

Program Transcripts

For January 2016



IN
SEARCH
OF THE LORD'S WAY [®]

SEARCH PROGRAMS

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Topics subject to change without notice

JANUARY 3 – THY WILL BE DONE

At the hardest moment of His life, the Lord Jesus said, “Thy Will Be Done.” We want to be able to say “Thy will be done,” when we face the challenge to obey as well. Are you living for yourself or for the will of God?

JANUARY 10 – THE GRACE OF GOD

Someone said grace is “God’s Redemption At Christ’s Expense.” In this lesson we’re going to explore what grace means for our lives. We were saved for a purpose, and we need to fulfill that purpose in our lives.

JANUARY 17 – WE NEED THE CHURCH

Many people think you can be a good Christian without being a member of any church. Is church really necessary? We're going to look at how the Lord Jesus sees the church and how important the church is to our salvation.

JANUARY 24 – YOU CAN UNDERSTAND THE BIBLE

The Bible is the best-selling book of all time and comes today in hundreds of languages. God gave us His word to instruct us and to bring us to a knowledge of the truth. It reassuring to know that we can understand the Bible.

JANUARY 31 – THE RESTORATION PLEA

Going back to the Bible is essential to true Christianity. Springs are purest at their source, and we want to restore our faith to its purest source found in the New Testament. We want to follow the Lord’s way.

Thy Will Be Done

At the hardest moment of His life, the Lord Jesus said, "Thy Will Be Done." We want to be able to say "Thy Will Be Done" in our own lives. I've got my Bible open, and I hope you do, too. God's Word always gives us the light that we need to know the truth and to draw close to God.

A necessary lesson of life is that God is God, and we're not; we're human. God rules our lives, and we should live according to His will. When the Lord Jesus came into this world, He understood He was here to do the will of His Father in heaven. We too must do His will. Every facet of our lives belongs to God our Father, and the problems of this life arise when men ignore His will. We must learn to pray, to speak, and to live a life that proclaims, "Thy will be done."

When Jesus taught His disciples to pray in the Sermon on the Mount, He said, "Pray, then, in this way: "Our Father who is in heaven, Hallowed be Your name. Your kingdom come. Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven" (Matthew 6:9-10). What if the will of God were done on earth like it is in heaven? What if people were willing to set their sins aside and to give their lives to the will of God? What if all the evil in this world vanished and people set their hearts on righteousness?

So many problems in life come at the expense of people doing their own will and ignoring the will of the Father. The selfishness, the greed, the lust, and the pride of our time have caused our lives, our homes, and our society untold pain and ruin. We desperately need God's will in our lives. "Thy will be done" is not only a prayer; it's a way of life.

Our reading today comes from the Gospel According to Mark 14:32-36. Jesus and His disciples have gone to the garden of Gethsemane. Verse 32 says, "they came to a place named Gethsemane. And he said to his disciples, 'Sit here until I have prayed.' And he took with him Peter and James and John, and began to be very distressed and troubled. And he said to them, 'My soul is deeply grieved, to the point of death. Remain here and keep watch.' And he went a little beyond them, and fell to the ground and began to pray that, if it were possible, the hour might pass him by. And he was saying, 'Abba, Father, all things are possible for you. Remove this cup from me. Yet not what I will, but what you will.'" This passage gets to the very heart of the Lord Jesus Christ. Let's pray together. O Father, we pray that Your will, will be done in our lives, that we'll love You always and give of ourselves to You, even as the Lord Jesus did. It's in His name that we pray, Amen!

"Thy will be done." Jesus must have found it both difficult and yet fulfilling to pray that the Father's will be done. While Jesus hated the thought of a scourging and an agonizing death, He knew it was necessary to fulfill His purpose in life. While He hated the thought of bearing the punishment for the sins of the world, He loved the world and wanted it to be saved from sin.

The Bible presents a number of paradoxes about the Lord on the cross. A paradox is a situation that seems to be absurd or contradictory, and yet is in fact true. For instance, the Bible says, "For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God" (2 Corinthians 5:21). Or 1 Peter 2:24 says, "He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness. For by his wounds you have been healed." The Holy Lord Jesus bore our sins at the cross so that we could become holy.

Hebrews 12:2 says that the Lord Jesus, "for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God." He despised

the pain and the shame but He loved the outcome of what He did on the cross. He looked to the joy that was set before Him, the joy of men finding forgiveness in His sacrifice. He didn't want to die, but His desire for our eternal salvation was greater than His desire to live in the flesh. He rejoiced in the eternal, not the temporary, and He was glad to do the Father's will.

Doing the Father's will was not a new concept or behavior to Jesus. From the time that He was born, He realized that He had come into this world to do the Father's will. At age 12, Jesus was in the Temple doing His Father's business. When the devil tempted Him at age 30, Jesus said, "Be gone, Satan! For it is written, 'You shall worship the Lord your God and him only shall you serve'" (Matthew 4:10).

In John 4, Jesus passed through Samaria. Stopping at a well near the town of Sychar, Jesus sent his disciples into town for some food while He rested. At the well Jesus had a remarkable conversation with a woman who had been married five times and was living with a man. When she learned that Jesus was the Messiah, she ran into town and told all the men of the town. The disciples began to return with the food that He had sent them for.

John 4:31-34 says: "Meanwhile the disciples were urging Him, 'Rabbi, eat.' But He said to them, 'I have food to eat that you don't know about.' So the disciples were saying to one another, 'No one brought Him anything to eat, did he?' Jesus said to them, 'My food is to do the will of Him who sent Me and to accomplish His work.'" The Lord Jesus lived to do the will of His Father in heaven.

Jesus explained, "I can do nothing on My own initiative. As I hear, I judge; and My judgment is just, because I do not seek My own will, but the will of Him who sent Me" (John 5:30). Jesus regarded the will of the Father as the perfect standard of right and wrong. He didn't want to vary from His Father's will in any way, and so He listened to His Father. He made judgments of right and wrong only as the will of the Father instructed. He did not act on His own initiative.

In Jesus' heart and in His mind, keeping the will of the Father was how He remained in a right relationship with His Father. The Lord said to His disciples on the night before He died, "Just as the Father has loved Me, I have also loved you; abide in My love. If you keep My commandments, you will abide in My love; just as I have kept My Father's commandments and abide in His love" (John 15:9-10). Abiding in the Father's will was an act of love and devotion. Keeping the Lord's commandments is how we demonstrate our love to the Lord and remain in His love. First John 2:3-5 says, "By this we know that we have come to know Him, if we keep His commandments. The one who says, 'I've come to know Him,' and doesn't keep His commandments, is a liar, and the truth is not in him; but whoever keeps His word, in him the love of God has truly been perfected." Our love for God moves us to be obedient to His will and to keep His commandments.

When Jesus was told that His family was outside the house and had come to speak to Him, the Lord Jesus asked, "'Who is My mother and who are My brothers?' And stretching out His hand toward His disciples, He said, 'Behold My mother and My brothers! For whoever does the will of My Father who is in heaven, he is My brother and sister and mother'" (Matthew 12:48-50). Jesus claimed a close kinship to anyone who does the will of His Father in heaven. He wants to be close to us, too.

On the other hand, Jesus, when He finished the Sermon on the Mount, said, "Not everyone who says to Me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father who is in heaven will enter. Many will say to Me on that day, 'Lord, Lord, didn't we

prophesy in Your name, and in Your name cast out demons, and in Your name perform many miracles?' And then I will declare to them, 'I never knew you; depart from me, you who practice lawlessness'" (Matthew 7:21-23).

The Lord knew people would claim to have a close relationship with Him, while they lived lawlessly. They wanted the blessing of Christianity, but didn't surrender to the will of the Father in heaven. The Lord Jesus never knew them. He never had a relationship with them. They never belonged to Him because they lived life on their own lawless terms and would not obey the will of the Father. You can't live by your own will and expect to please the Lord.

You can't draw close to God while you turn your back on what the Father teaches. You obey God by obeying what He teaches, not by saying that you love Him while living the way you desire. A person who lives in lawlessness says to the Lord, "Not Your will be done, but mine." He lives by his own rules and he ignores God's laws. He hasn't set his mind on the Father's will but on pleasing himself.

A person who plays by his own will thinks he's an exception. He thinks his sins aren't as bad as other people's sins. He does as he pleases and he presumes the Lord will still consider that as obedience. He counts on his own works, not on God's will, to assure him of a place in heaven. The Lord's rejection is going to surprise him.

We should strive to follow the will of the Lord. It's not only going to bless us when we do that, but it will also bless everyone around us. The Bible says, "And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, so that you may prove what the will of God is, that which is good and acceptable and perfect" (Romans 12:2). Doing God's will shows everybody the value of the Lord's way! It's a good way and an acceptable way and the perfect way.

Jesus taught us to pray, "Thy will be done." Have you thought about how radically different and better our world would be if people truly did the will of God? God's will for our lives is no small matter. If people did God's will, crime would disappear, the moral climate of this country would drastically change, and people would be more loving and less selfish. We'd keep the golden rule. The Lord Jesus taught, "In everything, therefore, treat people the same way you want them to treat you, for this is the Law and the Prophets" (Matthew 7:12).

If we did God's will on earth, as it is in heaven, God's Word would have a place of priority in our lives and decisions. We'd be asking the question, "What does God's Word have to say about this matter or that matter?" We'd realize that the God who created us knows us better than we know ourselves and He teaches us in His Word, the Bible, what is best. We'd make our life choices and we'd think of right and wrong on the basis of God's teaching, not our opinions or even our culture.

If we did God's will on earth, we'd begin to pray as a people again. We'd realize that nothing good can happen without God's blessing and favor. We'd seek His face. What does that mean, to "seek His face"? It means that we'd look to God for help and for the answers of life. When Solomon became king, he asked God for wisdom to know how to lead the people of Israel. He worried about what might happen if Israel forsook the Lord and faced famine or were defeated in battle. Solomon asked God to be willing to forgive His people.

The Lord God answered Solomon's prayer with this promise, "If...My people who are called by My name humble themselves and pray and seek My face and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven, and I will forgive their sin and will heal their land" (2 Chronicles 7:13-14). God wants to draw close to His people, and when His people pray in humble hearts,

turn from their wicked ways, and pray to Him, God will hear their prayers and He will heal them.

If God's will were truly done on earth, we'd stop hearing God's name being taken in vain and we'd stop hearing all the filthy talk. Ephesians 4:29 says, "Let no unwholesome word proceed from your mouth, but only such *a word* as is good for edification according to the need *of the moment*, so that it will give grace to those who hear." I tell you, words are important; and our speech should be gracious, seasoned with salt, as we ought to speak.

If God's will were done on earth, we'd set our hearts on things that bless rather than concentrate on things that corrupt. The Bible says, "Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things" (Philippians 4:8). What we think about shapes our attitudes. When our minds concentrate on the good, we see good all around us; and we become better people. If we think about the evil, it won't be long before we become evil people. My Bible says, "Do not be deceived: 'Bad company ruins good morals'" (1 Corinthians 15:33). When what is bad fills our minds, then evil begins to fill our lives.

If God's will were done on earth, we'd think more about the Lord and about heaven. The Bible says, "If then you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth. For you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. When Christ who is our life appears, then you also will appear with him in glory" (Colossians 3:1-4).

What are you going to do with your life? Does your life show that the will of God is good and acceptable and perfect? My friend, are you doing the will of the Father? Let's pray together. O Father, may Your love shine in our hearts, may our faith grow deeper in You; and may we do Your will on this earth as it is done in heaven. This is our prayer in the name of Jesus, Amen!

The Lord Jesus told Nicodemus unless he was born of water and the Spirit, he could not enter the kingdom of God (John 3:5). Jesus was emphatic about it and He said in verse seven, "Do not be amazed that I said to you, 'You must be born again.'" Some people think when it comes to salvation and life that the will of God is flexible and doesn't matter, but nothing could be farther from the truth.

The apostle John wrote, "He came to His own, and those who were His own didn't receive Him. But as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, even to those who believe in His name, who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God" (John 1:11-13). You cannot be saved by substituting some human plan for God's will. We have to realize that necessary lesson of life: that God is God, and we are human. We cannot edit or overrule the will of God. If we are saved by God's grace, it will only be by His will. To do His will we must read and study the New Testament.

What is the will of God for us to do to be saved? Upon hearing the gospel of Jesus, we must believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the living God. We must repent of our sins and turn to righteousness. We must be willing to confess our faith in Christ and be baptized. Baptism is that new birth in water and the Spirit. The Bible teaches that we must be born again. Baptism is an immersion in water in the name of Jesus Christ so that our sins will be forgiven. When we're baptized, God washes away our sins (Acts 22:16). That old man of sin dies, and we're born again to walk in newness of life (Romans 6:4). I pray that you will do the will of God today.

The Grace of God

Someone said that grace is “God’s Redemption At Christ’s Expense.” I’m excited today to tell you what the grace of God can do in your life. I believe you’ll get excited, too. We know the Lord’s Way is the right way, and we search the Scriptures because we know the Bible is always true.

When you say salvation is a gift, some people think it’s too good to be true. They figure they must earn their way to heaven by doing some great thing. They can’t imagine God giving us His blessing, the forgiveness of our sins, and a home in heaven. Today, we’re asking the question, “What does it mean to be saved by the grace of God?”

Someone has taken the word grace and made the acrostic “G-R-A-C-E” “God's Redemption At Christ's Expense.” This is a fairly accurate description of grace. The word grace (in Greek *charis*) means “favor.” One who has the love, and blessing, and favor of another may be said to be in the “good graces” of his benefactor. The distinguishing factors of God's grace are twofold: first, God's grace is a gift and is not earned; and second, God's grace is undeserved. Usually we think of having to earn a place of favor with others, but God gives us his favor as a gift.

God accepts, loves, and blesses the person who stands in His grace. In spite of one’s past, when a person is washed in the blood of Jesus Christ, he stands in a right relationship and in the favor of God. Even though we deserve to be punished for our sins, God graciously forgives us and no longer holds our transgressions against us. In Christ, we became new creatures, transformed into children of God, and transferred into the kingdom of God. In Christ, God hears our prayers and gives us every spiritual blessing.

Our scripture reading today comes from Paul’s letter to Titus, chapter 3, verses 3 to 7. “For we also once were foolish ourselves, disobedient, deceived, enslaved to various lusts and pleasures, spending our life in malice and envy, hateful, hating one another. But when the kindness of God our Savior and *His* love for mankind appeared, He saved us, not on the basis of deeds which we have done in righteousness, but according to His mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewing by the Holy Spirit, whom He poured out upon us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior, so that being justified by His grace we would be made heirs according to *the* hope of eternal life.” Let’s pray together. O Father, we are so grateful that in spite of our sinfulness, You were willing to send Jesus to die in our stead, and to pay the price for our forgiveness of sins. Father, help us to do Your will on earth as it is in heaven. In Jesus’ name, Amen!

You can’t earn God’s grace; it’s a gift. In Romans 4:4 the apostle Paul says, “Now when a man works, his wages are not credited to him as a gift, but as an obligation. However, to the man who does not work but trusts God who justifies the wicked, his faith is credited as righteousness.” Grace is not a wage for our labors, a prize for our winning a competition, or an award for our meritorious efforts. Grace is a gift. When a man can earn no wage, can win no prize, and deserves no award, yet receives a wondrous gift, he has been given unmerited favor or undeserved kindness. That’s what God, in his love, has done for us through Jesus Christ.

Ephesians 2:1-10 helps us to understand how God has loved us and saved us. The apostle Paul said, “And you were dead in the trespasses and sins in which you once walked, following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience—among whom we all once lived in the passions of our flesh, carrying out the desires of the body and the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, like the

rest of mankind.” Sin causes a person to be spiritually dead. It’s not merely an inappropriate act; sin kills one spiritually.

Verse 4 continues, “But, God being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved—and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, so that in the coming ages he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness towards us in Christ Jesus.” I’ve found that some of the most wonderful sections of the Bible begin with the word “but.” We were spiritually dead, but that’s not the end of the story. God, rich in mercy and love, saved us by His grace.

Then Paul says, “For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast. For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them” (Ephesians 2:8-10). We’re saved by grace through faith. It takes both. We’re not saved by grace alone or by faith alone, but by grace through faith. Grace reflects all that God does in our lives to bring us home to Him. Faith reflects our response of trust and love and obedience to the grace that He’s given us.

God’s grace works through faith. God desires that we appreciate his great gift by responding to him in faith. Paul said, “We ourselves were once foolish, disobedient, led astray, slaves to various passions and pleasures, passing our days in malice and envy, hated by others and hating one another. But when the goodness and loving kindness of God our Savior appeared, he saved us, not because of works done by us in righteousness, but according to his own mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit” (Titus 3:3-5). God chose to wash us and renew us as an act of loving kindness. How does He wash us?

This washing that regenerates and renews is when we are born again in baptism. By faith, when we repent and are baptized, God washes us clean from sin and causes us to be born again into His family. The faith that matters to God is a faith that is willing to trust God enough to accept His teaching and His blessing by obediently responding. In Galatians 3:26-27, the Bible says, “for in Christ Jesus you are all sons of God, through faith. For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ.”

This means the faith that saves, the faith that Paul had in mind, which responds to grace is an obedient faith. We are sons of God by faith, but this is a faith that will repent and be baptized. For it is in baptism that God causes us to be born again and we “put on Christ.” In baptism, God grants to us all the blessings and favor that goes with being a Christian. What a great God we have! Baptism is not, as Paul said, some work that we do to earn salvation. It’s how we lovingly obey Him in faith because He asks us to be baptized.

Obedience is not the same thing as earning. Let’s say I had a treasure worth \$100,000 hidden in my backyard and I told you that I would give it to you, provided you go and dig it up. Do you really believe that that few minutes of digging earned that \$100,000 for you? You met a condition for a gift by obeying my words. You didn’t earn the gift; you merely received it by doing what I asked you to do. That’s how it is in salvation. We don’t earn salvation by repenting or being baptized; we merely comply with God’s conditions for receiving the gift.

In Numbers 21, the children of Israel, while wandering in the wilderness, came to the land of Edom where they grumbled and spoke against God, “Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? For there is no food and no water, and we loathe this miserable food (that is, the manna).” The Lord became angry and “he sent fiery serpents among the people and

they bit the people, so that many people of Israel died. The people repented and confessed their sin. They asked Moses to intercede for them with God, and Moses asked God to remove the serpents.”

Then the LORD said to Moses, “You make a fiery *serpent (that is, out of bronze)*, and you set it on a standard; and it shall come about, that everyone who is bitten, when he looks at it, he will live.” So Moses made a bronze serpent and he set it on the standard; and it came about, that if a serpent bit any man, when he looked at the bronze serpent, he lived (Numbers 21:8-9). All they had to do was to look by faith on the serpent. They didn't earn their healing, but they did have to comply with God's instructions. Obeying is not the same as earning. Obedience is an act of faith and trust that God will keep his promises.

In John 9, Jesus encountered a man who was born blind. Jesus wanted to heal this man and show the power of God, so He spat on the ground, and he got a little of the dirt and He made clay of the spittle, and He applied the clay to his eyes, and said to him, “Go, wash in the pool of Siloam” (which translated means Sent). So he went away and he washed, and he came *back* seeing (John 9:6-7). Who would argue that washing in a pool is the same as earning his eyesight? The man earned nothing, but he believed strongly enough to do what Jesus told him to do. Faith is not merely accepting. It is trusting enough to do what the Lord asks us to do!

Let me make it very clear that the Bible does not teach that baptism is how we earn salvation. But the Bible does teach that baptism is necessary to salvation—just as looking on the brass serpent was necessary, just as washing in the pool of Siloam was necessary.

God tests us to see if we really love Him and believe in Him. These tests are God's conditions, not ours. He gave them to us; we didn't make them up ourselves. When we meet God's conditions, we say to Him, “We trust You enough to do what you ask of us. We know that You will keep Your promises.” God's grace is so wonderful, and we must never cheapen it or presume upon it. People presume on God's grace by changing the conditions or by setting those conditions aside. They presume God's blessing whether they respond rightly to Him or not.

Some people think the grace of God means I can respond to Him anyway I want too. They think grace has no conditions at all. Do you think the blind man would have argued with Jesus about doing it, and wanting to do it his own way if he really wanted to see? Do you think that the Israelites would have argued about looking on the serpent? Why then does anyone argue about repentance or baptism today? Wouldn't it be better just to trust God and obey Him?

The New Testament contains the new covenant of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. This new covenant contains what God promises His people and what God expects of His people. In this covenant God is the benefactor who gives more to us than can ever be repaid or earned. If we count our blessings, they include salvation, continued forgiveness of sin, eternal life, the right to pray, and son-ship. I tell you if we lived for thousands of years, we could never repay God for what He has done for us. God doesn't expect repayment. God expects love, loyalty, and obedient faith from His children.

Jesus said, “If you love Me, you will keep My commandments” (John 14:15). 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). Faithful obedience is not some form of legalism or works righteousness or anything else; obedient faith is love. Paul said, “For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision means anything, but faith working through love” (Galatians 5:6). When we love the Lord and we want to please Him, we're willing to do everything He asks and do it the way that He wants it done. We won't argue with Him about it.

So, when the Lord asks us to believe, we're willing to trust Him and His word completely. When the Lord asks us to repent of our sins, love turns us away from sin that offends God. We couldn't imagine continuing to offend the God who's been so good to us and blessed us. When Jesus asks us to confess Him before others, we'll gladly say to the whole world that Jesus Christ is the Son of God. He is Lord and He is the Messiah, the Christ!

When Jesus says to us in Mark 16:16, "He who has believed and has been baptized shall be saved," we believe Him. We're baptized because we trust, because we love, and we do it to please God. The Bible says, "Therefore we have been buried with Him through baptism into death, so that as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life" (Romans 6:4). If the baptism of the New Testament is immersion, and it is, then I will be immersed without question so that I might be able to please God.

In the book of Acts chapter 2 and verse 38, the Bible commands us to "repent and be baptized." That commandment is in the passive voice, not the active. The active voice is used when the subject performs an action, but the passive voice is used when the subject is being acted upon by someone else. In baptism God performs the action of saving us; and we are passive, receiving God's grace and forgiveness. Let God's grace work on you in baptism. Let God cleanse your soul; let God bury you and then raise you up with Christ; let God give you newness of life; let God add you to His church. God does all this when we're baptized into Christ and His death.

Sometimes people say, "Well, you don't have to be baptized to be saved!" But, they're missing the point. God works His grace on us through baptism into Christ. If you love Christ Jesus, and I know you do, let Him save you through the washing that regenerates. That washing God gives you is in baptism. Let's pray together. O Father, we're thankful for Your grace and Your love and Your favor. Help us to return that favor in love by loving You, by trusting in You enough to keep Your will. And may Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven. In Jesus' name, Amen!

God gives laws for our good. God doesn't give laws to punish or to enslave us. He doesn't dream up foolish laws just to prove that He is in charge. No! God gives us His laws to protect us from troubles in life. Even the law of God is gracious to us. As a loving parent, God's concern is for our welfare. Psalm 103:13 says, "Just as a father has compassion on *his* children, so the LORD has compassion on those who fear Him." Everything God does, He does to favor and bless us. When we understand that, we'll see God with clearer eyes.

Titus 2:11-14 says, "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, looking for the blessed hope and the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior, Christ Jesus, who gave Himself for us to redeem us from every lawless deed, and to purify for Himself a people for His own possession, zealous for good deeds." God wants to bless you richly by guiding you with His Word, the Bible! Let Him do it.

Where are you in your life, your spiritual life? Do you have a close, loving, peaceful relationship with God? Are you at peace in your soul? God hasn't left you; it may be that you've left God. You can draw close to Him again by trusting in Him, by obeying His Word. So believe in the Lord Jesus, and repent of your sins, step out and confess Him before others, and be baptized for the forgiveness of your sins (Acts 2:38). It may be that as a Christian brother or sister you've wandered away from God and you've wandered away from the church, and you need to come back home. My friend, do it today! Let God's grace back into your life.

We Need Church

Many people think that you can be a good Christian without being a member of any church. Is church really necessary? Today, we're going to explore what God says about the church, and you can't afford to miss this study! We know the Lord's way is the best way, the right way, and the holy way of life. The best way to know the Lord's way is to study the Scriptures. They're God's voice to us today. They were true when the Holy Spirit inspired the apostles and prophets to write them, and they're true for all time.

When you mention the word "church," people respond in a multitude of ways. Some think of the church as optional. Some think of the church as an institution. Some think that the church is made up of prejudiced hypocrites. Some think the church needs reinventing in a style more like the culture of our times. Everyone seems to think they know what the church should be like. Even folks who have never read the Bible or haven't entered a church door in many years have an opinion about what the church should be.

You've probably noticed that religion in America has changed. Many groups have become religious entertainment venues, and others have become like shopping malls. Some think the primary purpose of the church is to cater to my wants and desires. We've become self-centered, thinking Jesus ought to be our servant rather than thinking we ought to be His. It's no wonder some see the church as optional and others as a waste of time. Few want to know what Christ envisioned for the church that He built or what place it has in His heart. The Lord never thought of the church as an option; in His eyes it's necessary.

Our reading today comes from Acts 20:28-32. Paul is here addressing the elders of the church in 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. I know that after my departure savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock; and from among your own selves men will arise, speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after them. Therefore be on the alert, remembering that night and day for a period of three years I did not cease to admonish each one with tears. And now I commend you to God and to the word of His grace, which is able to build *you* up and to give *you* the inheritance among all those who are sanctified." Let's pray together. O Father, we are grateful that Your Word protects us and gives us the truths that we need to be right with You and to avoid foolish things. Father, we pray that Your Word and Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven. In Jesus' Name, Amen!

Yes, the Lord Jesus considered the church as necessary. He wants everyone to be a member of His church and to worship with the church regularly. The idea that you can be a good Christian and not be a member of the church is not from the heart of God. When you take a close look at your Bible, the New Testament reveals that the church is quite necessary to our relationship with the Lord.

The church that Jesus built doesn't belong to you or to me; it belongs to the Lord. He built it. After Peter confessed Jesus as the Christ, the Son of the living God, the Lord Jesus said, "I also say to you that you are Peter, and upon this rock (that is, the confession Peter made) I will build My church; and the gates of Hades will not overpower it" (Matthew 16:18). Yes, Jesus built His church, and not even His death could prevent it.

The church belongs to the Lord because He purchased it. The apostle Paul, by inspiration, 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” (Acts 20:28). If Jesus loved the church enough to die for it, how can we think so little of it? The church must be precious to the Lord.

The Bible reveals how closely related Christ is to the church in Ephesians 1:22-23. The Bible says, “And He (that is, God) put all things in subjection under His feet (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.” Just as your head is inseparably connected to your body, so Christ is inseparably connected to the church. Just as your body does your will as is conceived in the brain, so the church does the will of its head, and that’s Jesus Christ. The church is the fullness of Christ. We must never, never separate Christ from His church or the church from Christ.

The church is extremely precious to the Lord; He considers the church as His bride. The Bible says, “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). Jesus has gone to great lengths to bless and to sanctify the church. He wants her to be radiant with glory. Jesus values the church that much.

When people slander the church or make it trivial, they mock and insult Jesus Christ. They’re saying that Jesus is foolish to sanctify and glorify the church. If you wish to make a man angry, just slander his wife. Do you think the Lord Jesus will look kindly on anyone who slanders His bride?

I want to distinguish the church that the Lord Jesus calls His bride from what people today think when they hear the word “church.” What I’m speaking about is the Lord’s church described in the New Testament. Many religious groups who call themselves “churches” are nothing like the New Testament church. They differ in their name, in their organization, in their doctrine, in their mission, and in their worship. They’re often a reflection of our culture more than what God intended for the church to be. Some groups have so little spiritual value and content, it’s no wonder that people see it as unnecessary.

This difference of what we see today and what the Bible teaches confuses and causes people to stray from the will of God. More than ever, people need to know the truth revealed in God’s Word about the church. They need to think clearly about what God desires rather than be pulled into a false hope by something that calls itself church but differs greatly from the church that Jesus built as found in the New Testament. The Scriptures clearly make the church that Jesus built a necessity for us to engage in if we wish to please God.

Why is the church so necessary? There are several reasons. First, the Lord adds those that He saves to His church. When the Jews at Pentecost heard Peter preach, they were pierced to the heart and they wanted to know what to do. Peter replied that they must repent and be baptized for the forgiveness of their sins. Acts 2:41 says, “So then, those who had received his word were baptized; and that day there were added about three thousand souls.” In verse 47 the Bible says, “And the Lord was adding to their number (that is, to the church) day by day those who were being saved.” The Lord forgives us at baptism and adds us to His church. Baptism was that time that they were forgiven or saved.

When a person is saved, the Lord adds him to His church. To be in the church means the Lord has saved you. The Scriptures never contemplate a person who is saved as a person who hasn’t been baptized or a person who is not in the Lord’s church. The apostle Paul told the church at Colossae, “For He rescued us from the domain of darkness, and transferred us to the kingdom of His beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins” (Colossians 1:13-14). Just

as the Lord grants forgiveness when one repents and is baptized, so the Lord adds the baptized to His church. The church is the kingdom of Christ!

When John wrote to the seven churches of Asia in Revelation 1, he revealed to them what Christ had done for them. The Bible says, “Grace to you and peace, from Him who is and who was and who is to come, and from the seven Spirits who are before His throne, and from Jesus Christ, the faithful witness, the firstborn of the dead, and the ruler of the kings of the earth. To Him who loves us and released us from our sins by His blood—and He has made us to be a kingdom, priests to His God and Father—and to Him be the glory and the dominion forever and ever. Amen” (Revelation 1:4-6).

The book of Revelation addresses people who had come into a kingdom and were priests to God. John taught that “we” Christians “are of God, and the whole world lies in the power of the evil one” (1 John 5:19). There are but two kingdoms: the domain of darkness and the kingdom of His beloved Son. To enter the church is to enter the kingdom of the beloved Son.

The Lord Jesus Himself spoke of the church as a kingdom. The Lord said, “I also say to you that you are Peter, and upon this rock (that is, his confession) I will build My church; and the gates of Hades will not overpower it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven; and whatever you bind on earth shall have been bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall have been loosed in heaven” (Matthew 16:18-19). Why would the Lord build one thing and then give Peter keys to something else if the church is not the Kingdom? He doesn’t do that. The church is the kingdom of God today.

Some may ask, Phil, how do you know that? In Acts 20:28, the Lord Jesus purchased the church with His own blood. We have no record anywhere in the New Testament that the blood of Jesus ever purchased anything but the church. The twenty-four elders, however, sang this new song to the Lord Jesus, “Worthy are You to take the book and to break its seals; for You were slain, and purchased for God with Your blood men from every tribe and tongue and people and nation. And you have made them to be a kingdom and priests to our God; and they will reign upon the earth” (Revelation 5:9-10). The same blood didn’t purchase two different things, no—the church is that blood-bought kingdom.

Second, being in the church means that you’re blood-bought, but there’s no promise of being blood-bought to those outside the church. The church contains the cleansed, but the others outside are still in sin. The kingdom contains priests to God, but outside there are no priests to God. The Bible says, “Whoever has the Son has life; but whoever does not have the Son of God does not have life” (1 John 5:12) Being in the Lord’s church is vital to our eternal salvation.

Ephesians chapter 2 contrasts the difference between people who are in the world and outside of Christ from those who come into Christ and His church. The apostle Paul reminds those who came out of paganism at Ephesus of what they had before they became members of the church, or body of Christ. Ephesians 2:12-13 says, “remember that you were at that time separate from Christ, excluded from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world. But now in Christ Jesus you who formerly were far off, you’ve been brought near by the blood of Christ.”

In verses 19 to 22, Paul describes them after they became Christians, and he says, “So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you’re fellow citizens with the saints, and are of God’s household (His family), having been built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus Himself being the corner stone, in whom the whole building, being fitted together, is growing into a holy temple in the Lord, in whom you also are being built together into a dwelling

of God in the Spirit.” Before, they were strangers without hope and without God. Now, they’re God’s family and fellow citizens in God’s kingdom, the church.

Third, the church is necessary because being in the church means that you are a member of God’s family. Paul told Timothy, “but in case I am delayed, I write so that you will know how one ought to conduct himself in the household (that is, the family) of God, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and support of the truth” (1 Timothy 3:15). In this passage Paul identified the church as God’s household or family. The children of God are in the church. If you claim to be in God’s family but say church membership is unnecessary, then you’re confused and may be deceiving yourself.

The very act that puts you into the family of God is what puts one into the church. Compare these two verses. First, Galatians 3:26-27, “For you are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus. For all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ.” Baptism as an act of faith and is what makes us children of God. Second, consider 1 Corinthians 12:13, which says “For by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body, whether Jews or Greeks, whether slaves or free, and we were all made to drink of one Spirit.” This verse says that we are baptized into the body. Ephesians 1:22-23 taught us that the body of Christ is the church. So, baptism is what makes one a child of God, and baptism is what puts us into the body of Christ, and that is the church.

When we realize the church is God’s family, it’s the bride of Christ; it’s the body of Christ; it is the saved; it is those that were bought by the blood of Jesus, then we can see why the church is so important in God’s eyes. Being a member of the Lord’s church is not optional. Let me ask you, are you a member of the church that Jesus built? It matters! Let’s pray together. O Father, we’re so thankful for Your family, the church. We’re thankful for the Kingdom, for the body of Christ, for the bride of Christ, the church. And, Father, help us to be devoted to You, and to give ourselves so that we might serve You and please You. And may Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven. In Jesus’ name, Amen!

Many people claim to be members of the church, but they aren’t active. They’ve stopped worshiping at church or supporting it. By their actions they’ve actually abandoned the church and in that sense they’ve abandoned the Lord. The Bible says, “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” (Hebrews 10:24-25). The Lord wants us to encourage each other to love and good works and not forsake assembling with other Christians. You can’t encourage other Christians to stay faithful if you quit going to church altogether.

I know some of you can’t attend worship because of your health. The Lord understands your situation. But if you can attend, yet choose to forsake meeting with the Lord’s church, you’re forsaking the Lord, too. The Lord loves His people and knows His church. If you quit serving Him, He knows it. When you stop attending, you also open the door to temptation of every kind. To stay spiritually healthy, stay in church.

To become a member of the church and to be saved, believe with all your heart that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; repent of your sins; confess Jesus Christ as the son of God; and be baptized. When you’re baptized, the blood of Jesus will wash away your sins; he’ll cause you to be added to the church. You’ll become a child of God, born again into His family. If you are a member of the church of Christ but you’ve stopped attending, my friend, why not come back to the Lord and to the church. Get right with God and do it today.

"You Can Understand the Bible"

The Bible is the best-selling book of all time and comes today in hundreds of languages. Some think the Bible is too hard to understand. Is it really? God's way is always a blessing. God loves us and He gave us His will in written form in the Bible so that every age and nation could know the truth and be saved. God wants every person to believe and to obey His will.

Some people think the Bible is just too hard to understand. Perhaps you've heard people say, "The Bible is not meant to be understood." Or, "The Bible says different things to different people." Or, "What is important is not so much what the Bible says but what the Bible says to me." I've heard people claim, "The New Testament addressed the culture of the first century but really doesn't speak to us today."

Others dismiss God's Word by saying, "It doesn't matter what you believe as long as you are sincere and love Jesus." Then there's the skeptic who says, "You can make the Bible say anything you want it to say." Some say, "You just take a passage of Scripture and you read it to a group of people and there'll be as many interpretations of that passage as there are people in the room."

These popular charges against the Bible lose sight of God's purpose in giving us His Word. They seem to forget about God's incredible desire to have a relationship with us that lasts for an eternity. That relationship means that we can know Him and know His will. The Lord Jesus promised, "If you continue in My word, then you are truly disciples of Mine; and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free" (John 8:31-32).

Our reading today comes from the opening words of The Gospel According to Luke 1:1-4. "Inasmuch as many have undertaken to compile an account of the things accomplished among us, just as they were handed down to us by those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and servants of the word, it seemed fitting for me as well, having investigated everything carefully from the beginning, to write *it* out for you in consecutive order, most excellent Theophilus; so that you may know the exact truth about the things you have been taught." Is the Bible meant to be understood? The answer is yes, but don't take my word for it. Let's see what the Bible has to say for itself. Psalm 19:8 says, "The precepts of the LORD are right, rejoicing the heart; the commandment of the LORD is pure, enlightening the eyes." Psalm 119:18 says, "Open my eyes, that I may behold wonderful things from Your law." Psalm 119:105 says, "Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path." Psalm 119:125 says, "I am Your servant; give me understanding, that I may know Your testimonies." Psalm 119:130 says, "The unfolding of Your words gives light; It gives understanding to the simple." Proverbs 6:23 says, "For the commandment is a lamp and the teaching is light; and reproofs for discipline are the way of life."

When people say the Bible is not meant to be understood, I wonder how they came to that conclusion. Did they get it from the Bible or from other people? Surprisingly, some churches don't want you to read your Bible. These churches worry that if you read your Bible, you'll find out what the Bible actually says and that it's different from what they teach and practice. The Bible has God's authority attached to it, and it challenges those who vary from it.

The apostle Paul warned in Scripture about this kind of problem, and even in his day there were people who were misusing and tampering with God's Word. The Bible says, "But we

have renounced disgraceful, underhanded ways. We refuse to practice cunning or to tamper with God's word, but by the open statement of the truth we would commend ourselves to everyone's conscience in the sight of God. And even if our gospel is veiled, it's veiled only to those who are perishing. In their case the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelievers, to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God" (2 Corinthians 4:2-4).

The devil will do anything, anything to keep people from understanding the truth of God's Word. He'd love nothing more than to blind people to the gospel so they won't know the truth. Satan will tamper with the Word to convince you to believe something that's only partially true. He realizes his message must sound true or you won't buy into it. If he tells a lie that sounds true, he might lead some folks astray. If he can make his lie really appealing, he will. But when people obey the lie rather than listen to God, they're deceived with a counterfeit religion. The devil has supplied plenty of counterfeits in our world today.

We wouldn't know what the truth is and what error is if it weren't for this permanent standard of truth in the Bible. The Word of God provides that standard of truth for all time. God's Word is settled in heaven and it doesn't change. It's this stability, this security, this solid foundation that allows Christians to remain united to God. God was wise to give His message to mankind in written form in the Bible because by giving us the Bible, we can know the truth which makes us free. The difference between Christ's true disciples and other people is that true disciples remain in the Word of God, while the others drift away from the Word.

So, we must stay with God's Word. God expected ancient Israelite parents to teach their children the Law of God. The Lord God was concerned that a generation might arise that didn't know His commandments. So, Moses commanded them, "At the end of every seven years, at the set time in the year of release, at the Feast of Booths, when all Israel comes to appear before the LORD your God at the place that he will choose, you shall read this law before all Israel in their hearing. Assemble the people, men, women, and little ones, and the sojourner within your towns, that they may hear and learn to fear the LORD your God, and be careful to do all the words of this law, and that their children, who have not known it, may hear and learn to fear the LORD your God, as long as you live in the land that you're going over the Jordan to possess" (Deuteronomy 31:10-13.)

If the Bible were so hard to understand, God wouldn't have commanded all Israel to go through this every seven years. Truly, we can understand the Bible. The Bible says, "The secret things belong to the LORD our God, but the things that are revealed belong to us and to our children forever, that we may do all the words of this law" (Deuteronomy 29:29). God gave us His Word to bless us.

Deuteronomy 30:11-14 explains, "For this commandment that I command you today is not too hard for you, neither is it far off. It's not in heaven, that you should say, 'Who will ascend to heaven for us and bring it to us, that we may hear it and do it?' Neither is it beyond the sea, that you should say, 'Who will go over the sea for us and bring it to us, that we may hear it and do it?' But the word is very near you. It's in your mouth and in your heart, so that you can do it." God not only wants us to understand it, He also expects us to love and obey it.

The Word of God went out to all Israel. There were all kinds of people listening. There were the people who might be wise, and then there were the naïve; there were people who

were conservative, and people who were liberal; there were people who were educated, the young, and the old. Those who didn't know God's Law were expected to learn the Law and obey it. My friend, you're not an exception. God expects you to know His will.

First Timothy 2:3-4 says, "This is good and acceptable in the sight of God our Savior, who desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth." God doesn't communicate in riddles, nor does He hold back some secret message for only the select few. Oh, no! God wants everyone to be able to know the truth, to be saved, and to live in heaven with Him. The Bible says in Hebrews 2:9 that Jesus tasted death for every person. Why then would God give us a Bible with the words of life, but give it in a way that we couldn't understand it? That's ridiculous.

When God inspired Luke to write one of the four gospel accounts, He chose this Greek Gentile to write to a Roman authority about Jesus Christ, a Jew. Luke didn't grow up knowing about God, and Theophilus had only heard bits and pieces; so here is what the inspired Luke wrote, "Inasmuch as many have undertaken to compile a narrative of the things that have been accomplished among us, just as those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and ministers of the word have delivered them to us, it seemed good to me also, having followed all things closely for some time past, to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, that you may have certainty concerning the things that you have been taught" (Luke 1:1-4).

Theophilus apparently wanted to know the truth, and Luke said that he could tell him with certainty (that is, exact knowledge) the things concerning Jesus Christ. The Bible was written to impart to us true knowledge, exact knowledge, and the saving knowledge of Jesus Christ.

The apostle John said, "Therefore many other signs Jesus also performed in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book; but these have been written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing you may have life in His name" (John 20:30-31). God gave us this book, the Bible, so that we might believe in Jesus Christ and be saved and have life in His name. I cannot imagine why, if this is the purpose of the Bible, that God would write something that nobody can understand. The fact is we can understand what we need to know to be saved and go to heaven and to live with God forever!

In the book of Acts, the Bible says, "And Paul went in, as was his custom, and on three Sabbath days he reasoned with them from the Scriptures, explaining and proving that it was necessary for the Christ to suffer and to rise from the dead, and saying, 'This Jesus, whom I proclaim to you, is the Christ.' And some of them were persuaded and joined Paul and Silas, as did a great many of the devout Greeks and not a few of the leading women" (Acts 17:2-4). The Scripture is not some strange riddle, but it's a book that gives life and tells the marvelous story of Jesus Christ.

From this inspired book, we learn the most wonderful story of love and sacrifice. To some it may be meaningless, but to us it's the most meaningful story in the entire world. I'm so thankful that God chose men and inspired them to write that story down in the first century so that we could hear it, and we could read it as it really happened, and could believe and obey it. The New Testament gives us eyewitness accounts of the death, burial, and resurrection of Christ, a story of good news that saves our souls. There simply is no better, no more important, no more meaningful story in the entire world.

The gospel provides God's power unto salvation to everyone who believes it, according to Romans 1:16. God knew that He had to reveal Himself to mankind if they were to know and believe in Him and find salvation. We also can know some things through observing the universe, but we can't know the full story; we can't know it apart from the Word of God. The Bible says, "For since in the wisdom of God the world through its wisdom did not come to know God, then God was well-pleased through the foolishness of the message preached to save those who believe" (1 Corinthians 1:21). If we want to know the precious truth about God, we must go to His Word. Our task is to hear it, believe it, love it, obey it, and share it with others. Oh, thank God for the Bible!

The apostle Paul said, "For we write nothing else to you than what you read and understand, and I hope you'll understand until the end" (2 Corinthians 1:13). Paul wrote no other thing but what the Corinthians could understand; and we too can understand the Bible.

In fact, we must understand the Word of God and obey it. Why? Because one day we will be judged by the Word of God. The Lord Jesus said, "He who rejects Me and does not receive My sayings, has one who judges him; the word that I spoke is what will judge him at the last day" (John 12:48). My friend, you and I will be judged one day by the Words that are written in this book. We will stand before God and we'll have to give an account for our lives, and the standard will be these written Words.

The Lord Jesus said, "Not everyone who says to Me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father who is in heaven will enter" (Matthew 7:21). We must know what the will of God is. The purest source of God's will is found in the New Testament. So don't settle for anything less than the Scriptures. They will lead you to an exact knowledge of the Lord's will. And they will give you the unfailing truth that leads to eternal life. What kind of God says, "I'm going to judge you by the things written in the books" (Revelation 20:11-15 and John 12:48), but then gives us a book that people can't understand? Wouldn't such a God be a monster? But our God isn't like that. He gives us a book so that we can understand. Our God loves us and wants all men to be saved and to know the truth. Shouldn't we strive to know His will? If knowing and doing the will of God is the difference between eternal life and death, can we afford to ignore what He says?

The apostle Paul said, "Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a worker who has no need to be ashamed, rightly handling the word of truth" (2 Timothy 2:15). God wants us to study the Bible so that we will know the truth and not be ashamed on the Day of Judgment because we didn't follow the teaching of the Bible. Proverbs 23:23 says, "Buy truth, and do not sell it, get wisdom and instruction and understanding."

I hope you'll follow those teachings and that you'll come to Christ. To hear the Words of Christ and believe them is a part of what it means to come to Him. Do that; repent of your sins and confess the name of Jesus as the Christ, the Son of the living God. Repentance means that you change your heart; you leave sin and you turn to the ways of God. So with love and faith and repentance, be baptized for the forgiveness of your sins as Acts 2:38 and Acts 22:16 teach. The baptism of Christ is an immersion. When you do, God will bless you with His grace and forgiveness and add you to His church. He'll make you His child and give you an inheritance with Him. My friend, won't you do that? Won't you do it today?

The Restoration Plea

Going back to the Bible is essential to true Christianity. We search the Bible because we know that it is God's Holy Word and that it teaches us what God wants us to know to please Him. God's Word provides for us a standard, an example that teaches us His will for our lives. We do well to know and to follow that pattern that He set for us.

Have you ever broken a favorite dish or dropped a treasured book into the mud? You probably groaned and wished you could bring back your prized possession to its pure and original state. You wanted to restore it because it was ruined. Spiritually speaking, the restoration plea calls us to bring back the pure and unbroken church as God meant for it to be by returning to the truth that's found in the New Testament.

Christianity has changed dramatically through the centuries. Many changes were departures from the stated will of God in the New Testament. Some changes came as innovations that were never considered in Scripture; other changes came as edits to make the church more up-to-date with culture; and then still other changes caused Christianity to be blended with other religions. In the end, the pure Christianity of the New Testament, as God willed it to be, was corrupted. It needed desperately to be brought back to its original condition, to be what God desired it to be.

If we wear the name of Jesus Christ, shouldn't we seek to truly follow Him? Shouldn't we abandon every belief or practice that gets us away from His will as declared in the New Testament? Should we not seek God's teaching in everything we do? Let's restore the Lord's way in our lives.

Our reading today comes from Paul's epistle to the Ephesians 4:1-6. "Therefore I, the prisoner of the Lord, implore you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling with which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, showing tolerance for one another in love, being diligent to preserve the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. *There is* one body and one Spirit, just as also you were called in one hope of your calling; one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who *is* over all, and through all, and in all."

In the early 1800's many church leaders grew weary of the strife and fussing that was found in the denominations of their day. They believed the Lord wanted His people to be united, to all be together. All of the bad-mouthing and exclusiveness of the denominations shamed the name of the Lord. Their divisive ways caused people to fall away from Christ in disbelief. They also objected to all that was of human origin that led them away from pure Christianity.

The Lord Jesus prayed, "I do not ask on behalf of these alone, but for those also who believe in Me through their word; that they may all be one; even as You, Father, are in Me and I in You, that they also may be in Us, so that the world may believe that You sent Me" (John 17:20-21). The Lord Jesus wanted His followers to remain united. The whole concept of denominationalism is really foreign to the New Testament.

These early church leaders believed that the acceptance of human opinions, human creeds, and councils, human practices, and names caused this divisive and hostile condition. They wanted something better—a pure and true Christianity that went back to the Bible and remained free from human traditions. They knew that if they abandoned what was human and they concentrated on what was from God, they could find a basis for unity. They could have unity only through following the truth of God's Word that was found in the Scriptures. This meant that they had to cast off everything human and denominational, and return to the Christianity that was proposed in the New Testament.

These leaders rejected human traditions, human opinions and innovations, since these things cannot be found in God's Word. They believed that they could not require members to believe a doctrine that was not expressly taught in the New Testament. They said, "We speak where the Bible speaks, and we are silent where the Bible is silent." They wanted unity in essentials, freedom in matters of opinion, and love in all things.

They also recognized the New Testament predictions that Christians would fall away from the truth into error. God knew that the hearts of men often follow their own paths. The apostle Paul told the elders of the church at Ephesus, "I know that after my departure that savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock; and from among your own selves men will arise, speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after them" (Acts 20:29-30). Paul knew that some would fall away from the truth.

The apostle Peter also predicted, "But false prophets also arose among the people, just as there will also be false teachers among you, who will secretly introduce destructive heresies, even denying the Master who bought them, bringing swift destruction upon themselves. Many will follow their sensuality, and because of them the way of the truth will be maligned; and in their greed they will exploit you with false words; their judgment from long ago is not idle, and their destruction is not asleep" (2 Peter 2:1-3).

Paul was serious about staying with the truth. He told Timothy, "I solemnly charge you in the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who is to judge the living and the dead, and by His appearing and His kingdom: preach the word (that is God's word); be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, exhort, with great patience and instruction. For the time will come 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 away their ears from the truth and will turn aside to myths" (2 Timothy 4:1-4).

Early church history confirms that Christians began teaching and practicing things that were never taught or authorized by the New Testament. Within 500 years after the apostles died, a wholly new vocabulary developed with many innovations. For instance, the New Testament says nothing about holy water, or lent, or penance, or infant baptism, or intercession of the saints, or sprinkling for baptism, or sacrifice of the mass, or celibacy of priests, or purgatory, or confession to priests, or archbishops, or popes, or instrumental music in worship, or salvation by faith only, and "once saved, always saved."

The New Testament never conceived the idea of so many groups with different names, and creeds, and organizations, and forms of worship. The Bible condemns the perpetuation of new doctrines that differ from the teaching that is found in the New Testament.

Century by century, the church moved farther away from the simplicity of New Testament Christianity. After a while, it no longer followed God's pattern for the church in the New Testament, but became something very different. God's way was corrupted by the will of man. If the church is to please God, it must return to what God willed in the New Testament. Restoration to the Lord's way is necessary because repentance from error is necessary.

No one can remain in error and still please God. The Bible says, "My brethren, if any among you strays from the truth and one turns him back, let him know that he who turns a sinner from the error of his way will save his soul from death and will cover a multitude of sins" (James 5:19-20). Straying from the truth can put our souls in peril with a multitude of sins. By casting off these sinful, manmade doctrines and practices, we can restore the doctrine, worship, and organization of the New Testament church.

Our intent is not to start a new denomination, but to restore the church according to the ideals of the New Testament. Jesus built His church before any denomination existed. The Lord's church is not denominational, not inter-denominational, and not even non-denominational. The church Jesus built was undenominational and "pre-denominational." The idea of denominationalism is actually foreign to the New Testament. The Lord Jesus would never approve of unifying the truth with error.

The New Testament never entertained the idea of so many groups with different names, and creeds, and organizations, and forms of worship. The Bible condemns the perpetuation of new doctrines that differ from the teaching that's found in the New Testament. So, churches of Christ strive to "do Bible things in Bible ways and call Bible things by Bible names." They believe they must discard from their faith and their practice everything that is not found written in the New Testament of the Lord and Savior Jesus Christ; and that they are to believe and to practice whatever is instructed there.

The concept of "restoration" grew out of a conviction that the Bible is a complete and final authority. Just as a seed will produce only after its own kind, so the seed of God's Word will produce the same Christianity today that it did in the first century. Luke 8:11 says, "Now the parable is this: the seed is the word of God." As long as you keep a pure seed you will have a pure Christianity. But if you corrupt the seed, the teaching of the Word of God, then you'll also have a corrupt Christianity.

The Bible is complete and gives us all of God's revealed will for our lives and our godliness. Jesus promised His apostles, "I have many more things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. But when He, the Spirit of truth, comes, He will guide you into all the truth; for He will not speak on His own initiative, but whatever He hears, He will speak; and He will disclose to you what is to come" (John 16:12-13). The Bible is all-sufficient and contains every spiritual truth that we need to have eternal life and to live the Christian life. We aren't lacking anything that God wanted us to know.

But many people aren't content with the pure teaching of the Word, so they say we must change. We ask, "Change to what?" If they call for change that leads us back to the doctrine of Christ in the New Testament, we can rejoice in that. But if they call for a change that leads us away from God's revealed will, let's not be fooled.

When people go beyond the Scriptures to teach other doctrines, they produce something other than the church that Jesus built. They're making a church in their own image rather than honoring God's will. To add to the Scriptures or to take away from the Scriptures, to edit the Scriptures to fit today's culture is to corrupt the pure message or seed and to substitute for it something that will not accomplish God's intended purpose. Rather than fall for a substitute, let's demand pure Christianity.

The Lord Jesus desires unity among His followers; but before He prayed for unity in John 17:20-23, he first prayed for his followers to be sanctified or "set apart" in the truth. Jesus wanted all His followers to know and to practice the truth. Christ didn't pray for a unity that sacrifices or compromises the truth. No, it's our faith in the truth that unites us. Christian unity is not ecumenism, where groups unite but maintain conflicting and contradictory beliefs and practices. Christian unity means being faithful to the truth, and refusing error.

The Lord Jesus said, "If you continue in My word, then you are truly disciples of Mine; and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free" (John 8:31-32). Jesus distinguished true disciples from others by their willingness to abide in His Word. What we believe may not matter to today's culture, but what we believe and practice matters to the Lord Jesus Christ.

The New Testament provides for us examples and patterns showing how God wishes for us to respond to His grace, how we should come to Him in faith and obedience, how we worship, how we should live, how we should organize ourselves, and how we should treat one another. Some object to the concept of patterns in the New Testament, but the Scriptures are clear about the need to follow the apostles' doctrine and example. God expects us to believe and obey His instructions found in the New Testament.

For instance, Romans 6:17-18 says, "But thanks be to God that though you were slaves of sin, you became obedient from the heart to that form (or pattern) of teaching to which you were committed, and having been freed from sin, you became the slaves of righteousness." Again, 2 Thessalonians 2:15 says, "So then, brethren, stand firm and hold to the traditions which you were taught, whether by word of mouth or by letter from us." Again, 2 Timothy 1:13 says, "Follow the pattern of sound words that you have heard from me, in the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus."

If the sun, the planets, and the moon in our universe follow a pattern; if every cell in our body has a DNA pattern that is alike; and if every leaf on every tree follows a pattern, why would we suppose that the Lord's church has no pattern? If there is no pattern to the church, then it's the only thing that God ever produced that didn't have a pattern.

The New Testament speaks of the love and grace of God, but these 27 books in the New Testament also have commands, instructions, and examples for us to follow. The Lord Jesus said, "If you love Me, you'll keep My commandments" (John 14:15). He demonstrates how this will affect our relationship with God in John 15:8-10. The Lord said, "My Father is glorified by this, that if you bear much fruit, and so prove to be My disciples. Just as the Father has loved Me, I've also loved you; abide in My love. And if you keep My commandments, you will abide in My love; just as I have kept My Father's commandments and abide in His love."

Obedience to the Lord is not some kind of legalism; obedience from the heart is how we love God. If we wish to abide in the love of God, we must be obedient to His commands. God requires people to repent of their sins when they learn the truth. Repentance means that we leave error and we embrace the Lord's will. Repentance is how we are restored to the Lord. My friend, do you need to repent? Do you attend a church that goes beyond the teaching of the New Testament? Are you a true disciple that abides in the Words of Christ? If you aren't, you need to repent and restore your faith.

Restoration leads the lost out of sinful error and into eternal life. If this is true for individuals, it's also true for groups and churches. Even churches can fall from God's grace when they abandon the truth. Jesus anticipated disciplining whole churches in the book of Revelation chapters 2 and 3; if they didn't repent, he was going to come and remove their candlestick. We must remain faithful to God and His Word. We must hold to the truth at all costs. If we unite with error, we will corrupt ourselves. We'd rather speak the truth with the Lord than to fall for the devil's lies. We'd rather lovingly teach the truth that gives—maybe a little offense at first, but heals—than to spread false hope that destroys. Love demands that we tell the whole truth of God, because it's the truth that saves.

The truth is there's only one gospel, one body, one church, one baptism. In order to enter the Lord's church, believe with all your heart that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God. Out of faith and love, repent of sin, confess the Lord Jesus Christ, and be baptized. The one baptism of Jesus Christ is an immersion in water for the forgiveness of sins. When you're baptized, the Lord will add you to His church. Why not be baptized today?