” to God and then to sin. They were cast out of the garden, where they could have enjoyed eternal life and the fellowship of God. The woman bore children with pain, and the man would eat his bread by the sweat of his brow “till you return to the ground, for out of the ground you were taken; and you are dust, and to dust you shall return” (Genesis 3:19).

In Noah’s day people also rebelled against God. The Bible says: “Then the LORD saw that the wickedness of man was great on the earth, and that every intent of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually. And the LORD was sorry that He had made man on the earth, and He was grieved in His heart. The LORD said, ‘I will blot out man whom I have created from the face of the land, from man to animals to creeping things and to birds of the sky; for I am sorry that I have made them’” (Genesis 6:5-7). You’ll remember that God sent a great flood and destroyed every person except those on the ark—eight souls in all.

Bible students will remember what happened to Israel as the people came into Palestine. In Joshua and Caleb’s day, the people refused to do God’s will. In Numbers 13:1-2, the Bible says: “Then the LORD spoke to Moses saying, ‘Send out for yourself men so that they may spy out the land of Canaan, which I’m going to give to the sons of Israel; you shall send a man from each of their fathers’ tribes, everyone a leader among them.’”

Twelve went out and ten came back and brought a bad report. The Bible says, “We went in to the land where you sent us; and it certainly does flow with milk and honey, and this is its fruit (and they showed them). Nevertheless, the people who live in the land are strong, and the cities are fortified *and* very large; and moreover, we saw the descendants of Anak there” (Numbers 13:27-28). They were afraid and they counseled the people not to go into Canaan. Numbers 13:32-33 says: “So they gave out to the sons of Israel a bad report of the land which they had spied out, saying, ‘The land through which we have gone, in spying it out, is a land that devours its inhabitants; and all the people whom we saw in it are men of *great* size. There also we saw the Nephilim (the sons of Anak are part of the Nephilim); we became like grasshoppers in our own sight, and so we were in their sight.’”

Numbers 14:1-4 says: “Then all the congregation lifted up their voices and cried, and the people wept that night. All the sons of Israel grumbled against Moses and Aaron; and the whole congregation said to them, ‘Would that we had died in the land of Egypt! Or would that we had died in this wilderness! Why is the LORD bringing us into this land, to fall by the sword? Our wives and our little ones will become plunder; would it not be better for us to return to Egypt?’ So they said to one another, ‘Let us appoint a leader and return to Egypt.’” The people showed a lack of faith; they grumbled; and they rebelled against God.

Numbers 14:5-9 says: “Then Moses and Aaron fell on their faces in the presence of all the assembly of the congregation of the sons of Israel. Joshua the son of Nun and Caleb the

son of Jephunneh, of those who had spied out the land, tore their clothes; and they spoke to all the congregation of the sons of Israel, saying, 'The land which we passed through to spy out is an exceedingly good land. If the LORD is pleased with us, then He will bring us into this land and give it to us—a land which flows with milk and honey. Only do not rebel against the LORD; and do not fear the people of the land, for they will be our prey. Their protection has been removed from them, and the LORD is with us; do not fear them.'"

Verse 10 says, "But all the congregation said to stone them with stones. Then the glory of the LORD appeared in the tent of meeting to all the sons of Israel." The Lord was angry with Israel and thought about smiting them all with pestilence. But Moses interceded for the people, asking for their pardon. The Lord pardoned the people, but they had a price to pay.

In Numbers 14:21-23, the Lord God says, "Indeed, as I live, all the earth will be filled with the glory of the LORD. Surely all the men who have seen My glory and My signs which I performed in Egypt and in the wilderness, yet have put Me to the test these ten times and have not listened to My voice, shall by no means see the land which I swore to their fathers, nor shall any of those who spurned Me see it." Every rebellious person in that generation twenty years old and upward perished in the wilderness. Only Joshua and Caleb entered the Promised Land.

In Jesus' day there were disciples who had seen many miracles. When they heard Jesus teach something they didn't understand or like, these disciples turned away from the Lord. The Bible says: "As a result of this many of His disciples withdrew, they weren't walking with Him anymore. So Jesus said to the twelve, 'You don't want to go away also, do you?' Simon Peter answered Him, 'Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life. We have believed and we've come to know that You are the Holy One of God'" (John 6:66-69).

When people say "no" to God, they lose more than they imagine. They may think they have gained their freedom to do as they please, but they often find themselves slaves to sin. Adam and Eve did as they pleased and were cast out of the Garden of Eden. The people in Noah's day lost their lives. The people in Caleb's day died young and lost their inheritance. The people in Jesus' day lost "eternal life."

Let's say "yes" to God. Let's be obedient to God's will. We need to be like Moses. Hebrews 11:24 to 26 says, "By faith Moses, when he had grown up, refused to be called the son of Pharaoh's daughter, choosing rather to endure ill-treatment with the people of God than to enjoy the passing pleasures of sin, considering the reproach of Christ greater riches than the treasures of Egypt; for he was looking to the reward."

We need an attitude like the generation who entered the Promised Land after forty years in the wilderness. God's Word says: "They (that is, that younger generation under twenty at the time of the bad report) answered Joshua, saying, 'All that you have commanded us we will do, and wherever you send us we will go. Just as we obeyed Moses in all things, so we will obey you; only may the LORD your God be with you as He was with Moses. Anyone who rebels against the command and doesn't obey the words in all that you (Joshua) command him, shall be put to death; only be strong and courageous'" (Joshua 1:16-18).

Later, Isaiah also showed a marvelous spirit when he said to God, "Here am I. Send me!" (Isaiah 6:8). I'll go; I'll do what you ask. Here am I, send me. Do you have that attitude? We need the faith and love for God that says, Tell me what to do and I'll do it. Tell me what it is that is true, and I'll believe it. We're not going to fight with God. We're not going to

give any “ifs,” “ands” or “buts.” We’re going to listen and do. We’re simply going to trust God enough to obey whatever He instructs us. We aren’t going to argue with Him or try to change His Word to suit ourselves.

The church began on the first Pentecost after the resurrection of Jesus Christ. It was fifty days after he had been crucified. Peter preached a compelling sermon to the people proclaiming the resurrection of Jesus from the dead and how the Father in heaven had made him both Lord and Christ. When the people heard it, they were pierced to the heart, because they realized the crucified Jesus was indeed the Lord and Christ. They were guilty and cried out, “Men and brethren, what shall we do?” Peter said to them, “Repent, and each of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit” (Acts 2:38). The Bible says, “So then, those who had received his word were baptized; and that day there were added about three thousand souls. They were continually devoting themselves to the apostles’ doctrine (teaching) and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer” (Acts 2:41-42).

These people said “yes” to God, “yes” to repentance, “yes” to baptism, and “yes” to the church! God blessed them with forgiveness and with an abundant new life. He made them His children and heirs and citizens in His kingdom, the church. They had hope and they had eternal life. You too are making a choice. Will you have the blessing of God, or will you rebel against God? Will you say “yes” to God, or will you say “no” to God? You can say “no”, but just think about what you’ve lost. Don’t play around when the destiny of your soul is at stake.

I fear these days some folks are more sold on what they think about morals and about truth than what God teaches. For instance, they permit all kinds of sin and they endorse them, even though God condemns it. Sometimes when God teaches, they will only say “yes” when God agrees with them. Otherwise, they pursue their own course and ignore the moral teaching and the truth that God gives us. It’s unwise to say God will just permit us to choose our own ways, our own morals, and our own beliefs. It’s unreasonable to imagine that God will let us believe and practice whatever we wish and then never judge our morals, our beliefs, or our actions.

Rather than follow our own paths, we ought to say “yes” to God, “yes” to repentance, “yes” to baptism, and “yes” to the church! When we realize that we have sinned, and the burden of sin weighs on our souls, we ought to repent and be baptized. No “ifs,” or “ands,” or “buts” about it. No substituting what we’d like to do for what God asks us to do. Obedience is doing God’s will in God’s way. It doesn’t attempt to justify error or to suggest that we have something better than the ways of God.

Let’s say with our hearts and with our lives, “yes, Lord! We will come to you and serve you by obeying what You’ve taught us. We will, out of faith and love, repent of our sins, confess Jesus Christ as Lord, and we’ll be baptized. We love you and want to be obedient to your will.” Baptism is an immersion in water for the forgiveness of sin. Saying “no” to God or changing the instructions would be the worst thing that we could do; but saying “yes” and obeying is the best thing we can do. Let’s say “yes” to God and make things right. Let’s not permit one day, not even one day to go by in rebellion to God, but make up our minds today that we will follow the Lord!

## Is Marriage Obsolete?

A recent report reveals that four-in-ten Americans say that marriage is obsolete. Is marriage obsolete? What is God's will for couples who wish to live with each other? Does marriage matter? The Bible provides us the best way and the right way to live. That's why we go to it again and again.

A Pew Forum survey released in November said 39 percent of Americans say marriage is obsolete. This change in thinking profoundly impacts our country and especially children. In 1960, 72 percent of the adults in America were married, but today only about half are married. Many are waiting until later in life to marry, and the number of single people who are divorced has tripled since 1960. More than that, the number of couples living together without marriage has grown dramatically.

God gave Eve to Adam in the beginning because it was not good for him to be alone. Marriage; that is, one man and one woman for life, was and is today God's design. The home made up of a married father and mother still provides the very best foundation for the happiness and the prosperity of the whole family.

God has blessed my wife Jackie and me with 42 years of happy marriage and four wonderful daughters. We now have twelve grandchildren. I consider my wife Jackie as God's precious gift and a treasure. I'm so thankful for her. I've often wondered, though, how she's put up with me. When we married, we made a promise to God and to each other that we would live together as husband and wife until death do us part. After all these years, we still love each other deeply and are even more determined to keep that promise.

Our reading today comes from Paul's Epistle to the Ephesians, chapter 5, verses 25 to 30. "Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ also loved the church and gave Himself up for her, so that He might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, that He might present to Himself the church in all her glory, having no spot or wrinkle or any such thing; but that she would be holy and blameless. So husbands ought also to love their own wives as their own bodies. He who loves his own wife loves himself; for no one ever hated his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it, just as Christ also does the church, because we are members of His body."

When I was a teenager growing up in Shawnee, Oklahoma in the 1960s, we used a word that I don't hear much these days. It described a sexual behavior that was considered sinful and shameful. We used the term "fornication" to describe all kinds of sexual intercourse outside of marriage. Today, nearly 60 percent of American adults believe that "fornication" or sex between an unmarried man and woman is morally acceptable. Only forty percent think it's wrong to have sex outside of marriage.

This change in thinking reminds me of what happened at Corinth. The Bible says, "It is actually reported that there is immorality (that is, sexual immorality) among you, and immorality of such a kind as does not exist even among the Gentiles, that someone has his father's wife. You have become arrogant and have not mourned instead, so that the one who had done this deed would be removed from your midst" (1 Corinthians 5:1-2). Rather than be ashamed of sin, people have become arrogant! We've assumed that we have moral freedom to do as we please without spiritual or physical consequences.

I think that explains in part why we're seeing some significant social changes in America. The number of couples who are living together has risen dramatically! Cohabiting has nearly doubled since 1990. More than half of adults between the ages of 30 and 49 say that they've lived with someone at some point in their lives. Even many people who call themselves

Christian have turned a blind eye to the common practice of cohabiting.

As in the days of Jeremiah, many Americans today have no shame about anything. Jeremiah 6:15 says, "Were they ashamed because of the abomination they've done? They were not even ashamed at all; they didn't even know how to blush." From our movies, to our television sets, to the internet, there's a constant message that sexual immorality is now morally acceptable. But is it? When did God change His mind? Has God ceased to be holy? Habakkuk 1:13 says about God, "Your eyes are too pure to approve evil, and You cannot look on wickedness with favor." My friends, God hasn't changed!

The National Center for Health Statistics reports that nearly 44 percent of births in 2014 were to unmarried mothers aged 15-44. In 1960, that number was only five percent. Today, one in four children is growing up in the home of a single parent. Children who grow up in single-parent families often face greater social, financial, and moral challenges than other children do. People who value marriage less are more likely to value other family relationships less as well. Those who don't want a spouse often don't want a relationship with his cohabiting partner's family either.

I'll never forget a man coming to my office for help a number of years ago. He was in his late twenties, and he needed to talk. He had hit bottom in life, feeling so alone and needing so much. He lacked food, but he had a greater need than a meal. He needed a family. With tears streaming down his eyes, he said to me, "You know, if my father walked through that door, I wouldn't even know it. I don't know who my father is. I wish I had a father." I saw an empty man with a hole in his heart, impoverished by a father that he never knew.

Two-thirds of the children entering stepfamilies do so in the setting where adults are cohabiting rather than married. Studies show that children who live in cohabiting homes show poorer emotional development than children do from married, two-parent families. Cohabiting means people can leave their partner rather than face the challenging responsibilities of a home and family. Cohabiting families, unfortunately, rarely think of their spiritual lives or giving their children a spiritual education.

Even when two people have lived together a long time in cohabitation, they don't feel obligated to remain with this partner forever. Couples who live together often define their relationship as "open" and do not feel the need to remain exclusively loyal to their partner. Cohabiting couples, frankly, are less willing to support or be financially responsible for their partners. Such couples usually take steps to keep their money separate from their partners. A woman who lives with a man without marriage may be his girlfriend, but a girlfriend is not a wife. She is not yet family; she is only a live-in lover.

Many couples say they want to live together for a while before marriage to see if they're compatible. They assume that if they can get along before marriage, they can get along after they say "I do." They figure that they need to see if they can handle the down times as well as the good; and breaking up before marriage is better than going through a messy divorce. All of this sounds good, but there is a substantial difference between "trial" marriages and real commitment for life.

A trial is just that...a trial. Somebody slips up and the other person leaves. Marriage is much deeper and richer than that. It has levels of love that the couple who is cohabiting will never know. Marriage is for better or for worse, for richer or for poorer, in sickness and in health, and until death do us part. Cohabiting means I'll put up with you as long as you keep me happy. In the meantime, we're on a month-to-month agreement. No assurance, no security, and no long-term commitment.

If you get sick, lose your job, or become unable to take care of yourself, your live-in

partner will feel less responsible for your welfare. They may even abandon you when you most need them. One live-in partner said to the other, "If you ever need me, we're going to be in trouble." Couples who cohabit want the sexual benefits but not the responsibility. This selfish, self-absorbed attitude means it'll be harder for them should they marry to have a lasting and happy marriage.

Studies show that two people who deeply love each other and are willing to commit their lives to each other in marriage will live longer, healthier, happier, and more prosperous lives than those who are not married. For instance, sociologists Linda Waite and Maggie Gallagher cite a study that showed ninety-percent of married men at the age of forty-eight would live to be sixty-five; but only sixty-percent of never-married men at forty-eight would live to see retirement at sixty-five. Among married women, nine in ten at 48 percent reached 65, but among those never-married or divorced, only 80 percent reached 65. Married people, generally speaking, live longer than those who do not marry.

Some cohabiting couples end up marrying, but they divorce far more frequently than do couples who wait until marriage to live together. In their book, *The Case for Marriage*, Linda Waite and Maggie Gallagher show substantial evidence that married people are happier, healthier, and better off financially than those who choose other lifestyles. They cite hundreds of studies showing marriage is indeed a blessing of God. Marriage has not failed us; we have failed it.

Waite and Gallagher conclude their book with these words: "Decades of social-science research have confirmed the deepest intuitions of the human heart: As frightening, exhilarating, and improbably as this wild vow of constancy may seem, there is no substitute. When love seeks permanence, a safe home for children who long for both parents, when men and women look for someone they can count on, there are no substitutes, for the word that we call marriage."

In reality, what some people have tried to substitute for marriage is simply living in sexual immorality with the same person. The Bible says, "Let marriage be held in honor among all, and let the marriage bed be undefiled, for God will judge the sexually immoral and adulterous" (Hebrews 13:4).

God's will is that people marry rather than live in sexual immorality. First Corinthians 7:2 says, "But because of the temptation to sexual immorality, each man should have his own wife and each woman her own husband." Paul advises widows and the unmarried to live as celibate singles as he did. Then he said, "But if they cannot exercise self-control, they should marry. For it's better to marry than to be aflame with passion" (1 Corinthians 7:9). The Bible never approves of cohabiting outside of marriage.

Some today repeat what the Corinthians said long ago, "All things are lawful for me." The apostle Paul quotes this saying because the people thought they were free to commit acts of fornication. But the inspired apostle Paul answers them, "All things are lawful for me, but not all things are profitable. All things are lawful for me, but I will not be mastered by anything. Food is for the stomach and the stomach is for food, but God will do away with both of them. Yet the body is not for immorality, but for the Lord, and the Lord is for the body" (1 Corinthians 6:12-13).

The Bible says, "Flee immorality. Every other sin that a man commits is outside the body, but the immoral man sins against his own body. Or do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit who is in you, whom you have from God, and that you are not your own? For you have been bought with a price: therefore glorify God in your body" (1 Corinthians 6:18-20).

The Lord expects those who follow Him to live a pure and holy life, not like the people of the world. The Bible says, "But sexual immorality and all impurity or covetousness must not even be named among you, as is proper among saints. Let there be no filthiness nor foolish talk nor crude joking, which are out of place, but instead let there be thanksgiving. For you may be sure of this, that everyone who is sexually immoral or impure, or who is covetous (that is, an idolater), has no inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and God. Let no one deceive you with empty words, for because of these things the wrath of God comes upon the sons of disobedience" (Ephesians 5:3-6).

When people marry, they publicly promise before God and witnesses that they will care about and care for each other. Married couples work together; they take care of each other; they provide for each other; they share common goals and dreams. The money they earn they budget and spend together. They share their lives and raise their children together. They worship together, pray together, and work together. They share their joys, their sorrows, their faith, and their love. They become one flesh and one in heart. My friend, this is the Lord's way for people, both men and women, to live together.

God realized that it was not good for Adam to live alone, so He made a helper suitable for him. "So the Lord God caused a deep sleep to fall upon the man, and while he slept, He took one of his ribs and closed up its place with flesh. And the rib that the Lord God had taken from the man he made into a woman and brought her to the man" (Genesis 2:21-22). When husbands and wives highly value their mates as gifts from God, they will find greater satisfaction in marriage.

But when couples live together without marriage, they snub their nose at the will of God. Many couples who cohabit stop going to church and push God out of their lives. It's hard to draw close to God while you continue living in sin. Why not give up the sin and come back to God's way? Why not turn your heart and your life around and live as God teaches? You'll never regret doing the right thing, but you will always regret your sins.

When Jackie and I married, we inscribed some words of a Scripture in our wedding rings: "Two are better than one" (Ecclesiastes 4:9). Verses 9 through 12 say, "Two are better than one, because they have a good reward for their toil. For if they fall, one will lift up his fellow. But woe to him who is alone when he falls and has not another to lift him up! Again, if two lie together, they keep warm, but how can one keep warm alone? And though a man might prevail against one who is alone, two will withstand him—a threefold cord is not quickly broken." We believed this verse forty-two years ago. Today, we know it to be true. The Lord's way is the right way to live.

The Word of God proves itself over time. The Lord Jesus said, "if anyone is willing to do His will, he will know of the teaching, whether it is of God or whether I speak from Myself" (John 7:17). The Lord's teaching is from God and has proven itself again and again. That's why we must follow God's teaching on marriage, on salvation, and on the Christian life.

If you love the Lord, come out of sin and live righteously; confess Jesus as the Christ, the Son of the living God, and do it before others; and then be baptized in water in the name of Jesus Christ. Jesus said, "you must be born again" (John 3:7). That new birth of water and the Spirit comes through the grace of God when one is baptized into Christ. God washes away our sins in baptism (Acts 22:16) and causes us to walk in newness of life, free from sin (Romans 6:4). Perhaps you've given in to the lust of the flesh and you need forgiveness. There's never a better time than today to get things right with God. Won't you do that?

## A Church Member

Many people want Jesus, but they're not sure about the church. Some have quit organized religion and others have started worshipping at home. What does the Lord say about church membership? Is it the will of God?

Many people today say, "Jesus, yes; but the church, no." They want to be Christians but not members of any "organized religion." Others have decided to become Christians "at large" or to establish small "house churches"; they don't want to be part of the organized church with elders and deacons that's mentioned in the New Testament. But, can a Christian please God and live apart from the church? Is attending church and being a church member optional? Or can a person just live a good life without the church and without the association of brothers and sisters? Should Christians be church members?

I'm told that eighty percent of Americans believe that you can be a good Christian and yet not be a member of any church. This seems odd to me since the New Testament is full of references to the church. People forget the church is made up of the called-out people of God who are saved by the blood of Jesus and who are devoted to following Him. The church is not some man's idea but it's God's. If you could be a member of the church of Christ, the church that He built, and if you believe and practice what the Lord teaches, wouldn't you want to be a part of that church? The good news is that you can be a member of the Lord's church.

Our reading today comes from the letter to the Hebrews, chapter 10, verses 22 to 25. "Let us draw near with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water. Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for He who promised is faithful; and let us consider how to stimulate one another to love and good deeds, not forsaking our own assembling together, as the habit of some, but encouraging one another; and all the more as you see the day drawing near." Let's pray together. Father, we're thankful that we can draw near from a sincere heart with faith that is fully assured. We pray, Father, that you'll help us to stay committed to you, and together with the others as the church gathers together. And may Your will be done on earth, Father, as it is in heaven. In Jesus' name we pray, Amen!

In trying to understand the place of the church in God's plan and scheme of things, the first thing that we must do is see the connection between Christ himself and His church. There are a number of passages that show such a close relationship that one can hardly think of Christ and not also think about His church. In Matthew 16:18, Jesus responded to Peter's confession that He was the Christ, the Son of the Living God, and He said "And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock (that is, the confession) I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it." The church itself is built upon the fact that Jesus is the Son of the Living God. Jesus built His church, and it belongs to Him!

In Acts 20:28, Paul told the elders of the church at Ephesus, "Be on guard for yourselves and for all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God which He purchased with His own blood." When I think of the purchase price that Jesus paid for the church, I can only conclude that the church must have been very, very important to Him. People only die for the things that are most important in their lives. If the church were that important to Christ, it ought to be that important to those who love the Lord and want to follow in His steps. I might add that the church is the only thing mentioned in Scripture that Jesus purchased with His blood. For this reason, we cannot please God and act as if the church were optional.

Paul said that the church is so closely related to Christ that it may be called his body, suggesting that the church is how Jesus Christ is working in the world today. Paul said, “And He put all things in subjection under His (that is, Jesus’) feet, and gave Him as head over all things to the church, which is His body, the fullness of Him who fills all in all” (Ephesians 1:22-23). The head and the body are so closely connected, interconnected, that they should never be divided. Christ without the church is like a head without its body. Those who want Christ but reject the church need to think through their theology. The church was Christ’s idea.

Paul said, “Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ also loved the church and gave Himself up for her, so that He might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, that He might present to Himself the church in all her glory, having no spot or wrinkle or any such thing; but that she would be holy and blameless” (Ephesians 5:25-27). Christ loves the church with the same fervor that a husband loves his wife. When people criticize and slander the church, Jesus must feel the pain. How would you feel if people said ugly things about your family? Jesus thinks of every member of His church as His family.

The apostle Paul also reminds us that Jesus is “the head of the church” and “the Savior of the body” (Ephesians 5:23). The church is not the Savior, but the “saved.” Christ is the Savior of the church. In Acts 2:47, we learn that the Lord adds the “saved” to His church. If you are saved, the Lord has added you to His church; you’re a church member. If you’re not in the church, then (Biblically speaking) you’re not among the saved. The church is not an optional thing that you can take or leave at your will. It’s the Lord’s called out body of people whom He has saved, whom He loves, and whom He purchased with His own blood.

It is for this reason that Paul said, “For no man can lay a foundation other than the one which is laid, which is Jesus Christ” (1 Corinthians 3:11). People need to be careful with what the Lord has founded. You cannot substitute something else in its place. You can’t build your own spirituality, your own arrangement, or your own church and expect to please the Lord Jesus. Jesus, the Lord said, “Every plant which My heavenly Father did not plant shall be uprooted” (Matthew 15:13). Man-made religion doesn’t work with God. Some think they can reinvent the church, but it may end up back-firing on them. The Lord’s foundation is the only foundation.

We ask, “What was the church like in the New Testament?” The word “church” refers to an assembly, a congregation that has been called together for a specific purpose. After Paul had established several congregations on his first missionary journey, he returned to those congregations, strengthening and encouraging them. Acts 14:23 says, “When they had appointed elders for them in every church (that is, every congregation), having prayed with fasting, they commended them to the Lord in whom they had believed.” Later, Paul wrote “To all the saints in Christ Jesus who are in Philippi, including the overseers (that is bishops and elders) and deacons” (Philippians 1:1).

These were organized churches with established leaders. They were visible, recognizable congregations, meeting at set times, and in set locations. Paul mentions many of the members of the church at Philippi or Rome or Corinth by name. Yes, sometimes churches met in some family’s house. But in those days a large house could hold a congregation. In some cases, congregations met outside or in caves. You have to remember that the church was often persecuted and considered illegal. The earliest church buildings date about 250 AD. Although they could not openly show themselves, they were well organized.

When the church of the New Testament was faced with a problem, they brought it to the apostles and later to the elders of each congregation. They didn’t get mad and start their own

churches with their own doctrines and their own ways. The Hebrew writer gave instructions to members of churches, “Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they keep watch over your souls as those who will give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with grief, for this would be unprofitable for you” (Hebrews 13:17). God wants us to fulfill His plan and purpose for His church, not reinvent the church with our own ideas and designs. David said about the temple, “I was glad when they said to me, ‘Let us go to the house of the LORD’” (Psalm 122:1). We too ought to be glad when we meet today with the household of God; that is, the church. The church is God’s temple today according to 1 Corinthians 3:16. I must tell you that some of my most treasured moments have been spent with God’s people worshiping and serving. My dearest friends are fellow members of the church. They’ve helped me and blessed me richly through the years. I look forward to being with my spiritual family at church each Lord’s Day. I’m glad when they say, Let us go to church.

The notion that we can “be the church” but not be a part of any local congregation is a human idea. God’s people assemble with one another. The Hebrew writer said, “and let us consider how to stimulate one another to love and good deeds, not forsaking our own assembling together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another; and all the more as you see the day drawing near” (Hebrews 10:24-25). In the New Testament, when a Christian quit assembling with the church, he was falling away from God. He was leaving the faith. He was hurting himself and hurting the church by returning to the world. Once, an elder decided to visit a member of the congregation who had stopped going to church. He came to the door that cold evening and exchanged greetings with the member. The member knew why he was there, though not a word was spoken about his absence from the church. They sat quietly by the fireplace. At one point, the elder approached the fireplace and he pulled one of the burning coals away from the others and then he lifted it off to itself. For a while that coal still burned bright, but eventually that coal, without the heat of others around it, began to lose its luster. Much faster than normal, its flame went out. That member thought about it and got the message: and that is, that we need each other to keep our hearts warm.

Solomon said, “Iron sharpens iron, So one man sharpens another” (Proverbs 27:17). People in the church make each other stronger, better, and more faithful and committed. Each Christian needs the example of love and faith that his brothers and sisters give him. Each Christian needs to so live and so love that he provides an example of commitment to the cause of Christ, to those surrounding him. Saying, “Well, I love Christ, but I won’t go to church,” sends a mixed signal. It says I love God, but I will choose which commands I will obey and which I will not. Such a person isn’t really obeying God but he’s obeying himself and obeying his own wishes. Solomon said, “Two are better than one because they have a good return for their labor. For if either of them falls, the one will lift up his companion. But woe to the one who falls when there is not another to lift him up. Furthermore, if two lie down together they will keep warm, but how can one be warm alone? And if one can overpower him who is alone, two can resist him. A cord of three strands is not quickly torn apart” (Ecclesiastes 4:9-12). God knew that his people needed the strength and love that each one could give the other to grow and to remain strong in the faith. Two are better than one because they have each other.

Where would we be without Bible teachers and without godly examples? In the early church, God gave apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors, and teachers, “for the equipping of the saints for the work of service, to the building up of the body of Christ; until we all attain to the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a mature man, to the measure of the stature which belongs to the fullness of Christ” (Ephesians 4:11-13). God knew that His people needed

training and equipping to do the work that He called them to do: and that is to take the gospel to the world, to build up the church, and to render help to the needy. Through the years, the church has been so good to Jackie and me. Over thirty years ago, when our four children were small, my lovely wife Jackie had to be in the hospital for several days with a back problem. We had no physical family within 500 miles at that time. The church was our family. The church we attended in Mississippi helped us with food and cleaned our house. An older lady, Mrs. Edwards, watched our children when we had to go to the doctor. The hardest year of our lives was made better by the goodness of people who loved and cared for us. We can never forget that we had loved ones who helped us when we needed it.

When Katrina destroyed much of Louisiana and Mississippi, churches all over middle Tennessee and Kentucky raised funds to send to their brethren affected by the hurricane. I watched truck after truck loaded with supplies and food and water go to churches where the needed items were distributed. No red tape, just brothers and sisters helping brothers and sisters. One church of 100 members in Gonzales, Louisiana, fed 300-500 people every day for weeks. Churches gave millions of dollars to relieve this disaster. They didn't get much publicity, but the people there knew where to go to get help. They got it from God's people, the church. I'm so grateful for what the church is doing all over everywhere, and what a difference it makes in the lives of people. I tell you, we need the church for good examples; we need the church for the teaching that they give; and we need the church for the help that they can give when we need that help. Let's pray together. Father, we're so grateful for the joy and the love that we have found in brothers and sisters who are in Christ, who love You and who know You, and who live like Your son Jesus. Father, help us to love one another and to love the church, just as You've loved the church. May Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven. In Jesus' name we pray, Amen!

Someone says, "Well Phil, you just don't understand. We had a bad experience at church and won't be going back." Many times the problem is not with the whole church but with an individual or two who hasn't acted as he should. The Bible teaches that when a fellow Christian sins against you that you're to go to that person privately and talk to him, trying to restore the relationship (Matthew 18:15). Many times people, rather than following the instructions of the Lord, simply just quit and separate themselves from the godly people that they need in their lives. Don't quit the church over some rude brother or sister. Talk to that person and work it out, and draw close to Jesus when you do it.

I became a Christian because of Jesus. He is my Lord and Savior. I want to live with Him forever. My pride is not as important as going to heaven. I won't let anything or anyone come between my God and me. I will always have to deal with rude, selfish, and immature people; but if the Lord was gracious enough to forgive me of my many sins, I can be gracious enough to forgive those who sin against me. I don't want to risk my soul by refusing to forgive a brother or sister in the church. I'd rather forgive and be forgiven than to die lost.

There's no greater honor and no greater blessing than to be a child of God. You can be one today, if you will. The Lord opens His heart and His hands, reaching for you with the gospel. If you'll accept the gospel—that Jesus died for your sins, was buried and arose on the third day—and by believing in Him, repenting of your sins, confessing His name before others, and by being baptized in water for the forgiveness of your sins, then you too can be a child of God. You can be His child, an heir of eternal life. Won't you do that today?

## Is Satan Real?

Is Satan real? Should we take him seriously? Does he really tempt us and want to steal our soul? What does the Word of God say about the devil and what should I know about him?

For most people Satan is a riddle that won't go away. We've heard about him, known about his evil influence, and wrestled with him more than once. Many folks, however, don't know what to make of Satan. A recent Barna poll found that more than half of American adults (almost 60 percent) say that the devil, or Satan, is not a living being, but just a symbol of evil.

Medieval Christians depicted Satan as a character with a tail, dressed in a red suit, smelling of brimstone (that is, sulfur), and carrying a pitchfork. They believed that he was the warden of hell and will torture us for an eternity; and he'll torture the unfortunate, evil souls who are cast from the presence of God.

Hollywood usually depicts Satan as rich, cunning, successful, powerful and good looking. He appears as a winner with every pleasure that he wants. His prime work seems to be to roam over the earth seeking individuals who will sign over their souls to him in exchange for special powers or possessions. In the end of a Hollywood script Satan never wins but gets outwitted and reverts to a more familiar angry, immature, hate-filled guy with horns and revenge in mind. To Hollywood Satan doesn't seem particularly intelligent, because he's easily tricked by humans. But is that the real Satan?

The Bible always tells the truth. If we want to know what Satan is really like, let's go to the Bible. We don't want someone's imaginary idea about Satan. We want what God has to say. Only the Bible can give us the true picture

Our reading today comes from Paul's letter to the Ephesians, chapter 6, verses 10 to 13. "Finally, be strong in the Lord and in the strength of His might. Put on the full armor of God, so that you will be able to stand firm against the schemes of the devil. For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the powers, against the world forces of this darkness, against the spiritual forces of wickedness in the heavenly places. Therefore, take up the full armor of God, so that you will be able to resist in the evil day, and having done everything, to stand firm." That's an encouragement from the apostle Paul.

People who deny the supernatural usually regard Satan as merely a symbol of evil. For them Satan is a spiritual threat but not an actual being. To them the devil, or Satan, is only an impersonal evil force present and operating in the world. Since mentioning hell or judgment is politically incorrect, they have no need for Satan. Many believe that everyone is ultimately going to be saved, so Satan is merely a token, spiritual opposition. For 13 percent of Americans, hell is just a symbol for a bad outcome after life is over. Many people regard Satan as the personification of an influence.

The Bible describes Satan and his demons as actual beings during the days of Jesus, but churches that hold classical liberal views explain Satan away by saying the first century was pre-scientific and used the concepts of demons and Satan to frighten people into obedience and to account for events and diseases for which they had no other explanation. They regard belief in Satan and demons as real, say that they're real today as a view that was left over from a pre-scientific day.

The word "Satan," as it appears in both Hebrew and Greek, means "adversary." The word describes a person who lies in wait as an enemy. Satan is commonly called "the devil," which points to one who engages in slander or accusing. In addition to these two principal names, the

Scriptures also call Satan the tempter (Matthew 4:5); Beelzebub (Matthew 12:24); the enemy (Matthew 13:39); Belial (2 Corinthians 6:15); an adversary (1 Peter 5:8); the deceiver (Revelation 12:9); and the father of lies and a murderer (John 8:44). First John 3:8 says the devil has “sinned from the beginning.” The Lord Jesus describes Satan as the “evil one” (Matthew 13:16); that is, he is the one whose nature and will are given over to evil. Moral evil is his dominant attribute. The devil stands in stark contrast with God the Father who is the “Holy One” (Isaiah 1:14).

He is also called “the dragon,” and “the old serpent” in Revelation 12:9; he is “the prince of this world” (John 14:30); and he is “the prince of the power of the air” (Ephesians 2:2). Paul calls him “the god of this world” (2 Corinthians 4:4), and “the spirit that is now working in the children of disobedience” (Ephesians 2:2).

Satan’s power is very great in the world. He is like a “roaring lion, seeking whom he may devour” (1 Peter 5:8). Satan is the one who takes the word away from men (Mark 4:15). The Bible says people are “taken captive by him” (2 Timothy 2:26). Paul warned Christians against his “devices” (2 Corinthians 2:11). James called on Christians to “resist” him (James 4:7).

The Lord Jesus faced Satan when he was led into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil (Matthew 4:1). Satan tried to persuade Jesus, the Son of God, three times to follow His desires and to disobey the will of God. However, Jesus met each temptation by citing to the devil principles from the Word of God, specifically from the book of Deuteronomy. In the end, the Lord Jesus said, “Go, Satan! For it is written, ‘You shall worship the Lord your God, and Him only shall you serve.’” Then the devil left Him; and behold, angels came and began to minister to Him (Matthew 4:10-11). Luke 4:13 notes that when “the devil had finished every temptation, that he left Him (that is, Jesus) until an opportune time.”

In this Biblical passage, one has to admit the devil is just as real as the angels are. If Satan is merely an influence, this passage actually becomes nonsense. When Jesus told Satan to “go,” He wasn’t speaking to a symbol but to a person. In these verses, the Bible speaks of the devil as a person who travels, speaks, reasons, and is persistent. Such characteristics belong to a person, not a symbol.

When Jesus predicted to his apostles that He must go to Jerusalem and there suffer many things, be killed, and rise again the third day, Peter took Jesus aside and rebuked him saying, “God forbid it, Lord! This shall never happen to you.” In response, Jesus said, “Get behind Me, Satan! You’re a stumbling block to me; for you’re not setting your mind on God’s interests, but man’s” (Matthew 16:21-23). Calling Peter “Satan” suggests that Jesus considered Peter’s behavior like that of the evil person Satan, who sets his mind on human interests. Personalities (not symbols) set their minds, make decisions, and oppose the will of God. Satan is a person.

In Luke 22:31, Jesus revealed that Satan had asked permission of God to sift Peter like wheat. Such language again suggests that Jesus considered the devil as a person!

Again, the Lord Jesus recognized the problem that the church at Smyrna faced in living in a city where they were being blasphemed. Jesus condemned “the blasphemy by those who say that they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan” (Revelation 2:9). The book of Revelation reveals that the final end of Satan, or the devil, and what it’s going to be. If Satan were just a symbol, such a graphic statement would be meaningless. Revelation 20:10 says, “the devil who deceived them was thrown into the lake of fire and brimstone, where the beast and the false prophet are also; and they will be tormented day and night forever and ever.” You

can't torment a symbol; one can only torment a person.

That Paul regarded Satan as a real person may be seen in many of his statements about Satan. When he wanted to visit the Thessalonians, Paul said, "Satan hindered us" (1 Thessalonians 2:18). In 2 Corinthians 2:11, Paul described Satan as one who had "schemes"; that's a sure indication of intelligence and personality. In 2 Corinthians 11:14 Paul reveals that Satan "disguises himself as an angel of light." From this, Paul says it's not surprising that "his servants also disguise themselves as servants of righteousness" (chapter 11:15).

Paul judged the man who had his father's wife by delivering "such a one to Satan for the destruction of his flesh, so that his spirit may be saved on the day of the Lord Jesus" (1 Corinthians 5:5). In 1 Timothy 1:20, Paul handed over Hymenaeus and Alexander to Satan, "so that they will be taught not to blaspheme." Such statements do not reflect a mere influence, but rather suggest one who has the ability to do physical harm to disobedient saints.

In a different way, Paul also speaks of being given a "thorn in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to torment me—to keep me from exalting myself!" (2 Corinthians 12:7). Paul was well aware of the powers in the heavenly places with which he wrestled. Satan was not an influence, not a personification, and not a symbol; he is a person.

God's Word that we read a few moments ago says, "Finally, be strong in the Lord and in the strength of His might. Put on the full armor of God, so that you will be able to stand firm against the schemes of the devil. For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the powers, against the world forces of this darkness, against the spiritual forces of wickedness in the heavenly places. Therefore, take up the full armor of God, so that you will be able to resist in the evil day, and having done everything, to stand firm" (Ephesians 6:10-13).

Each of us faces a battle in life against the devil. This is a personal battle, and we can't pass this battle off to somebody else. When people fought battles in ancient times, the one who was standing at the end was the winner, the other was dead; he perished in death. Our battle is spiritual; we're not fighting for our lives; we're fighting for our souls. We're also fighting to show others what side we are on—to encourage others to fight the good fight and to stand.

We need the Lord's help in fighting this battle. We need His strength and the armor that He provides to us. If we ignore the fact that we're engaged in a spiritual battle, we'll likely lose. If we fail to arm ourselves with God's strength, we will fall victim to the devil. If we are unwilling to fight, we will perish spiritually. If we don't give it all we have, we will likely come in second place. To lose this battle means we'll lose our souls. This is no matter to take lightly.

God's Word says, "Stand therefore, having fastened on the belt of truth, and having put on the breastplate of righteousness, and, as shoes for your feet, having put on the readiness given by the gospel of peace. In all circumstances take up the shield of faith, with which you can extinguish all the flaming darts of the evil one; and take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God" (Ephesians 6:14-17).

The Lord loves us and so He equips us with armor that will help us win. Fasten on "the belt of truth." Why, because the devil is a liar and the truth exposes his lies. God gives us the knowledge of the truth in the Word of God. The best way to defeat the devil is to expose him for what he is, an enemy who lies and accuses people falsely in order to gain power. He gains power when he enslaves people to sin. He promises the pleasure of sin, but that pleasure never lasts. In the end, it enslaves and destroys.

The Lord equips us with the breastplate of righteousness. God lovingly forgives and cleanses us from sin. Righteousness motivates us to do what is right and to avoid destructive sins. The Lord equips us with protective shoes that allow us to move quickly in the gospel of peace. The gospel of Christ gives us peace and confidence, so that we can handle life's spiritual challenges without fear.

The Lord equips us with the shield of faith, which is able to put out the fiery arrows of the devil. When a Christian believes in Christ and believes in His love and in His Word, he has the power to block the lies that the devil tells. He knows Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and every word that He spoke is true and righteous altogether. He knows that whatever Jesus says is right and there's a difference between right and wrong. He knows he's a created being, not a product of evolution. He knows heaven and hell are the real destinies of our souls.

The Lord equips us with the helmet of salvation. That helmet protects the head from the blows of the opponent, and our salvation protects us today. The Scriptures marvelously promise, "if we walk in the Light as He Himself is in the Light, that we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus His Son cleanses us from all sin (1 John 1:7). Verse nine says, "if we confess our sins, He's faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness." If we walk with the Lord Jesus and confess our sins, asking God to forgive us, we have an ongoing relationship with God that keeps us completely free from sin.

The Lord also equips us with the sword of the Spirit, which is the Word of God. God's Word instructs, reproves, corrects, and trains us so that we might fight the good fight of faith. Soldiers used the sword both defensively and offensively. Scripture keeps us from sin and also helps us to defeat the devil by exposing his wicked ways. You can trust the Bible to give you the answers that you need to overcome temptation, overcome sin, and overcome the devil. So keep your Bible close to your heart if you wish to win this battle for your soul.

The Scriptures reveal that the devil is a deceiver, a liar in disguise. He wants people to think he's an angel of light, while in reality he is pure evil. Make no mistake, Satan is not now, nor has he ever been, your friend. The Bible says, "Be of sober spirit, be on the alert. Your adversary, the devil, prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour. But resist him, firm in your faith, knowing that the same experiences of suffering are being accomplished by your brethren who are in the world" (1 Peter 5:8-9).

God's Word says, "Submit therefore to God. Resist the devil and he will flee from you. Draw near to God and He will draw near to you. Cleanse your hands, you sinners; and purify your hearts, you double-minded" (James 4:7-8). God wants us to draw close to Him and submit to His commandments. If we draw close to God and resist the devil, the devil will flee from us! And we'll win this battle.

How do you draw close to God? Submit your heart and your will to Him, place your trust in Him. You can't draw close to God if you doubt Him or you're fighting with Him. You can't be friends with sin and be friends with God. You must give up the sin and submit to God. With your faith and repentance, out of love, you must be willing to confess your faith in Jesus Christ before others and to be baptized in the name of Christ for the forgiveness of your sins (Acts 2:38). At that point, God cleanses you from sin, and adds you to His family, the church. If you draw close to Him, He will draw close to you! If you're a Christian who's moved away from Christ, why not come back to Him by repenting of that sin and praying to God for forgiveness.

## Is Hell Real?

One day you'll face your eternal destiny. Will it be a day of joy or will it be a day of regret? We know that if God said it, that it's true and significant. After all, we're going to be judged one day by the words found in this book. The Bible is God speaking to us! We need to hear what it says and to take it seriously. God doesn't tease or joke around when it comes to our souls.

Our study today deals with our eternal future after this life is over, and it should matter to you. We're all going to face an eternal destiny someday. According to a recent Pew Forum poll, 72 percent of Americans believe in heaven, but only 58 percent believe in hell. Only a few people believe they will be lost in hell. It would be tragic to think you're saved when in fact you're not. While most folks know there is a hell, they ignore it. If we could open the graves of the dead and ask them about Hades, that unseen place where the spirits of the dead go, we might be more inclined to think about our future. Whether they were in a place of comfort or a place of torment, they would say with one loud, clear voice, "Do everything you can to please God and go to heaven; and do everything you can to stay out of this place of torment." I wonder if we take our afterlife seriously enough. Moses said in Deuteronomy 32:29, "Would that they were wise, that they understood this, that they would discern their future!" What will happen to us when we die? The Bible says in Hebrews 9:27 that it's appointed for men to die once and after this comes judgment.

Our reading today comes from the lips of Jesus Christ Himself as He was speaking in the Sermon on the Mount, Matthew 7:13-14. "Enter through the narrow gate; for the gate is wide and the way is broad that leads to destruction, and there are many who enter through it. For the gate is small and the way is narrow that leads to life, and there are few who find it." That's a surprising passage for many.

The Lord Jesus said, "Do not marvel at this, for an hour is coming when all who are in the tombs will hear his voice and come out, those who've done good to the resurrection of life, and those who've done evil to the resurrection of judgment" (John 5:28-29). At the resurrection, we will stand before the throne of Jesus our Lord. Jesus said, "But when the Son of Man comes in His glory, and all the angels with Him, then He will sit on His glorious throne. All the nations will be gathered before Him; and He will separate them from one another, as the shepherd separates the sheep from the goats; and He'll put the sheep on His right, and the goats on His left. And then the King will say to those on his right, 'Come, you who are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world'" (Matthew 25:31-34). Verse 41 continues: "Then He will also say to those on His left, 'Depart from Me, accursed ones, into the eternal fire which has been prepared for the devil and his angels.'" Verse 46 says: "These will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life."

There are two destinies after the resurrection and judgment; the blessed one with joy in heaven, and the other is hell. The word hell or *gehenna* appears twelve times in Scripture, mostly from the lips of Jesus. Some people think preaching hell is cruel or uncouth, but Jesus preached on it because people needed to hear about it. Heaven and hell ought to be important to us since we'll spend eternity in one place or the other. I find no joy in thinking about the final end of unbelievers or sinners.

God said, "Say to them, As I live, declares the Lord God, I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but that the wicked turn from his way and live; turn back, turn back from your evil ways, for why will you die, O house of Israel?" (Ezekiel 33:11). Perhaps you remember the broken heart of Jesus as he wept over Jerusalem. He said, "O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often would I have gathered your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you would not!" (Matthew 23:37). There are people who will not come to the Lord, people who will not repent of their sins, people who will not obey the truth, and who will not serve God. It breaks God's heart to think about the choices they have made. My friend, Jesus could have remained silent about hell and just let them perish, but he did not do that. If hell is real, it's cruel not to tell people about it. Cruel preachers avoid the subject. That's why Jesus spoke on the matter—He did it out of love and out of truth.

Listen to these warnings of our Lord. "And if your hand causes you to sin, cut it off. It's better for you to enter life crippled than with two hands to go to hell, to the unquenchable fire. And if your foot causes you to sin, cut it off. It's better for you to enter life lame than with two feet to be thrown into hell. And if your eye causes you to sin, tear it out. It's better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye than with two eyes to be thrown into hell, 'where their worm does not die and the fire is not quenched'" (Mark 9:43-48) Jesus is here warning us about the consequences of sin. It's worse to be lost in sin than to lose an eye, or a hand, or a foot. On another occasion Jesus warned, "And do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell" (Matthew 10:28). Dying is tragic, but it's even more tragic to be lost in hell.

When the Bible speaks of the eternal punishment of sinners or unbelievers, it uses phrases such as "outer darkness," "weeping and gnashing of teeth," an "unquenchable fire," or an "eternal fire, and "the place where the worm does not die." Hell is the place of complete separation from God.

Paul describes the second coming of Jesus as a frightening one for those who reject God. Jesus will come again to reward His followers, but He'll also come to punish those who reject Him. This inspired apostle said, "and to grant relief to you who are afflicted as well as to us, when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven with his mighty angels in flaming fire, inflicting vengeance on those who do not know God and on those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. They will suffer the punishment of eternal destruction, away from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his might" (2 Thessalonians 1:7-9). Can you imagine how sad it would be to spend eternity separated from God? God closes his ears to their prayers in eternity because they have closed their hearts toward Him in this life.

What can you expect of the future? That depends on you. The Bible says, "He will render to each one according to his works: to those who by patience in well-doing seek for glory and honor and immortality, he will give eternal life; but for those who are self-seeking and do not obey the truth, but obey unrighteousness, there will be wrath and fury. There will be tribulation and distress for every human being who does evil, the Jew first and also the Greek, but glory and honor and peace for everyone who does good, the Jew first and also the Greek. For God shows no partiality" (Romans 2:6-11). Those who choose to rebel against God and to ignore Him will indeed face eternal punishment

according to Matthew 25:46.

The Bible warns us about where sin will lead. Hebrews 10:26-27 says, "For if we go on sinning deliberately (willfully) after receiving the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins, but a fearful expectation of judgment, and a fury of fire that will consume the adversaries." Verse 31 concludes, "It's a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God."

Some people ask if hell is really eternal. The New Testament uses the words *aion* and *aionios*--eternity and eternal--141 times to speak about someone or something that is unceasing, endless, or perpetual. If the word eternal means "without end" when applied to the blessings of eternal life, it must also mean "without end" when describing the eternal punishment of the lost.

The Bible describes our eternal punishment, "If anyone worships the beast and its image and receives a mark on his forehead or his hand, he will also drink the wine of God's wrath, poured full strength into the cup of his anger, and he will be tormented with fire and sulfur in the presence of the holy angels and in the presence of the Lamb. And the smoke of their torment goes up forever and ever, and they have no rest, day or night, these worshipers of the beast and its image, and whoever receives the mark of its name" (Revelation 14:9-11).

Someone at this point asks, "Well, isn't all this just a figure of speech?" There are many figures of speech in the Bible. Many people fall into doctrinal error because they interpret a passage literally when they should interpret it figuratively, or they interpret it figuratively when it should be understood literally. Many think because a passage is figurative that this somehow denies what the passage is trying to say. But this is not right at all. Jesus did not use figures of speech to deny what he was saying. He used them to emphasize the points he was making. He felt it important enough to emphasize it with a figure of speech. Because He wanted people to remember what He had to say is why He sometimes uses figures of speech.

We learn a little more about this future punishment in Revelation 20:13-15. The Bible says, "And the sea gave up the dead who were in it, Death and Hades gave up the dead who were in them, and they were judged, each one of them, according to what they had done. Then Death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. This is the second death, the lake of fire. And if anyone's name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire." I can't imagine anything worse than going to hell; it's a horrible thought. I don't wish that for anybody. The only thing worse would be that I led someone else to go there. It's not just you or me that's involved here; when you choose to do evil, you may lead someone else to do evil; it's often those who we love and who we influence.

At this point somebody says, "Well, how can a loving God send anyone to hell and punish them forever?" This is an important question and it deserves an answer. First, God didn't make hell for people, for humans; according to Matthew 25:41 He made Hell for the devil and his angels. If anyone is lost, it's by his own choice to follow the devil by giving in to sin. Hell is filled with people who either ignore God or live in rebellion toward God and His teaching.

Second, God must punish sin to be holy and righteous. When sinners follow evil, they

become enslaved to sin. When people become unchangeably set in their thinking and their ways, they'll likely always wish God would just go away and quit interfering with their lives. They can actually begin to hate righteousness.

Third, God has done everything possible to keep us from being lost. He's given us the Bible to teach us; He's given us the church to help us; He sent His Son as a sacrifice for us. Before you decide God is unloving, remember that He sacrificed His Son for you, and Jesus suffered terribly on the cross for you. The Lord Jesus didn't suffer for his own sins but for your sins and mine. Jesus has demonstrated beyond question His great love by dying on the cross for us. He died in our place; He bore the punishment we should have received. The Lord laid upon Him the iniquity of us all, so that we could live free from sin and live with Him forever. He took our place on the cross so that we could be set free from sin and death. If God had not provided an answer for hell, we'd all be in a sorrowful condition; but Jesus sacrificed His body on the cross to give us a solution to the threat of hell; He did it willingly; and He gave it to us freely. God hasn't left you without hope. You don't have to be lost. You can go to heaven if you'll love and serve the Lord Jesus.

Each day you're choosing whether you want to draw closer to the Lord or whether you're going to pull away from Him. If you wish to have a home with God in heaven, you need to let God have a home in your heart and your life. The Lord Jesus said, "If anyone loves Me, 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). Could God make His home with you? Do you love God? Are you living in obedience to His Word? Have you given God even a second thought? Are you for Him, or living in rebellion to His Word? What are you choosing for your eternal destiny?

The Bible says that God "desires all people to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth" (1 Timothy 2:3-4). Jesus came to seek and to save that which was lost so that they might not go to that place. Jesus chose twelve apostles and gave the church the task of taking the gospel to every person. Because He doesn't want you to be lost eternally, he wants you for his own. I have no desire to see anyone lost, and that's why I have spent my whole life preaching the good news of Jesus Christ. That's why churches of Christ and many individuals support this program. We're in the saving business, teaching people about the love of God and the blood of Christ. Part of preaching is helping people to see how sin destroys us, but the other part is telling how God has opened a door of hope and forgiveness for them.

The loss of your soul is the worst thing that can happen to you. I don't have words to describe the hopelessness and the horror of that place the Scriptures call "hell." Rather than ignore the Scriptures or reject the Lord, listen to His warnings and come to Him. I pray that you'll come to Him by loving and believing in the Lord Jesus, repenting of your sins, by confessing Him publicly to all, and by being baptized in water for the remission of your sins. When you do this, the blood of Jesus will cleanse you. You may have become a Christian, my friend, many years ago, but maybe in more recent years you've rebelled against Him. You need to come back to Him. I want everyone, everywhere to be a citizen of heaven. One day, the only question that will matter will be whether we hear: "Well done, good and faithful servant," or "Depart from me, you worker of lawlessness." My friend, what will you hear? What will you hear?