

THE PROSPERITY TRAP

What the Preacher Didn't Tell You

Angelena Jackson

Copyright © 2013 by Angelena Jackson
All rights reserved.

Unless otherwise stated, Scripture is taken from The Holy Bible, New
King James Version Copyright © 1982 by Thomas Nelson, Inc.

Also used: Holy Bible, New International Version®, NIV® Copyright
© 1973, 1978, 1984, 2011 by Biblica, Inc.®

Contents

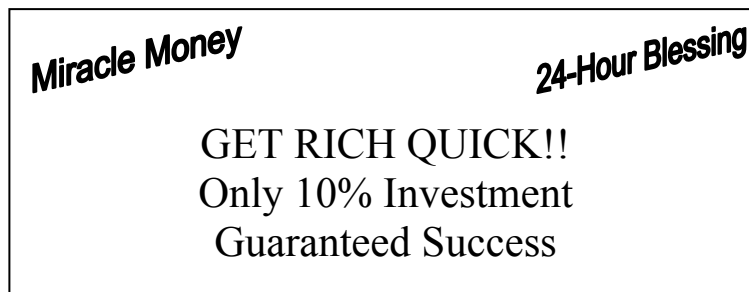
INTRODUCTION	2
Chapter 1: The Burning Bush	4
Chapter 2: Salt & Light	8
Chapter 3: Chasing the Cheese	16
Chapter 4: The Benefit Package	29
Chapter 5: Lessons from the Israelites	39
Chapter 6: Prophecy for Profit	46
Chapter 7: The Greatest Deception	56
Chapter 8: The Truth About Tithing	66
Chapter 9: False Prophets And Teachers	76
Chapter 10: The Vehicle of Faith	93
Chapter 11: Wake-Up Call	99

“For the word of God is living and powerful, and sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing even to the division of soul and spirit, and of joints and marrow, and is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart.”

(Hebrews 4:12)

INTRODUCTION

Imagine seeing this ad in your church bulletin:



Sounds ridiculous, doesn't it? Well, it's no more ridiculous than what I've heard at church and seen on Christian television. Today, the Christian Church has almost as many gimmicks as some secular organizations and just as many disillusioned people. It seems we've strayed away from the true message of the gospel and settled for a "feel-good", selfish religion that is more about being blessed than being a blessing.

Christians, both old and young, have fallen into what I call the prosperity trap. We have once again been "hoodwinked" and "bamboozled" and it is many of our own leaders who are leading us astray, because they have chosen to preach another gospel. In their efforts to build mega-ministries, many of these men and women have steered the Church away from her first love. I believe it's time for a change. I believe the days of pimps in the pulpit trying to prostitute the Word of God for their own gain are coming to an abrupt end.

Please don't misunderstand the message of this book. I'm not suggesting that God wants His children to live in poverty. I believe He wants us to prosper in every aspect of our lives, not just financially. However, God's definition of prosperity and ours is not always the same thing. Also, God has rules and conditions. Unlike the lopsided message

that so many are preaching today, God is not a sugar daddy. He's not a genie that pops out to grant wishes when we rub our bibles. This portrayal of God as the grantor of all of our materialistic desires is characteristic of prosperity preaching. Some of these messages may sound good, but many of them are overly influenced by worldly views that have no place in the Church.

The Church should be the salt of the world, but somewhere along the way, we traded our salt for fame and fortune. Some of our modern churches look more like a nightclub than a house of prayer. As long as the pastor is talking about getting blessed, the people are dancing in the aisles and running to the altar to throw money at him like he's some strip dancer. It's quite a spectacle, but I can understand their confusion because some of our pastors seem to be more interested in entertaining than they are in preaching the Word of God. Yes, I said it. It's time for somebody to say something so it might as well be me.

I am fully aware of the criticism that this book will probably receive. Prosperity preaching has become a movement that involves mega-ministries and mega-bucks and it is supported by well-known leaders in the Christian community. Consequently, anyone who has had the audacity to speak out against it has been ridiculed. But I am not afraid of the opinions of others. I'm writing this book because it's time for somebody to tell the truth. In John 8:32, Jesus said, "and you shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free." Perhaps you, like me, have heard enough prosperity preaching to last a lifetime and you too have found something lacking in many of these messages. Maybe you're wondering why the Church looks and acts so much like the world. Maybe you're also wondering why the only one who seems to be prospering is the preacher. Well, you don't have to wonder anymore, because after reading this book, you will know the truth and the truth will make you free.



CHAPTER 1

THE BURNING BUSH

If life were a school, I'd have a master's degree in Experience and a doctorate in Hard Times. I grew up in a small town in South Carolina where everyone knew each other and half the town was related. It was a place where life was slow and simple. It was also a place where dreams died quickly and hopes of a "better life" could only be realized if you were one of the lucky few to make it out. I was determined to be one of the lucky ones. When I graduated from high school and received my diploma, I moved out of there as fast as my feet would carry me.

Unfortunately, my education did not include any lessons on how to manage money. As a result, I made more financial mistakes than I care to admit. In my freshman year of college when I received offers for credit cards in the mail, I accepted them...all of them, and I used them...all of them. Shopping moved to the top of my list of priorities and studying moved to the bottom. For a while, I thought I was living the good life. I was eating out every day and wearing clothes that I couldn't afford.

It was a nice ride that came to a screeching halt. In my junior year, I co-signed several stolen checks for a guy that I barely knew. Of course, I didn't know the checks were stolen. I also didn't know that when the bank couldn't get their money from him, they would take mine. I was so naïve, I didn't realize that co-signing a stolen check, even unknowingly, could be considered fraud. It was a tough lesson learned while spending the

day in a jail cell. Fortunately, no formal charges were brought against me, but the bank still didn't return my money. It only took a few months of being unable to pay my bills to put my finances in a downward spiral, but it took years to recover from it.

After college, I had to sleep in my car for a couple of days because I couldn't afford a place of my own. Then, when I could afford somewhere to live my car was repossessed. So, like most people, I thought that all of my problems would be solved if I could just increase my income. Eventually I landed a job with an office, a corporate credit card and a view of downtown Atlanta. I thought I had arrived at the promise land and all of my dreams were about to be realized. I was wrong.

With my newfound success came some unwanted peer pressure. I was unsure of myself and very easily influenced so I did everything that I could to fit in with the "upwardly mobile" crowd that I was associating with. When my colleagues, who were also Christians, started purchasing homes, I purchased one too. When they bought more expensive cars, I bought one too, and on and on it went. In my futile efforts to pursue what I thought was my God-ordained piece of the pie, I made some mistakes that I'm not very proud of. I knew I was on the wrong path, but I was too entrenched in debt to do anything about it.

Then one day I went to church and heard the pastor say Christians should be employers, not employees. I took that as a word straight from the throne room of God. So I quit my well-paying job and started a business. My excitement to be a business owner was overwhelming. I took drive and dedication to a new level...insanity. I was determined to succeed so I started taking my personal money and dumped it into my business. I kept telling myself business would pick up and everything would be fine. When that business failed, I tried another one, and another one. Eventually, after four failed businesses and financial ruin, I started to wonder if maybe I misunderstood my pastor and acted outside of God's timing.

I could go on, but I won't. You get the picture. The interesting thing about all of this, however, is that most of my financial problems occurred after I was saved and after I became a tither.

My financial problems occurred after I was saved and after I became a tither.

Now there's something they don't tell you in Sunday school. In fact, talk like that will get you thrown out of some churches because it might decrease the offering. People aren't as eager to give if they are told that God may still allow them to experience some financial struggles even after they pay their tithes and give an offering. But it's the truth. We may not like it or even understand it, but it's the truth. I was a tither, but I was still in debt. I was even a generous giver, but still unable to pay my own bills. I attended every convention, listened to every tape, and did every kind of spiritual hocus pocus that they tell you to do, but I was still struggling financially.

And I was miserable. I didn't understand why everything I attempted to do financially seemed to fail. *After all, wasn't I destined to be prosperous? Wasn't it my God-given right to have wealth? Isn't that what Jesus came for? Didn't he sacrifice His life so that I could live an abundant life?* I convinced myself that I was only pursuing what I thought God wanted me to have. Like so many other Christians, I desperately wanted God to turn my situation around, but He didn't do what I wanted Him to do. It was during this time in my life that I really understood what the bible meant when it said that God's ways are not our ways. (Isaiah 55:8)

It has been (and still is) a long journey to discovering God's more excellent way. One of the hardest lessons that I've had to learn on this journey is that God's love is not measured by what He does or doesn't give me or even what He does or doesn't do for me. Neither can these things be a condition of my love for Him. I've had to learn that disappointment is the place where our plans meet God's plans and that the word "unfair" is not in God's dictionary.

Now, looking back, I realize that if I had achieved the worldly success I thought I needed, I would never have seen my burning bush. If Moses had stayed in Pharaoh's house, enjoying the wealth of that system, he would have missed his "burning bush" moment. I believe many of us miss our "burning bush" moment because our focus is on the wrong thing. Sometimes we're so busy chasing wealth we run right pass our destiny. Seeing that bush burn and not be consumed was an integral part of Moses' destiny, but in order to see it, three things had to happen. First, Moses had to be in the place where God led him. Second, he had to be open-minded enough to see something different. Third, Moses had to be willing to turn in order to see what God was showing him.

For the last few years, God has been showing me how far away from Him the Church has strayed. At first, I was reluctant to believe that God was speaking to me, because I'm not a theologian or a bible scholar. I'm just a regular person. When God told me to write

this book, I told Him I wasn't qualified. Then I listed for Him all of the reasons why I was the wrong choice. I thought it was a clerical error made by one of the angels and my name was mistakenly pulled from some heavenly file. Then I remembered something I read once. It said, "God doesn't call the qualified. He qualifies the called." In other words, God chooses you for an assignment, and then he equips you with what you need to fulfill that assignment.

**God doesn't call the qualified. He qualifies
the called.**

One morning when I was driving to work, God told me that a prophet doesn't hear from another prophet. A prophet hears directly from Him. I know this statement sounds obvious and simple, but as you read the rest of this book, you'll see why this was so important for me to hear. Much of what I am going to express in the next several chapters may not sound like what you are used to hearing. It might even sound a little harsh, at times, but it's the truth of God's Word. Sometimes the truth is hard to hear, especially when it comes against what we want to hear. Nevertheless, it's the truth and we have to approach it with the same attitude that Moses had when he saw the burning bush. If you're reading this book, I believe you're already in the place where God has led you. The rest is up to you.



CHAPTER 2

SALT & LIGHT

In the 1970's when I was a young girl, my church was not like the more modern churches I see today. My pastor was a bald-headed, plump little man, with a warm personality who stepped into the pulpit each Sunday and preached as if it were his last sermon. I barely understood anything he said, but the older people seemed to hang on to his every word. In the summertime, you could see a colorful array of hats nodding in agreement and funeral home fans waving back and forth. An ensemble of "Amens" could be heard across the church (and probably outside too) along with an occasional shout of "Yes, Lord".

In those days, most of the pastors worked a regular job during the week and preached on Sunday. Most of them had at least two churches. They preached at one on the second and fourth Sunday and at the other one on the first and third Sunday. The membership count was low and so were the offerings. Periodically pastors would go to another church to preach. Their pay for doing so was whatever offering was collected on their behalf. It too was usually low.

Most of the churches in my hometown had a never-ending building project for which members were required to pay dues. When the church wanted to do something or go somewhere, they had a fundraiser, which typically meant selling baked goods and chicken dinners. There never seemed to be enough money to do what was needed including

compensating the pastors. They were under-appreciated and underpaid for their service, yet they still continued to preach, visit the sick, baptize the new converts, eulogize funerals and perform the occasional wedding. Many of them had no formal seminary education, just a desire to preach the Word of God and what they often referred to as a “calling”.

The times have certainly changed. Today, riding along the interstates of Atlanta, you can see several billboards advertising various churches. Usually, there’s a picture of the church’s senior pastor, his or her spouse and the name and location of the church along with the church’s logo. Or, you may browse through a magazine and happen upon a feature story on one of the church leaders, and not just articles about the church or religion, but everything from fashion to economics. Gone are the days of the humble men who preached to half-empty churches with little recognition and even smaller compensation. Today’s top Christian leaders are charismatic personalities, dressed in a plethora of tailored suits, alligator shoes and Rolex watches.

The modern Church is now run like a business, with a CEO and an administrative staff. The wooden pews have been replaced with auditorium style seating and balconies. Most churches now are equipped with sound systems. The organist has been replaced with a nine-member band. The choir members have record deals and the pastor is a national figure who can be seen on both Christian and secular television.

Most people would call this “progress” and though I don’t disagree, I’m not sure what kind of progress to call it. Obviously, we have progressed financially, but I’m not so sure we have progressed morally or spiritually. There seems to be more money in the Church, but less love in the community. Instead of worship, we now have entertainment. Our churches are certainly more comfortable, but there’s not as much respect and reverence for the sanctuary.

When I was growing up, there were certain things you were not allowed to do or say in the church or even on the church property. Now, we go to church and treat it as if we’re watching a ball game or a movie with our snacks in one hand and a bottle of water in the other. I can also remember when it was considered a cardinal sin to leave a church service before the benediction. Now, people come late, just in time to hear the sermon, and then walk out in the middle of the altar call for salvation like it’s no big deal.

The older generations may have had less than we have today, but they had a lot of reverence for God and respect for the house of God. Many of them wore godliness like a garment. You didn’t have to ask if someone was saved or not. You knew it by the way they carried themselves. They didn’t have to wear t-shirts and put bumper stickers on their

cars to signify they were Christians. There were certain things they didn't say or do. There were places they didn't go. They didn't even allow certain things to be said or done in their presence. They didn't have the financial advantages that we have, but they knew who they were.

Our churches now are so secular, sometimes it's hard to tell who we're serving: God or ourselves. We've learned how to have church. We even have a praise leader to tell us how to praise God and when to do it. We're told when to clap, when to lift our hands and when to shout. We're moved by the music. Then, at just the right moment, when the atmosphere is charged with excitement, whoever has the microphone will announce that the glory of the Lord has shown up...as if God needs an announcement.

I'm not saying that we shouldn't praise God. Psalm 113:3 says we should praise Him from sunup to sundown, but God doesn't want forced or rehearsed praise. He's not interested in what we do or say out of tradition. Instead, He wants a pure praise. Pure praise is not the same as church theatrics. Pure praise is a heart thing and that is what God is after: our hearts.

We can run and jump and holler and make all the noise we want, but if our hearts are not turned to God, all we're doing is having church. If we're honest about it, that's exactly what many of us have been doing for years: having church. This is one of the reasons why we have trouble effecting change in the world. If the truth be told, many of us don't go to church to change the world or to be changed ourselves. We go to church to feel good. We go so we can get our "shout on". Shouting is fine, but when the music stops and the shouting is over, then what?

If you want to really see how effective the church has been, just consider your local news broadcast. A woman was tied up and sexually assaulted. The killer of a little girl is still on the run. A high-speed chase ended in the death of a young man. Someone else was robbed. Someone else was shot and killed. Yet another local pastor was accused of doing something so terrible and ungodly that it makes you wonder what side he's on. These are the events of a typical day in the city. It's the same tragic news over and over again.

Meanwhile, Christians are still having church. It's time for us to stop just having church and be the church. If we would step outside of the walls that bind us, we could make a difference in the world around us. I'm not talking about the four walls of our churches. I'm talking about the walls of our flesh. The church that is called the "body of Christ" is not plush seating and sound systems. It's not brick and mortar. It's not a building made by man, but one that is made by God. We are the church. So, if we don't like what we see on

the news, it's up to us to change it. The world needs the church. The bible says that all of creation is waiting for us to stand up and be who God has called us to be.

For the earnest expectation of the creation eagerly waits for the revealing of the sons of God. (Romans 8:19)

I believe that somewhere along the way, in our efforts to fit in and appeal to the world, the Church has lost sight of its purpose. We're still doing good works, but most of them seem to be done through our natural abilities. There are many organizations that do good works. What distinguishes the Church from them?

In the book of Matthew, Jesus told us what distinguishes us from everyone else. He said that we are the salt and the light.

“You are the salt of the earth; but if the salt loses its flavor, how shall it be seasoned? It is then good for nothing but to be thrown out and trampled underfoot by men. You are the light of the world. A city that is set on a hill cannot be hidden.” (Matthew 5:13-14)

The purpose of salt is to season whatever it comes in contact with. When Jesus said that we are the “salt of the earth”, He meant that we, just like salt, should season or change this world. Salt has a unique and unmistakable flavor. A food like rice, for example, also has certain unique properties and a distinct flavor. If the salt were to join the rice and take on its properties, then the salt would lose its flavor and its purpose and the rice would not be changed. The salt is supposed to mix with the rice, but still be salt. The salt then, doesn't taste like the rice, but the rice now tastes salty. The flavor of the rice is changed. This is how the Church should operate. We are the salt.

Similarly, we are the “light of the world”. Our purpose is to illuminate the pathway to Christ and to eternal life. Whenever darkness encounters light, the darkness is changed to light. But if that light is dim, the darkness will remain unchanged.

So many times, we align ourselves with worldly systems and instead of flavoring or changing that system, we become a part of it. We get into politics and become just as corrupt as the political system we were trying to change. We get into the music industry with the idea of making it a tool for ministry, to bring glory to God, but instead of influencing that industry, we become influenced by it. We dress like them. We dance like

them. We act like them. So now, the lyrics may have changed, but the mindset has not. One day someone is going to have to explain to me how dressing in tight, revealing clothing that leave nothing to the imagination while singing about the Lord is supposed to lead anyone to Christ. Is the true gospel of Christ so uninteresting that Christian recording artists feel like their only hope of getting the world's attention is to appeal to the flesh?

So, when someone looks at us, instead of seeing Christ in us, they see a reflection of themselves. It is like looking in a mirror. When the world looks at the Church, it should be like looking through a glass, where Christ is standing on the other side. And it's not just the responsibility of the leadership, but each of us should represent Christ wherever we go.

You would think that with as many mega-churches as we have in this country, the crime rate, HIV/AIDS, homelessness, pornography, homosexuality and all the other issues we face would be declining. They aren't. For example, HIV/AIDS has become an epidemic, especially in the African American community, and the Church acts powerless to do anything about it. We're still having church, going about business as usual while people are dying from a sickness that we should have dominion over.

THE DEVIL MADE ME DO IT

How is it possible that so many problems are still running rampant when there are so many churches? The older people used to say, "The devil sure is busy." I suppose he is busy, but we can't dismiss our responsibility by blaming all of our problems on the devil, because the Word of God tells us that we have dominion over him.

And He put all things under His feet, and gave Him to be head over all things to the church, which is His body, the fullness of Him who fills all in all. (Ephesians 1:22-23)

If all things are under Christ's feet and we, the Church, are His body, then that means that all things, including Satan, are also under our feet. So then, how can we blame him when we have authority over him?

There's an old joke that talks about a little devil and a big devil. The little devil is a regular worker and the big devil is his boss. So, one day, the little devil goes into his boss' office crying. When asked why he is so distraught, the little devil wipes the tears from his

eyes and blurts out, “Why are God’s children always blaming stuff on me that I didn’t do?”

The devil has always been our favorite scapegoat, but the bible tells us that the spirit of Christ, which is in all of us, is greater than the devil that is in the world.

You are of God, little children, and have overcome them, because He who is in you is greater than he who is in the world. (I John 4:4)

Satan was never a match for Christ, and when we operate according to who we are in Christ, he’s no match for us. All we have to do is recognize the authority that we have and be the “salt of the earth” and the “light of the world”.

IN THE WORLD – NOT OF THE WORLD

We have to live in the world, but we should not be of the world. That means that our lifestyles, the way we dress, the way we talk and the way we act should be different. We can’t be Christians on Sunday and act like everyone else the rest of the week. We should set an example. Also, what’s important to the world should not be the same as what is important to us. Our problem is that we want to be Christians, but we also want all the trappings that the world has to offer.

We love to quote the latter part of Proverbs 13:22, which says that “the wealth of the wicked is laid up for the just”. We like this concept because acquiring wealth (especially without working for it) is as important to us as it is to the wicked. If we’re honest with ourselves, what we’re really doing is envying what the wicked have. The bible warns us against this.

The wicked covet the catch of evil men, but the root of the righteous yields fruit. (Proverbs 12:12)

I’ve often heard Christians complaining about someone they know who isn’t saved but seems to live a better or more prosperous life than them. I understand their frustration, because I used to complain about the same thing myself. It didn’t seem fair to me, but the question that we have to ask ourselves is this: what are we using as measurement? The

world's definition of prosperity and success is not the same as ours. Our success should be based on who we are in Christ, not on our economic status.

**Christian success is based on who we are in
Christ, not on our economic status.**

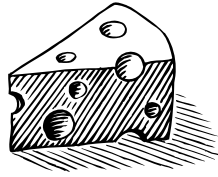
When we envy the wealth of the wicked, we're telling God that all that He has given us is not good enough. We're saying that His love is not enough. His favor is not enough. His peace, His joy and His presence are not enough. We'd rather have what the world has...more money.

Some of us may not actually say this, but our actions speak louder than our words. For example, God tells you to become a teacher. You tell Him, "No Lord. Teachers don't make enough money." So instead, you go into real estate. God tells one parent to stay home with the children. You tell Him, "Our standard of living will suffer because we'll have to live on one income," and you continue to work. Or God tells you to give a large offering to help the poor, (notice I said, 'God tells you'), but you don't do it, because you've been waiting two weeks for payday so you can stand in line with the rest of the world for the newest iPhone. The ways we say it may be different, but what we're saying is the same thing. We're telling God that we would rather have the things of this world than to have Him.

The older Saints didn't have some of the problems we have now in the Church, because they weren't pursuing material things. They were pursuing God. In fact, many of them didn't even expect financial prosperity. They were just happy to "be in the number" as they often put it. I'm not idealizing the older generations, because I'm sure they had their struggles too, but the godliness that I saw in my grandmother and my great-grandmother didn't look like what I see today. Back then people shouted in church about the goodness of God even though they had little money and very few material possessions. They didn't give praise for what they hoped God would do for them. They praised Him for what He had already done. They used to sing about how God had brought them through "many dangers, seen and unseen."

They had the "fear of the Lord" (Proverbs 1:7), so they didn't compromise what they believed to fit in with everyone else. Their sphere of influence was certainly not as large as ours, but whoever they came in contact with saw Christ in them. I meet Christians and

non-Christians all the time, and most of the time, I can't tell one from the other, because Christians don't want to be labeled as being different. We want to fit in with the crowd, but fitting in is not what we have been called to do. Until we are willing to be different we will fail to be who Christ said we should be: the "salt of the earth" and the "light of the world".



CHAPTER 3

CHASING THE CHEESE

Have you ever seen an old rat trap? It's a wooden rectangle with a spring on it that clamps down on the rat's neck, eventually killing him. It works by placing a piece of cheese in a certain position on the trap. Then the rat comes along, oblivious to the trap that has been set for him, and tries to eat the cheese thereby releasing the spring. It's a sad spectacle and it's a picture of how many of us go after financial prosperity. There are ways that the rat could still get some cheese without sticking his head in a trap, because the cheese itself is not bad for him. Nor is financial prosperity necessarily bad for us. However, it's how we go after it that causes a problem.

Foolishly, we attempt to pursue God's blessings without first pursuing Him. We've built an altar around the gospel of "bless-me" and turned the bible into a guide to get rich quick. We ignore all of the references in the bible that talk about self-denial and contentment because these are concepts that don't fit our prosperity focused mindset. Instead we'd rather listen to greedy leaders who are now telling us that our spirituality is directly related to how much material wealth we have. We'd rather listen to them than listen to Jesus who said in Matthew 19:24 (NIV), that "it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God."

THE AMERICAN DREAM

Recently, I did an internet search for any reference on the word “prosperity”. The search returned 29 million entries. I was amazed. It seems prosperity is no longer just an aspect of the American Dream - rooted in our rights to “life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness”. For many, it has become a religion. The bible has been interpreted, or should I say misinterpreted, to fit the mindset of the masses. Doing ministry is now equated with making money...and as much of it as possible. Christians are being told that they can’t be effective in the kingdom of God unless they have attained a substantial share of the so-called American Dream. Contrary to popular belief, God is not an American. Nor is he a venture capitalist just waiting to invest in the enterprises of the saints.

This is the age of materialism where the goal is to pursue riches, but as Christians, we must remember that this is a worldly pursuit, not a godly one.

But those who desire to be rich fall into temptation and a snare, and into many foolish and harmful lusts which drown men in destruction and perdition.

For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil, for which some have strayed from the faith in their greediness, and pierced themselves through with many sorrows. (I Tim 6:9-10)

What Paul is saying here is directly correlated to Proverbs 10:22.

The blessing of the Lord makes one rich, and He adds no sorrow with it. (Proverbs 10:22)

When God blesses, He adds no sorrow to it. But when we greedily pursue money, out of our desire to be rich, we not only stray away from our faith, but we cause ourselves to have many sorrows. This is why judging a person’s spirituality by how much money he has is a mistake. An evil person can accumulate great wealth, but the true test of whether or not it’s a blessing from God is how much sorrow is attached to it. How many times have we seen the dirty laundry of the rich and famous strewn across our TV screens? How many people have we looked up to and admired, only to see them a few years later being brought down by the mighty hand of God, because of their lust for power and riches?

It's not the riches that matter - it's how we get the riches and the value we place on the riches that make the difference. Paul is not saying that money itself is bad, just the love of it. When we pursue money, instead of pursuing God, we're not only demonstrating a love of money but we're also telling God that He comes second. Sometimes we even fool ourselves into thinking that we can pursue both money and God, but the bible also warns us against this type of thinking.

“No one can serve two masters; for either he will hate the one and love the other, or else he will be loyal to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and mammon.” (Matthew 6:24)

The word “mammon” signifies wealth or assets. What Jesus is saying here directly contradicts the mentality of the prosperity-minded church, which is that we can serve God and go after wealth too. Of course Jesus is not saying that we can't have wealth, but rather He's talking about the value that we place on it.

In that same chapter of Matthew, Jesus tells us why it's important not to focus on accumulating worldly wealth.

“Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy and where thieves break in and steal; but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.” (Matthew 6:19-21)

Here, Jesus is pointing out the difference between worldly wealth, that can be stolen or destroyed and godly wealth that has eternal value. He is also telling us that if we are preoccupied with the treasures of this world and accumulating those treasures, then that is where our heart will be. This is why we can tell God “no” when He asks us to do something that causes us to give up some of our money or our possessions. We wouldn't have a problem giving up something that we didn't value in our heart.

GOD IS NOT OUR PUPPET

It's obvious to see how going after wealth and riches instead of going after God is wrong. The more subtle mistake that Christians make is when we do pursue God, but only as a means to get more money. When I see people on TV or at conventions standing in money lines to sow a seed in order to get a bigger house or a nicer car, I want to scream. Trust me when I tell you this: I've tried it. IT DOESN'T WORK. Those people would probably be better off playing the lottery, because their chances of getting what they're wishing for would be just as good. Sometimes we think that just because we do something in the Church, its okay, but God is not our puppet. We can't manipulate Him into blessing us.

We can't manipulate God into blessing us.

One of the most misused scriptures in the bible and the one that is most often quoted to try to manipulate God into blessing us talks about sowing and reaping:

...for whatever a man sows, that he will also reap. (Galatians 6:7b)

We use this scripture to justify standing in money lines to sow a seed for a financial harvest. And just sowing the seed isn't enough. We are told to direct our seeds...to tell God what we are expecting Him to do for us because we sowed a seed, as if the Creator of the universe needs us to tell Him what to do. What's more important is that this passage of scripture is not even talking about sowing financial seeds, but you have to read the entire passage to understand it.

Do not be deceived, God is not mocked; for whatever a man sows, that he will also reap. For he who sows to his flesh will of the flesh reap corruption, but he who sows to the Spirit will of the Spirit reap everlasting life. (Galatians 6:7-8)

Sowing a financial seed in order to get money or material possessions is the same thing as sowing to the flesh because these things are fleshly desires. Wanting more money or more possessions is of the flesh, not of the spirit. Our spirit man doesn't require these things.

In any other arena, if someone were found guilty of giving something in order to get something in return, we would condemn him. Yet, we have allowed this same principal to become a basis for most of our giving in the Church.

Giving in order to get is out of God's order, no matter how we try to justify it.

I think it's also interesting that the beginning of this passage issues a warning against believing that God is mocked. The word "mocked" means treated with contempt or disregard. In the court system, when someone is found to be in contempt, it means that they have been disobedient to the rules of the court. In other words, Paul's warning is that we shouldn't deceive ourselves. We can't be disobedient to God's rule and think that He's going to sanction it just because we want Him to. Sowing to the flesh reaps corruption, even when we're doing it under the guise of sowing a seed. This is one of the reasons why a person can continually sow seeds and never see a harvest. Sowing the seed is not the problem. It's the motive behind it that determines whether or not it's of the spirit or of the flesh.

I know that there are many television prophets who make it seem like every seed you sow, especially the ones that you sow into their ministry will reap a hundred-fold harvest, but that simply isn't true. It's not true in agriculture and it's not true in the Church. Any farmer will tell you that not every seed that is planted yields a harvest, because planting the seed is not enough. You can plant a seed in the ground and scream "increase" all you want but that doesn't guarantee that seed will come up, especially if it is planted in infertile soil. Just because some joker is able to buy a spot on Christian television does not necessarily mean that his ministry is fertile ground.

I've even heard some ministers say that you shouldn't be concerned with what is done with the money that you sow into their ministry. They say that once you've sown the seed, you will still be blessed for it because you sowed it in faith. Though this sounds real spiritual, it's not entirely accurate. Would you invest your hard-earned money into bad

stocks? Would you give your money to any other charity without knowing what it will be used for? Investing in bad stocks or giving to a charity without knowing what that charity does is foolish. By the same token, it is also foolish to give money to a ministry that is not operating according to the will of God. And despite what some of these ministers may tell you, it's not a sin to ask for an explanation of what is being done with the money that you're giving.

Some ministries may even tell you that you shouldn't concern yourself with what is being done with your money because you're giving it to God. That's not true either. You're not giving the money to God. You're giving it to the church. God doesn't need our money. He's God. He owns the whole earth and everything in it. (Psalm 24:1)

FIRST THINGS FIRST

I believe the Church is so lacking in spiritual and supernatural power, because we're too busy seeking God's hand instead of His face. We know all about *Jehovah Jireh*, the God Who provides, but we never take the time to meet *Jehovah Nissi*, the God Who should be our banner and our standard or *Elohim*, the only true God. And though God did tell us that He would provide for us, He never told us to pursue the provision. What He did tell us was to pursue Him instead, and He would take care of the rest.

“Therefore, do not worry, saying, ‘What shall we eat?’ or ‘What shall we drink?’ or ‘What shall we wear?’ For after all these things the Gentiles seek. For your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things. But seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things shall be added to you.”(Matthew 6:31-33)

In the sixth chapter of Matthew Jesus explains how we should seek the kingdom of God with no thought of material provision. He uses the “birds of the air” as examples of how we are to live. He says that “they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns”, yet God still provides for them.

One of the things that I find amusing about this passage of scripture is that many prosperity preachers point to Solomon and his riches as an example of how God wants us to be blessed. Usually, they do so to justify telling congregants that having great riches is important to God. But in Matthew 6:29, Jesus makes a point of comparing Solomon to the

“lilies of the field” that “neither toil nor spin”. He says that even Solomon, “in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these”.

So naturally, the same God that provides for the birds and clothes the lilies will also provide for us. So, what’s our problem? Why are we so preoccupied with what we wear and what we drive and where we live? Furthermore, why does it seem that no matter how much we get, it is never enough to satisfy us? God told us He would supply our needs and He does, but still we want more because someone else has more. All of a sudden, what God gave us is no longer good enough if our neighbor has something we perceive to be better than what we have. We quickly forget the words of Jesus regarding covetousness.

**And He said to them, “Take heed and beware of covetousness, for one’s life does not consist in the abundance of the things he possesses.”
(Luke 12:15)**

When compared to the poverty that exists in the world as a whole, the vast majority of Americans are already prosperous. Yet still, we’re not satisfied. We are constantly trying to keep up with our neighbors, buying things on credit with money we don’t have to impress people we don’t like. Some people spend so much time chasing the cheese, there’s no time for anything else, including God. Some even work two or more jobs just to pay for their stuff, and as soon as they get a raise or a promotion, they go after more stuff. It’s a never-ending cycle.

I’m convinced that the devil no longer spends any time coming up with new tricks. Why should he when the old ones still work? He’s still getting us with his number one scheme: the lust of the eyes. He used it against Eve in the garden and he’s been using it on us ever since.

THE NAME IT CLAIM IT MYTH

The Church has moved so far away from God’s order, we’re now sanctioning the pursuit of the material. Of course, we don’t call it chasing material possessions. That would be too obvious. Instead, we tell people to “name it and claim it” and they will receive it. We’ve compacted getting blessed into a 3-step plan.

Step 1: Name It!

Step 2: Claim It!

Step 3: Receive It!

Sounds pretty simple, doesn't it? So why doesn't it work? It doesn't work because God is the "Great I Am", not the "Great Magician", and He's more concerned with building our character than He is with building our bank accounts. Why would a loving God Who knows all and Who sees all give us what we are not ready to handle? A blessing in the wrong hands is actually a curse.

One of the problems with the whole "name it and claim it" idea is that it gives people false hope by making them believe that God is going to just give them whatever they want, even if what they are asking for is not part of His divine will and purpose. It simply doesn't work that way. I know that's what many of us have been told during offering time, but it doesn't work like that. God is not into instant gratification. He has a process and His blessings come with rules and conditions. When we pursue material things, the steps that we are actually following look more like this:

Step 1: See It!

Step 2: Covet It!

Step 3: Go After It!

One of the scriptures that is used to support the "name it, claim it" idea is found in the book of Mark. One day Jesus cursed a fig tree that would not bear fruit out of season. The next morning, the disciples came to Him and told Him that the fig tree He cursed had withered away.

So Jesus answered and said to them, "Have faith in God. For assuredly, I say to you, whoever says to this mountain, 'Be removed and be cast into the sea,' and does not doubt in his heart, but believes that those things he says will be done, he will have whatever he says. Therefore I say to you, whatever things you ask when you pray, believe that you receive them, and you will have them. (Mark 11:22-24)

Taken out of context, this scripture could easily be interpreted to mean that anyone could have whatever he asks for as long as he believes that he's going to get it, but notice who Jesus was talking to when He said this. He wasn't talking to the Pharisees, the Sadducees, or even the multitude. He was talking to His disciples: those men who had forsaken all that they had in order to follow Him.

In Mark 10, there is another story about a rich young ruler who came to Jesus and asked Him what he needed to do to inherit eternal life. Jesus began to tell Him about the commandments. The young man, probably very proudly, said to Jesus that he had kept all of the commandments from his youth. Then Jesus told him that he still lacked one thing. He instructed him to go and sell all that he had and give to the poor and follow Him. The bible tells us that the young man went away sorrowful, because he had great possessions.

I believe if Jesus would have just told him to pay a tithe or give an offering to the poor he would have been able to do that, but Jesus told him to sell everything he had and give to the poor. How often do you hear the prosperity preachers talk about selling all of their possessions for the sake of the gospel? No, their too busy telling you what you should do with your money. The problem this young man had wasn't that he was rich and had many possessions. The problem was that he obviously placed too much value on his possessions, because he was not willing to give them up to follow Jesus.

Later Jesus shares with His disciples the reward for forsaking everything for Him and for the gospel's sake.

Then Peter began to say to Him, “See, we have left all and followed You.” So Jesus answered and said, “Assuredly, I say to you, there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or father or mother or wife or children or lands, for My sake and the gospel’s, who shall not receive a hundredfold now in this time – houses and brothers and sisters and mothers and children and lands, with persecutions – and in the age to come, eternal life.” (Mark 10:28-30)

Our problem today is that we want the hundredfold return without having to forsake or give up anything, and we want it without any persecutions. Also, notice that Jesus isn't just talking about a hundredfold return of worldly possessions.

Another problem with the “name it, claim it” idea is that the people who advocate it are usually naming and claiming material possessions or money. These are the same people who go to conventions and shout at the devil to give them back their money. I mean, just think about it. If these people really do believe that they have the ability to just name and claim something and receive it, then why are they wasting that anointing on things that have no eternal value? Why not go for the big bang? Why not claim an end to cancer, drug addiction or pornography? I don't believe God would give that kind of anointing to

someone who would use it for selfish gain. I believe that when Jesus said we could have whatever we ask for - He was only talking to those who are mature enough to know what to ask.

ASKING ACCORDING TO HIS WILL

We've all heard about King Solomon and his great wealth. However, Solomon's wealth itself is not nearly as important as how he attained it. Unlike many of us, Solomon didn't pursue wealth. The bible tells us "the Lord appeared to Solomon in a dream by night; and said, "Ask! What shall I give you?" (I Kings 3:5) What an awesome position Solomon was in - to have God Himself appear to him and tell him to ask for whatever he wanted. He could have asked for anything, but look at how Solomon replied to God:

"Therefore give to Your servant an understanding heart to judge Your people, that I may discern between good and evil. For who is able to judge this great people of Yours?" (I Kings 3:9)

How many of us today, if given the same opportunity that Solomon had would have asked for understanding or discernment? Many of us would have still been naming things....*'I'll take a nicer house, Lord. You know I need more closet space for all these shoes I have. And could I also get a pool in the backyard? I don't know how to swim, but I can have some great pool parties. And if You could throw in a newer car that would be great too'...* and on and on we would go. The bible tells us that Solomon, though he was a young boy, didn't ask for anything material or selfish. He asked for the ability to wisely judge God's people, and God was so pleased, He not only granted Solomon's request but threw in a little something extra.

Then God said to him: "Because you have asked this thing, and have not asked long life for yourself nor have asked riches for yourself, nor have asked the life of your enemies, but have asked for yourself understanding to discern justice, behold, I have done according to your words; see, I have given you a wise and understanding heart, so that there has not been anyone like you before you, nor shall any like you arise after you. And I have also given you what you have not asked;

both riches and honor, so that there shall not be anyone like you among the kings all your days.” (I King 3:11-13)

Solomon became not only the wisest, but also the wealthiest king of his time, all because his desire and his focus were on the right thing. What happened with Solomon is what I believe Paul meant when he spoke of the God who is “able to do exceedingly, abundantly above all that we ask or think...” (Ephesians 3:20). Solomon didn’t have to name and claim riches. Instead, he asked for wisdom and God gave to him exceedingly and abundantly above what he asked for.

If we’re honest with ourselves, we’re usually asking for material possessions or more money and then we wonder why God doesn’t give to us exceedingly and abundantly above what we’re asking for. It’s because we’re asking for the wrong thing. God will bless us, but His blessings are according to His will and His purpose for our lives, not according to what we want.

Now this is the confidence that we have in Him, that if we ask anything according to His will, He hears us. (I John 5:14)

One of the reasons we don’t see our prayers answered is because we haven’t grasped this concept of asking according to God’s will. You’re not the CEO of that company yet, because that’s not God’s purpose for your life. You’re not financially wealthy, because God never told you that you would be. Your pastor may have told you that, but God didn’t.

Solomon received such great riches because his request was in line with God’s will. I believe that if Solomon had asked for anything else except wisdom, his story would have been very different, but Solomon asked for something that God wanted to give him anyway. He had a kingdom mentality, not a selfish one. Similarly, we can’t expect God to just give us whatever we ask unless what we are asking for is part of His will.

Have you ever asked God for something, but He didn’t give it to you? You were probably disappointed. You may have even become angry or bitter. Then later something happened and you understood why God didn’t do what you asked. There have been many times that I’ve asked God for something that He did not give me and later I was glad that I didn’t get it. I’m thankful that God knows what I need better than I do.

Much of the prosperity message depicts God as this great spiritual being who is just sitting around waiting on us to tell Him what to do. If this were true, then we would all be

in serious trouble. Fortunately for us, God does not need our direction. He's God. The bible says that "the heavens declare [His glory] and the skies proclaim the work of His hands." (Psalm 19:1) So, He's well qualified to do His job. He knows what to do and when to do it. It's not God's job to do whatever we ask Him to do. It's our job to find out from Him what it is that we should be doing.

This is why it is so important to focus on God and not on the blessings of God. If our focus is on worldly things and worldly pursuits, we will never understand God's purpose for our lives. If we don't understand our purpose, we won't know what to ask Him for in prayer. Solomon knew his purpose. He knew that he was a king and therefore would need to be able to wisely judge between the people of God. He understood that in order to fulfill his purpose, it was more important for him to have wisdom than riches. Likewise, when we understand our purpose, we will know what we need to fulfill that purpose.

CONTENTMENT

I'm going to say something that many of you reading this book will not like, so brace yourself: We are not all destined to be financially rich and have all of the material possessions we could ever desire. I realize that is what many prosperity preachers have told us, but it simply is not true. Not every Christian needs to be rich in order to fulfill his or her purpose.

Many of these same preachers and teachers will also say that Jesus, when he walked the earth as a man, was rich, but that's a direct contradiction to the Word of God, which says that Jesus became poor for our sakes.

For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though He was rich, yet for your sakes He became poor, that you through His poverty might become rich. (II Corinthians 8:9)

It was a sacrifice on the part of Jesus to become poor for our sakes, but He did it because He wasn't caught up in the things of this world. His poverty didn't hinder His destiny, because He still had what He needed to fulfill His purpose.

Also, Paul, who wrote much of the New Testament, was able to fulfill his purpose without the benefit of great riches. In fact, Paul was the one who said that he was content with just food and clothing.

Now godliness with contentment is great gain. For we brought nothing into this world, and it is certain we can carry nothing out. And having food and clothing, with these we shall be content. (I Timothy 6:6-8)

Through his suffering and tribulations, Paul learned the simple joy of contentment that many Christians today still haven't learned. Like Jesus, Paul wasn't concerned with accumulating worldly possessions or money, because he didn't need those things to fulfill his purpose. He was content with having only what he needed to do the work that God had for him to do.

Before we ask or expect God to give us something, we need to first ask ourselves these three questions:

1. Am I asking God for something that is according to His will or is it based on the desires of my flesh?
2. Is what I'm asking for or expecting God to do necessary to fulfill the purpose that God has for my life?
3. Am I content with what God has already given me or am I dissatisfied because I want more?

If you're like me, when you ask yourself these questions and honestly answer them, you'll realize that much of what we go after today is more about what we want than what God wants for us. I'm not saying that God won't bless us, because He already has. What I am saying is that the body of Christ is wasting too much time pursuing the things of this world. We've allowed our desire for material and financial gain to consume our hearts and minds and blur our vision. So, when we read the bible it's like looking through a camera that is out of focus. When our focus is on self-gain, it doesn't matter what scriptures we read or hear, we can't discern the truth of God's Word. Only when we re-focus the lenses of our hearts will we see clearly.

There's limitless power and authority in the Word of God that we'll never really tap into until we put our focus where it should be. I believe that if Christians could ever get to a point where we spend more time chasing God than we spend chasing that elusive piece of cheese called prosperity, we would begin to see a major shift in the power and influence that we have in the world.



CHAPTER 4

THE BENEFIT PACKAGE

Imagine that you are the CEO of a large company and you tell one of your managers to hire someone to run one of your offices. You probably only chose this manager because you trust him to carry out your wishes. You assume that as a manager he knows and understands the mission and goals of the organization and will do a good job hiring someone and ensuring that they are trained properly.

Now how would you feel if that manager told the potential employee nothing about the actual job they were being hired to do, but went on and on about the benefit package? What if after hiring the person, he never even trained them to do the job? Once you found out about it, you would probably discipline that manager or terminate him.

Well, that is what many of our leaders in the Church are doing today. They're enlisting people into the kingdom by telling them about the benefit package, and just like the new employee in the example above, these people are not equipped to do what is required of them.

Many are led, not to the cross, but to the church or the pastor. They see the luxury cars in the parking lot. They're impressed with the congregation's designer clothing and the pastor's tailored suits. So, they answer the altar call. The unfortunate part is that the call

they are answering is not the call for salvation. Instead, they see joining the church as a means of achieving a greater level of success.

You know the people I'm talking about. They're the ones you see passing out business cards on Sunday or those who fight to sit beside certain people who they think can help them further their careers. These people foolishly assume that aligning themselves with the right ministry will lead them directly to financial promotion. Each Sunday they return for more "good news." They hear that God's going to bless them and they begin to dream again. They see themselves sporting that new car, showing off those new clothes and entertaining in that larger home. Sunday after Sunday, message after message they hear about the benefits of being saved.

They believe that God is going to just drop something in their laps and they have all of their cups turned up. Excited at the prospect of a more prosperous life, they've done laps around the church and jumped across the pews. Some of them have stood in the money lines and sown most of their bill money and they just know God's going to grant their wishes. So, they wait...and wait...and wait.

Many of them are led through the bible like it was a buffet at a banquet and they were told they could choose what they wanted to eat.

"Give me a large helping of that Blessing."

"I think I'll pass on that Obedience."

"Give me a piece of that Prosperity."

"No, I don't want any of that Sacrifice."

"And Suffering! I'll never choose that stuff. It tastes awful!"

Their stomachs are full, but they've feasted on the wrong thing. I can't tell you how many times I've eaten until I was full, but I still had an unsatisfied feeling. I wanted more, but I couldn't find that one thing that would hit the spot. Our spirit operates in much the same way. We can eat until we're full, but unless we're eating the bread of life, we'll never be satisfied. A true Saint has a built-in hunger that is only satisfied with the Word of God. Fluffy pastries with cheap filling won't hit the spot. Sugary drinks won't quench our thirsts. We need sustenance to survive, and we need to know what God requires of us.

I call this section "The Benefit Package" because many Christians see prosperity as the benefit of being saved. When we're looking for employment, we evaluate a job based on what benefits the company offers. Do they have affordable medical and dental coverage? How many vacation days or sick days do they give in the first year? Is there a tuition

reimbursement plan? Based on the answers to these and other questions, we make a decision as to whether or not we want to work for a particular company. If we like the benefit package (and of course the salary), we pursue the job. If we don't like it, we keep looking.

Somehow, we've brought this same pattern of thinking into the Church. We've been told that God offers an excellent benefit package, replete with houses and cars and everything a person could ever want, and of course God must pay very well, because even the pastor is flashing diamonds and gold. While this way of thinking may be acceptable in corporate America, it's dangerous in the Church because it sets us up for disappointment and gets us focused on the wrong thing.

I realize how difficult it must be as a leader today in the Church because there are so many secular distractions. The younger generation, especially, is so impressed with athletes and entertainers whose lifestyles exemplify a materialistic culture. They see all of the glitz and glamour and they want what these people have. So naturally, many pastors feel as if they have to compete. They adjust their messages by telling people that being saved has just as many materialistic benefits as being in the world. And while there are many men and women who God blesses abundantly (only because He trusts them to be a blessing to others), this type of preaching to appease the masses is more destructive than helpful.

In his letter to the Church of Corinth, Paul said that he became "all things to all men, that [he] might by all means save some". (I Corinthians 9:22) I can see how a misinterpretation of this scripture would make it seem okay to use "worldly trappings" to entice people to Christ, but Paul didn't compromise the gospel. He didn't become a pimp. He became a martyr.

After Jesus was resurrected, He appeared before the disciples on the mountain in Galilee and gave them these instructions:

"Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you..." (Matthew 28:19-20a)

Notice that Jesus' instructions were not to 'go and build a mega church and get as many people to join as possible'. He didn't even tell them to 'go and get people saved'. He told

them to make disciples. Disciples and churchgoers are not the same thing. Churchgoers *hear* the Word. Disciples *become* the Word. Tickling people's ears by telling them how much stuff God is going to give them is not making disciples. It may raise the membership count. It may even increase the offering, but it won't make disciples.

It takes strong meat and not milk to make disciples. Disciples understand that there is a price to pay for discipleship. This is where those ministries that focus on the blessings and the benefits fall short, because they don't talk about the sacrifices of discipleship. Most of the disciples and the apostles died as martyrs. For them, there was definitely a price to pay for their discipleship, but they were willing to pay that price, because they were following Jesus because of Who He was, not because of what they believed He would give them. Had they thought they would get the worldly reward that many of us seek, they would have been some very disappointed fellows.

Yet, we believe that we're somehow different from them. We don't even question it when someone tells us something that is contrary to the Word of God. We would call it irresponsible if a general in the armed forces didn't adequately prepare his soldiers for battle. So why do we tolerate the same thing in the Church? Why do we sit and listen without question to messages that don't line up with the Word of God? When we talk about the benefits of being saved, we need to look at the whole picture, not just the things we like. God never promised us an easy life. In fact, the bible tells us that we should expect persecution, tribulation and suffering.

PERSECUTION

Yes, and all who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will suffer persecution. (II Timothy 3:12)

The word "persecution" probably ranks up there in the top five words that are forbidden in the Church today...right up there with "sin" and "suffering". But if we study the lives of the disciples and apostles and even Jesus Himself, we'll find that they were persecuted. And they endured the persecution, because they knew that there was a greater reward awaiting them. Jesus even tells us to "rejoice" when we are persecuted:

"Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when they revile and

persecute you, and say all kinds of evil against you falsely for My sake. Rejoice and be exceedingly glad, for great is your reward in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you.” (Matthew 5:10-12)

Persecution is part of being a true Christian. We can't escape it. Nor should we try. We should embrace it as much as we embrace prosperity, knowing that it is an indication that we're doing what is right according to the Word of God.

Just ask Job. The bible tells us that Job was a righteous man who was minding his own business when God decided to use him to prove a point to Satan. God had a hedge of protection around Job and his household and he was the most blessed man in the East region. Satan told God that the only reason Job was still serving Him was because God had blessed him so much. He challenged God and said that if God removed Job's blessings, Job would curse Him to His face.

So God gave Satan permission to destroy everything that Job had. First, raiders stole all of Job's possessions and slaughtered his servants. Then fire from the sky burned up his sheep and a mighty wind destroyed his house, killing his sons and daughters. Finally, Job came down with a terrible disease that left painful sores all over his body.

The first time I read this story, I thought, 'poor Job'. It seemed unfair and cruel for God to allow the devil to torment someone whom He Himself called "blameless and upright". (Job 1:8) Then I realized that Job was a chosen and honored vessel. Certainly, it didn't appear so to Job, but he was in a wonderful position. God wasn't about to let the devil be right. His reputation was on the line, so He had to choose someone that He could trust with persecution...someone who wouldn't get angry and lose his faith and turn his back on God because of what he was going through. I've often thought about what I would have done if I were in the same position as Job. Could God trust me with persecution?

The only reason that Job was persecuted was because he was righteous. He was someone whom God could trust. Though he questioned the unfairness of his situation, Job never cursed God. Even after his friends told him that he was to blame for the suffering he was going through and his own wife told him to curse God and die, Job proved faithful to the end. Through all of his pain and despair, he declared, "though He slay me, yet will I trust Him." (Job 13:15) And in the end, God blessed Job with twice as much as he had before.

TRIBULATION

“These things I have spoken to you, that in Me you may have peace. In the world you will have tribulation; but be of good cheer, I have overcome the world.” (John 16:33)

How many of us get happy at the prospect of having more tribulation? Yet, Jesus said that we can expect to have some tribulations as long as we’re in this world and we should “be of good cheer” about it. The good thing though is that we can also expect to have peace in Him.

The apostle Paul understood this concept. He was whipped, beaten and stoned, yet still he was able to say that he gloried in tribulations.

...but we also glory in tribulations, knowing that tribulation produces perseverance; and perseverance, character; and character, hope. (Romans 5:3b-4)

The hope that Paul is talking about here is not the hope that God would bless him with financial prosperity or a life of comfort. He wasn’t focused on those things. His hope was built on an eternal reward and it was the outcome of his tribulations. Without tribulations, there would be no perseverance. Without perseverance there would be no building of character and without character, there would be no hope. Paul was able to say that he and the other apostles gloried in their tribulations, because they knew that the product of those tribulations would be hope in Christ and that was enough to sustain them.

SUFFERING

The Spirit Himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs – heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ, if indeed we suffer with Him, that we may also be glorified together. (Romans 8:16-17)

We often hear that we are joint heirs with Christ. We like the idea of being children of God. What we don’t usually dwell on is the part that says, “if indeed we suffer with Him”,

because no one likes to suffer. We dislike the idea of suffering so much, many have taken it completely out of the Christian walk. The prosperity gospel's message is that we no longer have to suffer, but we can all live lavish, comfortable lives, reaping the benefits of Christ's suffering. However, that's not what the bible says. Instead, it tells us that we should share in the sufferings of Christ.

Beloved, do not think it strange concerning the fiery trial which is to test you, as though some strange thing happened to you; but rejoice to the extent that you partake of Christ's sufferings, that when His glory is revealed, you may also be glad with exceeding joy. (I Peter 4:12-13)

So, not only should we partake or share in Christ's sufferings, but we should also rejoice to the extent that we share in His sufferings. In other words, the more we share in His sufferings, the more we should rejoice.

When I was younger, I would run to my mother complaining about something that happened in my life. She would always say to me, "if it doesn't kill you it'll make you stronger." At the time, I thought she was just being hard on me, but when I grew older, I realized she was right. It's hard to see when you're going through a difficult time, but suffering does build strength and character. When God allows us to suffer through something, He has a greater purpose that we may not understand. As Christians, we should be able to walk through our suffering with faith, knowing that when Christ is glorified, we will be glorified with Him.

For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us. (Romans 8:18)

We shouldn't expect to be glorified with Christ if we are not willing to suffer for Him. Many of us believe that we are entitled to the glory, but exempt from the suffering. But if God allowed Christ, Who was His only Son, to suffer, what makes us believe that He will spare us?

THE FORGOTTEN BENEFITS

Because we've become so materialistic and financially driven in the Church today, we often overlook what I consider to be the more important "benefits" of being saved. We're all familiar with Philippians 3:19 which tells us that "God shall supply all of [our] need according to His riches in glory by Christ Jesus," but sometimes, what we call a need is really a want. Sometimes we forget that His "riches in glory" encompasses far more than money or material possessions.

For example, every Christian that chooses to walk in the Spirit and not in the flesh will live a life that exemplifies certain characteristics. The bible calls these characteristics the "fruit of the Spirit" and they are those things that distinguish us from the rest of the world.

But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, longsuffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, meekness, temperance: against such there is no law. And they that are Christ's have crucified the flesh with the affections and lusts. If we live in the Spirit, let us also walk in the Spirit. (Galatians 5:22-25 KJV)

These are the real benefits of being saved: that we would be transformed in such a way that we walk and act like Christ. What is money without love or joy or peace? What does it matter how many material possessions we have if we don't have longsuffering, goodness, faithfulness or self-control?

Without these qualities, a financially prosperous Christian will be like the rich man Jesus spoke of in the twelfth chapter of Luke. Jesus told the parable of a certain rich man who had abundance but didn't know what to do with it. So, he decided to build bigger barns to store it. God called him a fool, because he hoarded what he had. (Luke 12:16-21) This man simply didn't get it. Just like many of us, he was too focused on the material benefits of the kingdom, and didn't grasp the spiritual benefits. Had he walked according to the Spirit and not according to the flesh, he would have known that the only reason he had such an abundance was so that he could share it, not hoard it all for himself.

THE GREATEST BENEFIT

The greatest benefit that God promises us is eternal life with Him. It doesn't get any better than that. In the old Church, the saints sang songs about going to heaven and meeting God face to face. They looked forward to it. It was the ultimate reward. The Church today, however, acts as if heaven no longer exists. Rarely, will you find anyone talking about eternal life or heaven. For a long time, I wondered why our generation downplays the "hereafter". It wasn't until recently that I figured it out. We downplay heaven because it's a future promise and we don't want to wait on it. We want to get everything now, in this lifetime.

So, we buy into the messages that pacify our desires for an earthly reward. But does God really promise that we will all be rewarded in this lifetime? Why should we be any different from those who walked before us? Not only is the bible full of examples of people who didn't get their reward on this earth, but many men and women who paved the way for us to be where we are today didn't live to see the manifestation of their labor. Yet they were still willing to toil and sacrifice, knowing that their reward would come later.

They were stoned, they were sawn in two, were tempted, were slain with the sword. They wandered about in sheepskins and goatskins, being destitute, afflicted, tormented – of whom the world was not worthy. They wandered in deserts and mountains, in dens and caves of the earth. And all these having obtained a good testimony through faith, did not receive the promise, God having provided something better for us, that they should not be made perfect apart from us. (Hebrews 11:37-40)

The first time I read this section in the book of Hebrews, it scared me. It scared me because my entire Christian life was centered on the idea that no matter how hard things became, God would eventually rescue me, and that included giving me the finances and the things that I wanted. I mean, isn't that what we are told on Sunday at church and what we hear on Christian television – that one day God is going to bless us with everything we've always wanted? Isn't that what motivates us – the idea that one day all of our labor will pay off?

I didn't want to believe that God would allow us to serve Him and not reward us. So, I did what many of you are doing now. I ignored the truth of God's Word even though it

was staring me right in the face. Then one day I had to accept it. Earlier, I said that disappointment is the place where our plans meet God's plans. It's also the place where our misconceptions meet the truth. I had been lying to myself. I was more interested in the "here and now" than I was in "eternity". I wanted the big house. I wanted the nice car. I cared what people thought of how I dressed. And I was disappointed and angry. I had put my hope and my trust in God and He didn't come through.

It was a difficult period in my life, which forced me to look inward. I had to examine myself and my motives. What I saw made me ashamed. I wasn't serving God because I loved Him. I was doing it for me. My faith wasn't in Him. My faith was in what I thought He would give me. I thought God had let me down, because I had not achieved the financial level of success that I thought I should have.

Now I realize that God didn't let me down. He did rescue me. He saved me from living a life that was based on selfish desires and pursuits. He put me in a place where I could experience real love. When I hear people saying that they love God for Who He is, I wonder if they really know what that means. It's not something to say lightly and it's not an easy thing to do. To love Him for Who He is means putting aside every dream and every desire, forsaking all to follow Him. To love Him for Who He is means obeying Him, even when we don't understand. And to love Him for Who He is means understanding that the greatest benefit of being a child of God is God Himself.



CHAPTER 5

LESSONS FROM THE ISRAELITES

Beginning in the book of Exodus, the bible tells us the story of the Israelites and how God miraculously delivered them from their oppression out of the land of Egypt. It's a familiar story to many of us and one we've heard used often as a lesson for everything from deliverance to obedience. Yet, I believe there's still more that we can learn from the children of Israel. There are other aspects of their story that shed light on God's plan regarding the prosperity of His people.

The bible tells us that the Israelites came to live in the land of Egypt during the seven years of famine. Because of the favor that Joseph had with Pharaoh, Joseph brought his father, Jacob, and all of his brothers and their households to Egypt so that he could provide for them during the famine. After Jacob and Joseph died, the Israelites increased in number. Then another king came into power who did not know Joseph and he began to oppress the people, because they were so great in number. The king feared that if there was a war the people would join their enemies and leave the land of Egypt. So he set taskmasters over the people to afflict them and make them work hard, but the more they were afflicted, the more the people multiplied. After a while, the people began to cry out to God because of their bondage. God heard their cry and remembered the covenant that He had made with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, which was to bring their descendants into the

land of Canaan, a land “flowing with milk and honey”. (Exodus 3:17) So God chose Moses to lead the people out of Egypt to the Promised Land.

Before the people came out of Egypt, God gave them favor, which allowed them to plunder the riches of the Egyptians.

Now the children of Israel had done according to the word of Moses, and they had asked from the Egyptians articles of silver, articles of gold, and clothing. And the Lord had given the people favor in the sight of the Egyptians, so that they granted them what they requested. Thus they plundered the Egyptians. (Exodus 12:35-36)

So, the Israelites left Egypt with silver and with gold. In an instant, they went from rags to riches. They didn't attend a wealth-building seminar. They didn't purchase the sermon series on how to be more prosperous. Instead, they received a supernatural, sudden deliverance from poverty.

God's favor made them rich.

They didn't ask God to give them the wealth of the Egyptians. They only wanted deliverance from the hand of their oppressors. God not only delivered them but He also gave them the favor that made them rich. Then God, through his servant, Moses, led the people to their promise. So, first, they received the riches of the Egyptians, and then they were led to their promise.

Getting the riches was not the promise.

Many of us think getting riches or wealth is the final achievement, but it's not. For the Israelites, getting wealth was not their promise. It was just an “extra”. Now here's what really intrigues me about this story: first God delivered them and gave them wealth; then He led them into the wilderness, a place where the wealth was of no real use to them.

They still had to depend on God to survive.

God still had to protect them and even feed them. The bible tells us that God fed the people manna for 40 years. (Exodus 16: 35) So, the wealth they had didn't really matter and had nothing to do with getting to their promise. They still had to depend on God every day to survive. I believe God gave them wealth and then took them to a place where they couldn't really use it, because He wanted to show them that the wealth was not as important as the God Who gave it to them. In fact, Moses admonishes the people not to forget that it was God who gave them the ability to get wealth.

“And you shall remember the Lord your God, for it is He who gives you power to get wealth that He may establish His covenant which He swore to your fathers as it is this day. Then it shall be, if you by any means forget the Lord your God, and follow other gods, and serve them and worship them, I testify against you this day that you shall surely perish.” (Deuteronomy 8:18-19)

And perish is exactly what they did. Because of their disobedience, the Israelites spent forty years in the wilderness. So, they were rich but still wandering in the wilderness. They had all the resources to do great exploits at their disposal, but because they were wandering in the wilderness, they were unable to do anything.

They wasted their resources wandering in the wilderness.

I believe we're doing the same thing today. Just like the Israelites, we're still wandering in the wilderness, wasting the resources that God has given us. If a non-Christian were to look at the Church today, he or she might think that God was either a lousy provider or He was having a financial crisis, because His children are always begging for money. I believe that the Christian community already has all of the resources that it needs to do what God has called us to do, but instead of using those resources for ministry, we're wasting them in the wilderness. We're taking the wealth that God gave us the ability to get and we're buying things that have no eternal value, constantly feeding our every fleshly desire. We're even building monstrous churches and facilities that we really can't afford, all the while declaring that we're doing it for God's glory when really it's for our own glory, and we're wasting valuable resources on interest that is paid to secular organizations.

In many ways, we are just like the Israelites. The journey that they took from Egypt to Canaan was only about 250 miles by the shortest route, but it took them forty years. Even if they only traveled an average of 3 miles per day and rested on the Sabbath, they should have been in the wilderness no more than 3 months. But it took them 40 years. That's 39 years and 9 months longer than was necessary. That's a lot of wandering, and all of the wealth that they could have used in the Promised Land was wasted because they were wandering around in the wilderness.

I believe it took them so long, because they missed God's purpose. Time after time, they experienced the miraculous. At the beginning of their journey, they saw God part the Red Sea and allow them to walk across on dry land then swallow up their enemies. They even saw God rain manna from heaven. Repeatedly they saw God's hand move on their behalf, but they never caught His Spirit.

They saw God's hand, but they never caught His Spirit.

The bible tells us that twelve men were sent to spy out the land of Canaan. When they returned to camp to give their report to the people, most of the spies gave a negative report and told the people that they were not able to take the land, because the cities were fortified and the descendants of Anak (the giants) were there. Only Caleb and Joshua said that they were well able to take the land God had promised them, but the people didn't believe them. So, God told them that they would not enter the Promised Land.

"...because all these men who have seen My glory and the signs which I did in Egypt and in the wilderness, and have put Me to the test now these ten times, and have not heeded My voice, they certainly shall not see the land of which I swore to their fathers, nor shall any of those who rejected Me see it. But my servant Caleb, because he has a different spirit in him and has followed Me fully, I will bring into the land where he went, and his descendants shall inherit it." (Numbers 14:22-24)

"Except for Caleb the son of Jephunneh and Joshua, the son of Nun, you shall by no means enter the land which I swore I would make you dwell in." (Numbers: 14:30)

So, many of the people died without ever entering into their promise, because their spirit was not in line with God's Spirit. They didn't have a "different spirit" like Caleb so they missed God's purpose. I don't believe that God's purpose for the Israelites was to give them wealth. If God's purpose for them was wealth only, He would not have given them wealth and then led them into the wilderness where they couldn't even use it. Even though the bible tells us that taking the children of Israel into the land of Canaan was the fulfillment of God's covenant, I don't believe this was God's only purpose either. If taking the people into the Promised Land was God's sole purpose, why did he lead them through the wilderness first and allow most of them to die there without ever entering the Promised Land? I believe God's purpose was much higher.

God was trying to build the character of His people.

He wanted them to have faith in Him. He wanted them to trust Him and believe in Him. The journey they took was never about the wealth they received on the way. It wasn't even about where they were going. They should have learned something. They should have caught the Spirit of God and developed a closer relationship with Him, but they missed it.

Physically, they were delivered from the land of Egypt, but their spirits and their minds were still in bondage. No matter what God did for them, they were never satisfied. They witnessed miracle after miracle, but they still doubted God. They continually complained to Moses that they would have been better off in Egypt, because all they could see was their natural circumstances. They missed what God was doing. The purpose of the journey was never about what God was or wasn't doing for them. It was about what He was trying to establish in them.

When God heard the people's complaints about not having enough to eat, He said that He would send them bread, but make them gather a certain amount so that He could test them.

Then the Lord said to Moses, "Behold, I will rain bread from heaven for you. And the people shall go out and gather a certain quota every day that I may test them, whether they walk in My law or not." (Exodus 16:4)

So, the people had to go out each day and gather only what they needed according to who was in their household. They were told not to gather more manna than they could eat. If they gathered too much and had some left over, except on the Sabbath, it would spoil. God could just have easily made the manna so that it would stay fresh no matter how long they kept it, but He wanted to teach the people to trust Him and to heed His voice no matter what He told them. The most important thing about the Law that was given to the people was not so much the Law itself, but God wanted to teach the people to be obedient to whatever He said. He wanted their hearts to be turned towards Him.

I believe that what happened to the Israelites is a picture of the Church today. We spend a lot of time talking about what God's going to give us and where He's taking us, but we're missing His greater purpose.

The focus is not what He's doing for us, but rather what He's trying to do in us.

The bible tells us that we are God's handiwork.

For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared before-hand that we should walk in them. (Ephesians 2:10)

The bible also tells us that we are being transformed into the image of Christ.

But we all, with unveiled face, beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from glory to glory, just as by the Spirit of the Lord. (II Corinthians 3:18)

God wants us to be like, act like, walk like and talk like His Son. Jesus came to redeem us, but that wasn't His only purpose for coming. He also came to be our example of how we should live our lives.

Back in the late 90's, the WWJD (What Would Jesus Do?) paraphernalia became popular for many Christians: armbands, t-shirts, bumper stickers, etc. But we don't have to wonder what Jesus would do, because we have the Word of God, which tells us what He did. So, we can just look at His example. I think that if we did this, we would find that there are many things that we go after that Jesus never went after.

The final lesson that we can learn from the Israelites lies in what they did with some of the gold that they had. While Moses was up on the mountain, the people went to Aaron and asked Him to make a god for them, because Moses had been gone so long and they didn't know what happened to him. So, Aaron instructed the people to bring him the gold that they had. Then he took the gold and made a golden calf, and the people sacrificed to it and worshipped it. They said that this was the god that brought them out of the land of Egypt.

They forgot about God and worshipped a false god.

When God saw it, He was angry with the people, because they broke His commandment to have no other gods before Him. When we read this, it's easy to see that the Israelites went outside of God's order and broke His commandment, but it's a little harder to look at ourselves and see that we're doing the same thing. Except now, our golden image is a house, a car, or even a lifestyle. For some of us it's a fleshly image. Some of us make idols of our ministers and leaders, and we bow down to them. We replace God with them, and just like the Israelites, we're breaking God's commandment to have no other gods before Him.

But unlike them, we don't have to die in the wilderness. I believe we can learn from their example. Unlike them, we can catch hold of God's Spirit. We can walk in obedience and heed the voice of God and allow Him to lead us to our promises, both corporately and individually. God has a purpose, a plan and a promise for each of our lives and it doesn't have to take us forty years to reach it. We can start today by changing our minds and readjusting our mentalities, and most importantly, we can stop wasting the resources that God has given us.



CHAPTER 6

PROPHECY FOR PROFIT

Then Jesus went into the temple of God and drove out all those who bought and sold in the temple, and overturned the tables of the money changers and the seats of those who sold doves. And He said to them, “It is written, ‘My house shall be called a house of prayer,’ but you have made it a ‘den of thieves’ ”. (Matthew 21:12-13)

I believe that if Jesus walked into most of our churches today, He would turn over some tables just as He did in Jerusalem. We’re not selling doves, but we’re selling everything else. Some of our churches are designed more for profit than for prayer or for worship. We might as well remove the altar and replace it with an ATM machine, since that’s what many of us think God is anyway - our personal ATM machine, and the only reason we go to church is to make a withdrawal.

We spend more time taking up the offering or promoting someone’s latest book or CD than we spend in prayer or worship, and we wonder why people come Sunday after Sunday and never change. They never change because they never encounter the true presence of God, just a whole lot of flesh.

Our churches are even designed now to look like a marketplace. The lobbies are filled with so-called spiritual products displayed to entice the people into thinking that all of this paraphernalia is a necessary part of the Christian walk. Sometimes I wonder how the saints of old managed to serve God without the array of flags, CD's, bumper stickers, t-shirts and all of the other items that we place so much importance on now. Perhaps they were more interested in being godly than they were in looking godly.

YARD SALE REVELATION

A few years ago my mother and I went to a yard sale during one of our Saturday morning outings. While I was browsing the items for sale, a CD of the bible caught my attention, and I decided to buy it. I was making a few other purchases so the lady who was having the sale told me my total and she threw in the bible for free. She said that she wouldn't feel right selling someone a bible. I was so impressed with her comment that it made me think. I started to wonder why some of our churches don't take that same opinion. In fact, those churches that have bookstores not only sell bibles, but they sell them at a profit.

I'm not an expert on the subject, and I know it costs money to produce a nicely bound bible, just as it does to print any other book, but does it really cost \$89.99? Now there's a special bible for everyone for all occasions in various sizes and colors. The last time I went into a bookstore and tried to purchase a new bible, I was overwhelmed by the selection. I'd like to think that there are so many different bibles on the market now because of our love for God and His Word. However, one glance at the price of some of these specialty "devotional" bibles makes me doubt that is the case.

Apparently, the bible selling business is a moneymaker. I'm not knocking free enterprise, but I can't help but wonder how God feels about all of this. Maybe He cares. Maybe He doesn't, but it seems to me if there's one product that the Church should be willing to give away, it's the bible. I think the lady from the yard sale had the right idea, though I doubt she even realized the revelation of her words. She was only talking about a CD, but I heard a deeper meaning in what she said.

**The Word of God is not for sale, whether it's
in printed form or coming from the pulpit.**

TV PROPHETS

I've always been a huge fan of Christian television. I think that it's commendable for someone owning a broadcasting station to use it to advance the gospel. Lately, however, I've stopped watching Christian television as much as I used to, because too many of the messages are now about money and how we can get more of it if we sow into a particular ministry. When used properly, television is a wonderful tool to spread the gospel of Christ. However, as with anything else, it is not always used in the best manner. Many of these TV prophets are like the men that Paul warned Timothy to watch out for.

...men of corrupt minds and destitute of truth, who suppose that godliness is a means of gain. From such withdraw yourself (I Timothy 6:5b)

Paul's warning to Timothy is still relevant today. We should beware of these so-called prophets who see ministry as a means of making money. These are the ones who offer their viewers a guaranteed blessing if they sow a specific amount of money into their ministry. Their focus is to teach people how to get blessed rather than teaching them how to live godly lives and be a blessing to others. They're the ones that you see on TV selling everything from prayer cloths to holy water, all the while promising blessings and miracles. How can someone claim to be a messenger of God in one breath and then try to sell you some holy water in the next? And when did a prayer become so expensive?

Ministry should not be used as a means of making a profit. This is a worldly mentality that we have allowed to creep into the church. We're so off track, we defend this materialistic type of thinking and condemn anyone who has the temerity to speak out against it. I don't believe that ministers should use the money that they collect through ministry to pay for their overly lavish lifestyles. And I also don't believe that church members should be made to feel like it is their responsibility to pay for the lifestyle of the pastor.

A TALKING DONKEY

Unfortunately, the concept of prophecy for profit existed long before television was invented. In the 22nd chapter of Numbers, the bible introduces Balaam, a professional

magician who evidently hired himself out to work magic. Balaam's story is the only one recorded in the bible where God allows an animal, a donkey, to speak.

The bible tells us that during this time, the Israelites were camped along the Jordan across from Jericho. (Numbers 22:1) Because they were so great in number and because God had given them triumph over other nations, the king of Moab, Balak, feared the Israelites. So, he sent men to summons Balaam to come and put a curse on the Israelites. Then God spoke to Balaam and told him not to go with the men to curse the Israelites because they were a blessed people. So, Balaam declined the first summons and told the men to tell King Balak that the Lord would not let him go with them.

So, King Balak sent another summons to Balaam, this time offering to reward him handsomely to come and curse the Israelites. (Apparently, this type of offer would have enticed Balaam in the past.) This time the Lord told Balaam to go with the men but do only what He instructed him to do. The next morning Balaam mounted his donkey and followed the men. The bible says that God became very angry when Balaam went with the men and the angel of the Lord stood in the road to stop him from going. Balaam's donkey saw the angel and turned off the road into a field, but Balaam did not see the angel, so he struck the donkey. The donkey, seeing the angel again, tried to move closer to a wall to stop Balaam, but Balaam struck it for the second time. Finally, the donkey just lay down under Balaam. When Balaam struck the donkey for the third time, God opened up the mouth of the donkey and it spoke to Balaam.

... “What have I done to you to make you beat me these three times? Balaam answered the donkey, “You have made a fool of me! If I had a sword in my hand, I would kill you right now.” The donkey said to Balaam, “Am I not your own donkey, which you have always ridden, to this day? Have I been in the habit of doing this to you? “No,” he said. Then the Lord opened Balaam’s eyes, and he saw the angel of the Lord standing in the road with his sword drawn. So, he bowed low and fell facedown. (Numbers 22:28b-31 NIV)

When I first read this, I thought it was hilarious. Imagine being rebuked by a donkey. The donkey, which is known to be one of God's most stubborn creatures, was able to see what its master was not. Not only was the donkey able to see the angel, but it was also willing to stop mid-track and yield to God's authority. Balaam, on the other hand, was so

anxious to rush toward what seemed to be an opportunity for self-gain, he didn't even notice the angel of the Lord standing in the road. He was blinded by greed.

Even though God had already told him to go and say only what He told him to say, I believe that Balaam had other plans, and God knew it. That's why He sent the angel. Balaam knew that King Balak was in a desperate situation and would pay him well if he would agree to curse the Israelites. So he, like so many so-called Christians today, was willing to sell out for a profit.

Despite Balaam's obvious issues, God still chose to use him to deliver a prophecy to the king of Moab. However, Balaam's seemingly transformed ways were short-lived. God spoke to Balaam seven times, but later, he resorted to his old tricks. He advised the Moabites to seduce the Israelites in order to deter them from following God's commandments. (Numbers 25:1 and Numbers 31:16 NIV)

I believe that Balaam's story illustrates what has happened to some of our leaders in the Church today. Even though they may have been used by God at some point to deliver a word of prophecy, they are not exempt from being tempted by earthly rewards. Just like Balaam, many of them have hired themselves out to the highest bidder and are only preaching when and where there is money to be made. They try to justify their behavior by saying that the more money they can raise, the more money will be available for ministry. However, one look at their lavish lifestyles will prove this to be at its best, only half of the truth, and at its worst, an outright lie.

ANOINTING NOT FOR SALE

Another biblical example of someone trying to use God for his own gain is Simon Magus. The bible tells us that there was a man named Simon who practiced magic in the city of Samaria. The people believed that he held divine power. Then Philip went to Samaria preaching the gospel of Christ, and the Samaritans, including Simon, believed and were baptized.

Later Peter and John went to Samaria and prayed for the Samaritans to receive the Holy Spirit. When they lay hands on the Samaritans, they received the Holy Spirit. The bible tells us that Simon, the magician, saw Peter and John's gifting as an opportunity for himself.

When Simon saw that the Spirit was given at the laying on of the apostles' hands, he offered them money and said, "Give me also this ability so that everyone on whom I lay my hands may receive the Holy Spirit." Peter answered: "May your money perish with you, because you thought you could buy the gift of God with money!" (Acts 8:18-20 NIV)

Simon wanted the anointing that the apostles had, but his motives were wrong. He wanted it so that he could use it for his own gain. Because of his background as a magician, he thought he could add the Holy Spirit to his bag of tricks. He was wrong and Peter rebuked him for it. Notice though that Peter didn't rebuke Simon for desiring the gift of God. He rebuked him for trying to buy it. See, Simon wanted an anointing but he wasn't willing to do what was necessary to get it. He thought he could just throw some money around, and like magic he would be able to lay hands on someone.

Peter was able to see right through Simon's schemes. He knew that Simon's heart was not right. Simon didn't have a heart for God. Whether it was the fame he wanted or a way to make more money, his motives were wrong because they were self-motivated.

I believe that Simon is also a picture of many in the Church today who are motivated by fame and money. Many who are spiritually gifted use their gifts as a means of furthering their own agendas or fattening their own bank accounts. There should be a sign posted outside of every church that says: *Anointing Not For Sale*, because too many anointed people in the body of Christ believe that making money is the purpose of their anointing. These people fail to realize that the gift that God gave them is not for them. It is given to serve others.

We often talk about stewardship and most of the time we refer to it in the context of being a good steward over money. However, stewardship is not just about money. Stewardship is taking whatever God gives us, including our spiritual gifts, and using it according to His divine purpose. You can't be a good steward without accepting this one simple fact: IT'S NOT ABOUT YOU!

God blesses us so that we can bless others. It's popular church-speak to say *I'm blessed to be a blessing*, but how many of us really live according to this principle. How many of us really believe that we are blessed so that we can serve others? A person who really believes this will not use their gifts to advance their own agenda, but rather to advance the kingdom of God.

DON'T PAY FOR A PRAYER

Did you know that there are people in the body of Christ who will only pray for you if you can pay them for doing so? Oh, it might not be as obvious as them coming right out and asking you to pay them for a prayer. The enemy is far more subtle and cunning than that. It might be something like filling out a pledge card and writing a prayer on the back of it. Pledge on one side, prayer on the other side. Or it may be an offering envelope with a spot on it for a prayer request. Offering inside the envelope, prayer request outside the envelope. These are all very subtle gimmicks used to make us believe that God requires a monetary offering in order to answer our prayers. He doesn't and woe to anyone who would tell you otherwise.

A few years ago, I went to a Christian conference with my family. During one of the many offerings, everyone was asked to fill out a prayer card and give a certain amount of money. Then we were told to either bring it to the altar or put it in the basket. Later, the pastor and his team were going to pray over all of the cards. I've forgotten how much it was, but I remember that at that time none of us had the money. I can still remember the reaction of some of my family. They wanted the prayer, but they didn't have the offering amount. It took me and my mom several minutes to explain to them that it didn't matter if they had the money or not. Their prayers would still be answered. Eventually, we filled out one card as a family.

To a mature Christian, this may not have been a big deal. He or she might have even dismissed it, because a mature Christian knows that you don't have to fill out a card to get a prayer answered. However, to someone who isn't a mature Christian...to someone who's desperate...who came to a Christian conference searching for God...needing Him to fill a void in their life or touch them in a special way...to someone who was hurting, this was equivalent to spiritual murder.

I was so disappointed. It took a lot for me to get my family to Atlanta and I didn't want them to leave discouraged. Now that my eyes can see and my ears can hear, I realize that this prayer request/offering was not only appalling, but out of order. I don't understand how someone professing to be a messenger of God could allow so many people to be manipulated. That offering killed someone's hope who didn't know any better. Some people look up to these prophets and preachers believing that they hold the answers to all of their problems. They believe that their prayer for them somehow holds more weight with God than their own prayers. Many of them believe this because they have been

deliberately brainwashed by someone whose ego has hindered his calling (if he was ever called to begin with).

A true messenger of God will not use this type of spiritual manipulation. A true messenger of God will tell you that you can pray for yourself or lay hands on yourself. Because of Christ, we no longer have to wait for a priest to do these things for us. We can go directly to God for ourselves. (Hebrews 10: 18-22) Of course, there will be times when we may need to go to a priest or an elder in the Church for prayer or guidance, but God doesn't want us to be like the man at the pool of Bethesda, depending on someone to help us get healed or delivered. (John 5: 5-8) He doesn't want us depending on a man (not even one He's chosen to be a messenger). Instead, He wants us to depend on Him. Besides, if you're a member of a mega-church, you'll get a much quicker response from God than from your pastor anyway.

CHRISTIAN CONFERENCES

Have you ever gone to a Christian conference and had a wonderful time, only to return home a few days later to the same old mess? Did you wonder how you could be so joyous at the conference, yet be miserable at home? The reason for this is that some of these spiritual events are designed to make you feel good, not to make you change. People who feel good give good offerings. Changed people may not show up the following year, because they don't need to. People who feel good run down the aisle every time there's an altar call so someone can lay hands on them. Changed people lay hands on themselves.

It's amazing the number of spiritual conferences and conventions that are held each year. What's even more amazing is the number of people who consistently attend them. Almost every ministry (especially the bigger ones) has several conferences each year. There's the Single's Conference, the Married Conference, the Women's Conference, the Men's Conference, the Missionary Conference, the Mini Conference and the Mega Conference, just to name a few. It's almost mind numbing.

I used to try to attend every conference that my church held, because I thought it was a necessary part of my growth and development as a Christian. I no longer feel this way. I believe that a conference is only useful if it makes a difference in someone's life. In order to do that, the focus has to be on moving people closer to God. Otherwise, it's just another show.

These types of events could also be a good way for Christians to come together to fellowship and praise and worship God. Unfortunately, this is not always the case, because many of them are held in order to raise money. This is why most of them cost a fee to attend. If you want to get in the building, close enough to actually see the people who are speaking or singing, then you have to buy a ticket. Otherwise, you'll end up in the "nose bleed zone". Many of these spiritual events are just like attending a ball game or a show. The more money you pay, the closer your seat will be. You can even get a hotdog and some popcorn or nachos at some of them.

And be prepared to pass the offering basket multiple times, because somebody has to pay for all the pomp and circumstance. And don't forget the celebrity preachers (A.K.A. messengers of God) who usually demand top dollar. Most of them will begin their sermons by telling you that they have a "Word from the Lord", but they won't share it with you without receiving payment for doing so.

I wonder where Jesus would be sitting if He attended one of these conferences. Somehow, I doubt he'd be sitting on the front row with the dignitaries and the super-saints. If He bothered to attend at all, (and that's a very big "if"), He could probably be found in the "nose bleed zone", ministering to the poor people who couldn't afford a ticket. Probably, Jesus would be outside of the convention, ministering to the sinners...like we should be doing.

While we're having a conference in some grand building downtown, there's a drunken man two streets over wallowing in his vomit. While we're having a conference, there's a crack-head outside the convention center begging for spare change so he can get his next fix. While we're having a conference, entertaining the saints, some man is planning to leave the night service, go home, and abuse his wife. And nothing that happened at the conference is going to make any difference to that woman, because her husband didn't receive a message that would make him change. All he received for his \$65 ticket was some real good entertainment.

If the truth were told, many of us only go to these conferences to feel good and to be entertained, not to change. We go to see the preacher or hear the celebrity musicians. It's the same kind of spiritual entertainment that God warned Ezekiel about after Babylon conquered Jerusalem. (Ezekiel 33:21) Ezekiel became popular after his prediction that Jerusalem would fall came true, but the people only saw him as entertainment, not as a messenger of God.

My people come to you, as they usually do, and sit before you to listen to your words, but they do not put them into practice. With their mouths they express devotion, but their hearts are greedy for unjust gain.

Indeed, to them you are nothing more than one who sings love songs with a beautiful voice and plays an instrument well, for they hear your words but do not put them into practice. (Ezekiel, 33:31-32 NIV)

God told Ezekiel that he was nothing more than entertainment, because the people weren't trying to change. They just came to see the show. The difference, however, between Ezekiel and some of our modern day prophets is that Ezekiel didn't try to entertain the people. He didn't hoop and holler to get the people excited. Ezekiel spoke only what God told him to speak, no matter how horrible it sounded. He didn't try to appease the people with fairy-tales, but He warned them of God's judgment.

Also, Ezekiel didn't try to turn his prophecies into profit. I have yet to find one example in the book of Ezekiel where he was paid money to deliver a prophecy. In fact, Ezekiel had no choice in the matter. God told him what to say and he said it, like it or not.



CHAPTER 7

THE GREATEST DECEPTION

One of the biggest times of deception at some of our churches is offering time. We've taken what should be a sacred moment between the giver and God and reduced it into a joke. I've visited both small churches and large churches and though the size of the offering is different, the gimmicks that are used to coerce people into giving are the same. Churches are doing everything from forming money lines to selling bricks. It seems we've lost all sense of sanctity and decorum and are doing whatever it takes to raise money.

How many times have you heard someone say, during offering time, that if you want more money, you have to give more money? Usually, these are the same people who like to talk about the hundred-fold blessing. I'll admit, it sounds good. Give \$10 and get a hundredfold return of \$1000. Give \$20 and get a hundredfold return of \$2000. Many of us have heard these types of promises and unfortunately, many of us have fallen for them, but how often have you really seen this work for someone? I mean, let's be serious for a minute. These people make it sound like giving an offering in church is like pulling the handle of a slot machine. If you do it enough times, eventually you'll hit the jackpot.

When we really think about it, we can easily see the absurdity of it all. So why do so many people fall for it? These types of ministries are only profitable because people support them. The reason so many people fall for this is because many of us are more

concerned with the blessings of the Lord than we are with the Lord Himself. So, we buy into anything that makes us believe we're going to get more. We'll stand in a money line all day to sow our electric bill money if someone tells us that we're going to get blessed for doing so. We don't really want to go through the process of God, so we'll do anything for an instant blessing. We'll turn around three times to spin out of poverty, shout at the devil to give us back our money and scream "increase" until we're hoarse, and after we get finished, we'll still be broke.

The Church has become so worldly and materialistic - I don't think most of us even realize that we are out of God's order. We even have well-known and respected leaders who condone tricking or manipulating people into giving to support their ministry. I suppose some of these people believe that the end justifies the means, but it doesn't. Many of them are just using the Word of God for their own gain. They may have started out with a heart to serve the Lord and His people, but somewhere along the way, they fell for all of the worldly trappings. Now they see their ministry as a business and a way to increase their own finances. They are not concerned with making disciples or teaching the Word of God unless they can spin it to advance their own agendas. They are more concerned with the number of members they have, the size of their churches, the kind of car they drive and where they live. They have allowed their egos to get in the way of their service, and they ridicule anyone who has the audacity to question their behavior, because they believe that they are above reproach. So, instead of pointing people to Christ as the example of how to live, they point to themselves and their own lifestyles.

I can remember being in church one time and hearing my pastor say that he was trying to show us how to roll like him. I didn't pay that much attention to it at the time, but now I realize how off-track we were even then. He was basically pointing people to himself and using his lifestyle as enticement. The message was this: if we listened to him and did what he did, we would one day be able to live like he lived. Since then, that same pastor has been in the news several times and accused of various offenses. Instead of using himself as the example he should have pointed people to someone who is truly flawless and above reproach – Christ.

THE NUMBERS GAME

A few years ago, at the urging of one of my girlfriends, I attended a Christian conference. The conference as a whole was fine, but what I witnessed during offering time

made me ashamed and angry. The pastor assigned to collect the offering (a very well known and respected figure in the Christian community) told the people that God said they should sow a specific amount of money. Some of the people had already started making out their checks and this pastor told them to stop and wait so they could hear from God. What I believe she really meant was stop and wait so they could hear from her, because she proceeded to deliver a very persuasive argument. Coincidentally, the amount of money that the people were told to sow correlated with a scripture about God blessing His people.

Now, I can't say that God didn't tell her this, but I didn't hear Him. I believe that this was just another gimmick and one that I've seen used many times to compel people to give. Someone finds a scripture that talks about increase or blessings and they tell the people that God said for them to give this amount. For example, if the scripture is chapter 1, verse 20, they say God said to give \$120. If the scripture is chapter 2, verse 12, they say God said to give \$212. Of course, if the scripture is a low number, like chapter one, verse two, they wouldn't say give \$12. Then they would stick a one in front of it and say God said to give \$112, or give in multiples of \$12...\$12, \$24, \$36, \$48, etc. It's absolute craziness. It's like turning the Word of God into lottery numbers, and when you consider the fact that the bible, as we know it, is not even written in chronological order, it becomes even more ludicrous.

Ministries that promote this type of trickery usually do so by playing on people's desire for more money or a better lifestyle. They encourage giving by emphasizing to the people what God is going to do for them as a result of their giving. I understand the need to raise money in order to support certain ministries, but using the Word of God in a deceptive manner is not the way to do it. When a ministry does this, it turns what should be a sacred act (the act of giving) into a selfish one.

GIVING THAT PLEASES GOD

Selfishness should not be what motivates us to give. Paul, in his letter to the Church of Corinth, told the people how to give.

So let each one give as he purposes in his heart, not grudgingly or of necessity; for God loves a cheerful giver. (II Corinthians 9:7)

Giving should be done according to what we purposed in our hearts. This means we should only give what we have decided or made a commitment to give. Also, our giving should be out of love. We should not give “grudgingly or of necessity”. The word ‘grudgingly’ means with reluctance. The phrase ‘of necessity’ means under force or by compulsion. When we give reluctantly or when we feel compelled to give because someone makes us feel guilty, we are not pleasing God, because God loves a “cheerful giver”.

When we give out of love, it is an act of worship. If God instructs us to give a specific amount, our giving then becomes an act of obedience. In both cases, giving should be a private matter and we should do it with joy. And where does it say that all of our giving needs to be monetary? God may require us to give of ourselves or our time. Sometimes just giving someone a word of encouragement will help them better than any check we could write. Everything is not about money.

I believe the deception that happens during offering time is a symptom of a much bigger problem. I believe we have allowed the materialism and vanity of the world to creep into the Church. So, doing ministry today is like running a corporation, and those in ministry believe that it is their mission to raise as much money as possible, even if it requires a little misrepresentation of the Word of God to do it. What’s really sad is that usually we’re trying to raise money to pay for something that God never told us to do in the first place.

God is not broke. Contrary to what may be going on in America, the kingdom of God is not having an economic crisis. God is still able to provide the resources to pay for whatever He ordains. It’s up to us to use those resources wisely and not waste them fulfilling our fleshly desires. Consequently, I don’t believe that God’s children should be beggars. Yet, that is exactly what we are doing. Begging, begging and begging some more. When did God get to be so needy? Isn’t He still the owner of the cattle on a thousand hills? (Psalm 50:10) It’s like we’re saying to the world, “somebody, anybody, please help us pay for what God told us to do”, and it’s insane.

If God ordered it, He’ll pay for it!

However, if God didn't order it, He's not going to pay for it and that's why so many churches have to come up with gimmicks and schemes to raise money. Some of them are too busy doing things that God never told them to do, because if He had, He would have provided the means to do it. Also, some of us are too pre-occupied with trying to attain the wealth and riches of this world to focus the resources that God does give us on the kingdom.

There are many people, even ministers of the gospel, who don't know what to do with the wealth that God gives them. God blesses us so that we can be a blessing to others, not so we can accumulate more and more material possessions, trying to live the lifestyles of the rich and famous.

And God is able to bless you abundantly, so that in all things at all times, having all that you need, you will abound in every good work. (II Corinthians 9:8 NIV)

According to Paul, the primary reason for the abundance God enables us to get is to do the work of God. It should be used for good works. It is given to us to advance and to build the kingdom of God. It should not be used to advance our own agendas or to build our own bank accounts.

PAY YOUR BILLS

The bible also tells us that we should give to the poor. (Luke 12:33) We should not exploit them or use them for self-gain. Yet, we have ministers who beg poor people for money on Sunday while they themselves live lavish lifestyles the rest of the week. I'm not saying that God's servants should live like paupers, but nor do I believe they should build their wealth off the backs of the poor. For example, there are poor people who continually give to ministries under the misconception that God will make them rich financially, yet they are unable to pay their own bills. Many of these are people who rely on government assistance, whether it is provision for food, housing or healthcare. So, it is the government, not the Church, who is taking care of them.

While the pastor is living in grand fashion in his mansion on the hill, they are living sub-standard lifestyles, oftentimes to the detriment of their own children. Instead of helping them to get off of public assistance or helping them to rise above the poverty level,

many ministries encourage them to give what little they have by telling them that God is going to just give them an instant blessing. To someone who has been struggling to make “ends meet”, it sounds very good, but it’s the wrong mindset. If sowing a seed was all it took to get out of poverty, there wouldn’t be any poor people. It’s just not that simple. There is more that God requires of us.

Do you know people who are always giving money to the church who have trouble paying their bills or providing for their families? I do. In fact, I used to be one of them. I struggled to pay my bills, and I never had enough to help my own family. Yet I was always in church writing a check, every time someone called for an offering. I was taught that this was what God wanted from me - every dime I could spare, and for a long time, I believed it. I thought I was doing what was right. I believed that my blessings were directly related to how much money I gave in church. The more I gave, the more God would bless me, but if I withheld money from Him, I would be cursed.

Looking back, I can remember the moment in my life when I should have realized that something was wrong. I was sitting at my desk one day, balancing my checkbook, and I discovered that I had spent more money than I had intended to spend. When I realized that I didn’t have enough left to pay my tithes that week, I started crying. I was sobbing like a baby. I was in a state of disarray because I’d spent too much money paying my bills and I hadn’t paid my tithes first. I felt sure God was going to punish me because I’d messed up and spent His money. I waited for the bottom to fall out, but nothing happened to me. No lightning bolt from heaven struck me down. No wind blew me away. My life continued as it always did.

The only thing that was disrupted was my fellowship with God. At the time, I thought that God had hid His face from me, because He was disappointed in me, but He didn’t. His presence never left me. It was my own feelings of guilt that caused me to leave His presence, something we often do.

What I didn’t understand then that I understand now is that when God gives us the ability to work and receive a paycheck, He intends for us to use that paycheck to pay our bills and take care of our families. No matter how spiritual it may seem, He doesn’t intend for us to squander away what He gives us. Giving away our bill money to some ministry who promises us that God is going to give us more back is squandering away resources.

Also, God does not want us to live with debts hanging over our head. In the book of Romans, the bible instructs us regarding our debts.

**Let no debt remain outstanding, except the continuing debt to love one another, for he who loves his fellowman has fulfilled the law.
(Romans 13:8 NIV)**

When we withhold money from our creditors and give it instead to the church, we're taking money that is promised to someone else and giving it away. Even though we may have the best of intentions, and even though many of our creditors may be greedy institutions who charge too much interest, we're still giving away what belongs to someone else. We're trying to fulfill one obligation by breaking another. It's like the old saying "robbing Peter to pay Paul".

God's plan for His people is that we would have enough to do both: pay our bills and give, but many of us don't follow God's plan when it comes to our finances. As a result, we end up in a situation where we have to make a choice. *Do I pay my electric bill or do I give to the church?* When it's ten degrees outside and the heating is electric, it's a difficult choice to make, even for the most sanctified Christian.

DON'T PLEDGE WHAT YOU DON'T HAVE

Another instance of giving that is out of God's order happens when we feel so compelled to give, we make a pledge or a vow even though we can't afford to pay it. Many television ministries are big on getting people to make pledges. Most of the time, these ministries appeal to a Christian's generosity and sense of obligation. While this may be a very effective tool to raise money to support the ministry, it is not wise to make a pledge that you can't afford to keep.

**It is better not to make a vow than to make one and not fulfill it.
(Ecclesiastes 5:5 NIV)**

How many times have you seen this scripture on a pledge card? You're more likely to hear this after you've already made the pledge as a means of convincing you to keep it. Not very many people who are trying to raise money for a specific ministry will tell you anything that might make you count the cost before you write that check or fill out that pledge card. In fact, some of these ministries might even tell you to give in faith, without considering what's in your wallet. However, I doubt they will accept a faith check that

doesn't clear the bank. They also won't help you pay that overdraft charge you're going to get if that faith check bounces.

Why is it that we've even taken faith and turned it into something we can use to satisfy our fleshly desires. We think it's a sign of our spirituality when we say things like "*I believe God will give me a house*" or "*I believe God will give me a new car*". Remarks like these are not a sign of spirituality. Instead, they are a sign of greediness and discontentment. Why are we always saying that we believe God for something? Why can't we just believe God?

It's manipulative for ministries to encourage people to make a pledge they can't afford to keep by telling them that doing so or not doing so shows how much faith they have. Your faith is not measured by the size of the check you can write, and it's foolish to believe that it is. God expects us to use wisdom and exercise good judgment when it comes to handling our money. Just because someone has a microphone, is wearing a tailored suit and standing in a pulpit on Christian television doesn't mean that making a pledge to send him your money is exercising wisdom.

TAKE CARE OF YOUR FAMILY

The bible also tells us that we should provide for our families. It says that when we don't take care of our families, we are worse than an unbeliever.

But if anyone does not provide for his own, and especially for those of his household, he has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever. (I Timothy 5:8)

When God blesses us with provision, He expects us to use some of that provision to care for our own families. As a parent, you wouldn't give away your child's food or the clothes off your child's back. So why do you give away your child's future? The bible says that it is our responsibility to prepare for our children's futures.

A good man leaves an inheritance to his children's children... (Proverbs 13:22a)

“Children’s children”: that’s two generations. That means we should leave an inheritance to our grandchildren. Still, there are those who give to different ministries who don’t have anything set aside for their children nor their grandchildren. I can almost guarantee you that when it is time for your child to go to college, that ministry that you are supporting will not pay for your child’s tuition. I can also guarantee you that the leaders of whatever ministries you are supporting already have trust funds or something similar set aside to secure their own children’s financial futures. So should you. Your children are no less important than theirs.

SELFLESS - NOT SELFISH

I know that the bible says that the more you give, the more will be given to you. I’m not trying to dispute the Word of God. Instead, what I’m saying is that our interpretation of some of these scriptures is wrong, because we’ve turned giving into a selfish act, rather than a selfless act. When you do a selfless act, you’re not concerned with getting a “thank you” or getting your name mentioned. You’re not doing it in order to receive something in return. You’re doing it out of love. You’re doing it as a sacrifice. In other words, it’s more for someone else than for yourself.

On the other hand, a selfish act is one that is motivated by the thought, “what am I going to get out of this” or “how is this going to benefit me?” It’s no longer about love or sacrifice. Instead of doing something to help someone else, you’re doing what will help you.

Sadly, that’s the motivation behind much of our giving in the Church today and even sadder, it’s encouraged by many ministries. These ministries actually tell people to give so that they can get something in return. Ministries that encourage giving by promising that God will give back even more are not only misrepresenting the Word, but also feeding the flesh. They should be teaching us how to overcome the flesh, but instead they are promoting selfish, fleshly desires. So now, instead of giving out of love or obedience, we’re giving because we want something in return. And what happens if God doesn’t give us what we are hoping for? Does this mean that God didn’t keep His promise?

God is not a man, that He should lie, nor a son of man, that He should repent. Has He said, and will He not do? Or has He spoken, and will He not make it good? (Numbers 23:19)

One of the biggest problems with encouraging selfishly motivated giving is that it sets people up for disappointment. God is not obligated to fulfill a promise that He didn't make. So, maybe your pastor told you to give and promised you that in return for your gift, God would give you that new car you've been wanting, but God didn't say that. So, when the new car doesn't come, don't blame God, because He's not the one who lied to you. It's impossible for God to break a promise. He can't lie...but man can.

For some of us, realizing that our giving is not in line with the Word may be a difficult task, because we've been doing it wrong for so long. However, there's an easy way to determine if your giving is selfish or selfless. Just ask yourself this question each time you give. *If God doesn't return the gift to you in some way, would you still be able to "cheerfully" give it?* If the answer is a quick "yes", you're on the right track. If the answer is a "no" or even a hesitant "yes", keep your gift and examine your motives. Once your heart and your motives are in line with God, you will be able to give freely.

I believe that somewhere along the way, around the time that we started treating our ministers like celebrities, many of us stopped reading the Word for ourselves. So when someone comes along and tells us the truth, if it doesn't line up with what we're used to hearing, we reject it. Even if what we're used to hearing is a lie, we won't recognize it as a lie. Until we go directly to God and study His Word for ourselves, we'll never be able to distinguish a lie from the truth.

I realize that what I am writing seems harsh, but I'm only writing the truth, because the truth is what we need to hear now. We've seen enough flesh and heard enough lies. It's time for the truth, because the truth is the only thing that can make us free. My prayer is that knowing the truth about giving will set you free from the bondage of believing that your fate is determined by how much money you give to a particular ministry. It's simply not true and woe to those who would tell you otherwise. Certainly, there are times when God requires a sacrifice from all of us, and oftentimes it may be a financial sacrifice, but you'll know when that time comes because God will tell you, not some joker who is trying to exploit the Word of God for his own gain. Jesus paid a tremendous price for our freedom. So why would you allow anyone to put you back in bondage?

100% Tithing
Church

CHAPTER 8

THE TRUTH ABOUT TITHING

I almost left this section out of this book, because tithing is such a “sticky” subject and everyone has an opinion about it. For many, tithing is no longer an option. Some churches are now requiring that their members be 100% tithers. Some even request salary information. Tithing is even being used as a measuring stick to determine if someone is qualified for certain ministries. The idea is that a person who does not tithe is not fit for ministry, even though they may be otherwise qualified.

Tithing is also being used to determine if someone is worthy of benevolence. The belief is that people who don't tithe are not being good stewards over their money so their finances are cursed. For many people, tithing has been presented as the gateway to prosperity. I believe that in order for Christians to be completely free we have to know the truth about tithing.

To say that the subject of tithing has been debated is an understatement. Tithing has also been misunderstood and even exploited. In the next few pages, I am going to tell you what I believe to be the truth, but please don't take my word for it. Be like the Bereans in Acts 17 and search the scriptures for yourself.

Truth #1: Tithing is not an automatic guarantee to financial success.

The reason that I began my own research on the subject of tithing was because I wanted to understand why so many Christians, who were tithers (including myself) were still struggling financially. I had heard more times than I can remember that if you weren't a tither, God wouldn't bless you financially. So, I believed that in order to be blessed, I had to pay my tithes. I believed this so deeply, I would pay my tithes even if I didn't have enough money to pay my other bills. In fact, I saw it as an act of faith. I believed that if I paid my tithes, God would take care of all of my other expenses regardless of what they were.

I can remember times when I was having trouble paying a bill and I would say to myself *I'm a tither, so I know God's going to take care of it*. Though I never said it aloud, I felt like God owed me something because I gave my little 10%. And when He didn't do what I wanted Him to do, I was disappointed and even angry. That's when I realized that God was not my sugar daddy. He let the finance company repossess my car. He let me start four unsuccessful businesses, which left me financially bankrupt. He even allowed me to be homeless for a short period. Because I didn't understand what was happening, I was devastated. It didn't seem fair to me, especially when I knew people who weren't tithers who seemed to prosper more than me.

What I didn't know then, that I know now, is that I was already prosperous. I had (still have) something that money can't buy - a relationship with the Creator. There were times when God didn't take care of my bills, but He always took care of me. Because I was so focused on what I thought were the financial and material benefits of being a tither, I missed the greater blessing. All the while, God was taking care of me. During financial hardships (most of which were my own fault), He carried me, but I didn't always see it, because I was expecting something financial.

Many Christians believe, just as I did, that being a tither automatically entitles us to financial blessings. Because of this belief, we often neglect the things that we should do to ensure that we and our families are secure financially. We tithe, but we don't save. We tithe, but we don't invest our money wisely. We tithe and then live lifestyles that are beyond our means, expecting God to supernaturally stretch our limited funds.

For me, it was my business. I didn't know anything about owning and operating a business, but I expected God to make it work, because I was a Christian and a tither. Even after things started to get rough, I kept thinking that God would fix it. All the while, He was waiting on me to use the resources that He had already placed before me. For example, there are numerous books and other resources about operating a business,

because achieving success as a new business is not an easy task. It takes knowledge, patience and adequate capital, all of which I had very little of. Instead of accepting that maybe I wasn't ready yet to be a business owner, I plunged into it head first, believing that God would make up for whatever knowledge I lacked and whatever money I didn't have. He didn't.

Back then, I didn't know why God didn't come to my rescue, but now I think I understand. I believe that we all have within our grasp everything that we need to fulfill our purpose. The problem is us. We want to sit in church and rock and moan and wave our hands, then go home and wait on God to do what He's already done.

And we justify our actions in our minds because we think God owes us something. I can't tell you how many times I've heard someone try to rationalize the belief that God owes us when we give by saying that we can't beat God in giving. The idea is that the more we give, the more God is going to give back to us, because He owes us. I have a problem with this because I don't believe that God owes us anything. It's the other way around. We owe Him. In fact, any one of us could spend a whole lifetime trying to repay the debt that we owe to Him and never even scratch the surface.

Truth #2: If you don't tithe, you are not cursed.

The book of Malachi is probably the most quoted in the bible regarding the subject of tithing. Unfortunately, I believe that it is also one of the most misinterpreted books in the bible. The following is a somewhat fictional story of something that happened at a Christian church. Though the story itself is fictional, I believe that it illustrates what is happening in many churches all the time.

Martha was a woman in her late forties who loved church. She was a devoted Saint who rarely missed a service. She loved the singing and the praise and worship. She loved the fellowship with the other saints. She loved everything about church. She even loved the blend of the Sunday morning aromas - the smell of furniture polish on the wooden pews mixed with the scent of Pine-Sol and Carpet Fresh.

On this particular Sunday morning, Martha awoke early, read her devotionals and took her time as she always did preparing for church. On the drive to church, she listened to gospel music and tapped her foot to the beat. As usual, she was looking forward to another Sunday of praise and worship.

But what Martha encountered when she arrived at church was neither praise nor worship. As soon as she entered the sanctuary, she sensed a different spirit in the atmosphere. The ushers were rushing everyone to take their seats. The praise choir was not singing their usual welcoming songs. So, Martha sat with the rest of the congregation and waited anxiously.

Soon the pastor came to the pulpit, with a look of exasperation and anger on his face. He didn't pray. He didn't ask the choir to lead them in a song. He didn't welcome the congregation or the visitors. Instead, he dropped his bible on the book stand with a thud, looked out at the congregation and declared, "God sent me here today to expose some robbers and some thieves."

Immediately, a gasp went across the church and everyone started looking around, as if they could spot the guilty party. Martha was appalled. Apparently, someone had robbed the church and today they were going to find out who had done it. The pastor held up his hand and a silence fell across the whole place. Martha leaned forward, giving the pastor her undivided attention.

The pastor began to flip through the pages of His bible. It was so quiet in the church, the sound could be heard all the way to the last pew of the last row. With an air of authority, he picked up his bible and began to read, emphasizing every word.

"Will a man rob God? Yet you have robbed Me! But you say, 'in what way have we robbed You?' In tithes and offerings. You are cursed with a curse, for you have robbed Me, even this whole nation. (Malachi 3:8-9)

He looked out at the congregation with accusing eyes and declared, "because you withhold your money from this ministry you are guilty of robbing God and He says that you are cursed with a curse". Another gasp went across the congregation.

Martha's eyes filled with water, because she felt like the pastor was looking directly at her. She looked around, ashamed and expecting to see accusation on every face, but no one was looking at her. In fact, the faces of almost everyone she saw held the same look of guilt and shame as hers. Martha noticed it immediately. So did the pastor. With a nod of satisfaction, he continued his sermon.

After the sermon was over, the ushers took up the offering. It was a record day for the church. They collected more money that Sunday than they had in several Sundays combined.

Unfortunately, Martha's story is the same one that many of us have experienced in some way or another. We've gone to church expecting to experience the glory of God, only to be told that we are cursed. And why? Because we paid our bills or bought some groceries or put new tires on our cars so that we wouldn't skid across I-285 in the rain on a Friday afternoon in Atlanta traffic. Because we chose not to give some ministry our last dollar, we are accused of withholding money from God Himself and are therefore cursed.

This is not only a misrepresentation of scripture, it is absurd. I sometimes wonder if there's some sort of magnetic device that sucks the common sense out of our brains when we walk across the sanctuary threshold. Why are we unable to discern the true spirit of God? Do we really believe that God would send His son to the cross to die for our sins and to set us free, then turn around and place us under a curse? Apparently, we do believe it, because Martha's church is not the only one collecting record-breaking offerings with these types of fear-evoking and guilt-rendering sermons.

But is this really the will of God: that we would live our lives under the constant threat of being cursed? Is it His will that we would act out of shame or guilt? I don't think so. We already know that giving (whether it is a tithe or an offering) out of guilt or fear is not the way that we should give. Remember, "God loves a cheerful giver." (II Corinthians 9:7) It is impossible to be cheerful and fearful at the same time. It is also impossible to feel guilty and feel cheerful at the same time. So then, how can we believe that God wants us to give cheerfully while at the same time believing that we are cursed if we don't tithe? It doesn't make any sense. Cheerful giving and tithing under the fear of being cursed are not the same thing.

Also, aren't we free from the curse of the Law? I realize that there are those who would have us believe that tithing is a New Testament principle, but it's not. It was a part of the Old Testament Law, and scripture tells us that Jesus came to free us from the curse of the Law.

Christ has redeemed us from the curse of the law, having become a curse for us (for it is written, "Cursed is everyone who hangs on a tree") (Galatians 3:13)

In his letter to the church at Galatia, Paul went to great lengths to explain this freedom. He described the difference between faith and the works of the law. (Galatians 3:1-5) We

are all saved, not by works, but by faith. The Spirit that we receive is not according to the law, but according to our faith in Christ Jesus. Paul goes on to say that the man who keeps the law has to live by the law, because the law is not a part of our faith (Galatians 3:12).

So then, only those who keep the law are bound to it. Those who keep the faith are free from the law. In other words, those who hold to the law that tithing is a requirement are bound to the curses of that law, but those who, by faith, believe that they are no longer under the law are not cursed by it.

For as many as are of the works of the law are under the curse; for it is written, “Cursed is everyone who does not continue in all things which are written in the book of the law, to do them.” (Galatians 3:10)

What Paul says here is an echo of the words of Moses.

Cursed is the one who does not confirm all the words of this law by observing them. (Deuteronomy 27:26a)

And think about this: why is it that tithing is the only part of the Old Testament law that we are still bound to keep? Why aren't we also bound to keep the Sabbath holy (which by the way is Saturday, not Sunday)? Why aren't we refraining from eating “unclean” animals like swine and shellfish? How is it that some greasy-mouthed pastor can tell you that you are bound to tithe, but excuse you and himself from indulging in swine? Why is that? I'll tell you why: because tithing is big money to prosperity focused ministries. So in order to persuade you and me into giving those big bucks, these ministries have to make us believe that we are cursed if we don't tithe. The truth is, ministries that force members to tithe are so out of sync with the divine order of God they believe they need this money in order to survive. They believe it so much, they are willing to do whatever is necessary to get it, even if it means distorting the Word of God.

I believe that because of Christ, we are no longer bound to the tithe any more than we are bound to other aspects of the law. However, I do believe that giving is a very necessary part of being a Christian. This is giving that is done out of love and obedience and sacrifice, not out of fear or guilt or some ritualistic sense of tradition...giving that is not selfish but selfless. I also believe that the greatest gift we can give anyone is not out of our pockets, but out of our hearts.

Perhaps if these ministries spent less time on scare tactics and more time teaching their members the joy of freely giving, they would see an even greater abundance in their churches. By promoting the 10% tithing rule, some of them are actually doing their ministries a disservice, because people give their 10% and that's it. This is the limitation of ritualistic giving. Ritualistic giving is limited to whatever the ritual is, whereas "free" giving has no limits.

Truth#3: The priests, not the people, were the ones who were guilty of robbing God.

I doubt you'll find too many ministers, especially among those that are part of the prosperity movement, to agree with me on this one. But take a moment to read the book of Malachi (from the beginning) and you'll notice that most of God's anger is directed towards the priests, not the nation as a whole.

In Malachi 1:1-4, God is speaking to the nation of Israel. However, in Malachi, 1:6, He begins speaking to the priests. He is angry because of the offerings that the priests have been bringing to Him.

“A son honors his father, and a servant his master. If then I am the Father, where is My honor? And if I am a Master, where is my reverence?” says the Lord of hosts to you priests who despise My name. Yet you say, “In what way have we despised Your name?”

“You offer defiled food on My altar, but say, ‘In what way have we defiled You?’ By saying, the table of the Lord is contemptible.

And when you offer the blind as a sacrifice, is it not evil? And when you offer the lame and sick, is it not evil? Offer it then to your governor! Would he be pleased with you? Would he accept you favorably?” says the Lord of hosts. (Malachi 1:6-8)

God goes on in versus 9-14 to rebuke the priests for the unacceptable offerings that they have been bringing to His altar. In verse 14, He says “cursed be the deceiver who has in his flock a male and takes a vow, but sacrifices to the Lord what is blemished.” This tells us that the problem was not that the people weren't tithing animals worthy of an offering to the Lord. The problem was that the priests were keeping the good animals and offering God the defiled ones.

Those ministers today who advocate tithing and who are constantly badgering their congregations for not giving enough money would have us to believe that they are not receiving enough money to support the ministry. I believe that the bigger issue is what is being done with what is received. Just visit a mega-church and look around. Take a trip to the parking lot and look at the vehicles in the reserved spaces. Just how much of what is given is being used to pay salaries and support overly lavish lifestyles?

If you listen to many prosperity preachers, you will hear an echo of the same thing. They are constantly blaming the members for the lack that exists in the church. According to them, it's all our faults and they are blameless, but that is not what God is saying in Malachi. It's the priests, not the people who are offering what is not acceptable.

I remember one time my minister said that the reason our church was in debt was because the money needed to pay off the debt was in the members' pockets. At the time, this really got to me. Now, I realize that the church was in debt then (and still is in debt) because what was given was not used properly.

Just like the nation of Israel, we were bringing our tithes and offerings to the church and giving it to the Levites (church leaders) and priests (church ministers). We were giving it to them, expecting that it would be used to do the work of the Lord. But instead of sacrificing it to God to do His will and His work, they were keeping it for themselves. In essence, they were robbing God.

In the second chapter of Malachi God is still rebuking the priests. He tells them that He will spread refuse (waste, manure, dung...you get the picture) on their faces. In Malachi 2:2 God tells the priests that he will send a curse upon them, curse their blessings and rebuke their descendants. All of this anger and rebuke is aimed not at the people, but at the priests.

God goes on to say that the priests have corrupted the covenant He made with Levi. God compares the priests to Levi. He says that "the law of truth was in his mouth" and he walked with Him "in peace and equity, and turned many away from iniquity". (Malachi 2:6) But the priests did not keep the way of the Lord and caused "many to stumble". They "corrupted the covenant of Levi". (Malachi 2:8) In Malachi 2:9, God tells the priests that He has made them "contemptible and base before all the people" because they did not keep His ways and showed "partiality in the law". Again, God's anger is aimed at the priests, not at the people.

It is also important, when reading Malachi, to understand how offerings were brought to God. The bible tells us in the book of Numbers, chapter 18, that God appointed Aaron and

his sons to be priests over the tabernacle. He appointed Levi and his sons to be workers to serve the priests. God tells them that only the priests from the house of Aaron could enter the most holy sanctuary and the altar, where offerings were made. If the other Levites came near the altar they and the priests would die.

Then the Lord said to Aaron: “You and your sons and your father’s house, with you shall bear the iniquity related to the sanctuary, and you and your sons with you shall bear the iniquity associated with your priesthood.

“Also bring with you your brethren of the tribe of Levi, the tribe of your father, that they may be joined with you and serve you while you and your sons are with you before the tabernacle of witness.

“They shall attend to your needs and all the needs of the tabernacle; but they shall not come near the articles of the sanctuary and the altar, lest they die – they and you also. (Numbers 18:1-3)

Also, the people were not allowed to come near the tabernacle.

“Hereafter the children of Israel shall not come near the tabernacle of meeting, lest they bear sin and die. (Numbers 18:22)

The priests were the only ones who could offer sacrifices to God on the altar. The people were not allowed to come near the tabernacle or they would die.

I believe that it was the priest who robbed God by withholding the acceptable offerings (brought by the people) and instead offered to God what was blemished. God did not say that the priests didn’t have an acceptable offering because the people didn’t bring one. He said that the priest withheld what was acceptable.

Truth#4: New covenant principles of giving replace the tithe.

I believe that New Covenant principles of giving have replaced the tithe. I believe this just as I believe in New Covenant principles of salvation and grace. I don’t believe that we, as believers in Christ, are bound to the tithe no more than I believe that we are bound

to sprinkle the blood of animals as sacrifices to God. Jesus, the Lamb of God, was the ultimate sacrifice.

His death replaced the Old and established the New. The bible tells us that when Jesus died on the cross, the veil of the temple was torn.

And Jesus cried out again with a loud voice, and yielded up His spirit. Then, behold, the veil of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom; and the earth quaked, and the rocks were split... (Matthew 27:50-51)

The veil was part of the temple that separated the holiest place where God dwelled. The symbolism of the veil being torn is twofold. First, before Christ, only priests could go behind the veil and worship God and offer atonement for the sins of the people. (Exodus 30:10; Hebrews 9:7) The tearing of the veil symbolized that the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross and the shedding of His blood was the final atonement for the sins of mankind. Second, the tearing of the veil symbolized that the old religious system (the Old Covenant under the Mosaic Law) was destroyed on the cross and replaced with a New Covenant.

After Christ, no priest or minister has ever held the same position as those that the bible talks about in Numbers 18. There is no longer a need for them. Before Christ, these priests in essence stood between the people and God. Now, every believer has access to God without having to go through a priest. So, if Old Covenant believers presented their offerings to the Levites and the “High” priests, then likewise, New Covenant believers should present their offerings to the “High” priest who is Christ. The Old Covenant set up by God is no longer applicable because through Christ He has established a New Covenant.

So, am I saying that Christians should no longer give? No, I am not saying that at all. What I am saying is that as New Covenant believers saved by grace and infused with the spirit of Christ, we are no longer bound to the rules of the law. However, because we have the spirit of Christ working in us there are still things that we should or should not do. We may not be bound to the tithe tradition as it was given to the Israelites, but we are still supposed to give out of love. The spirit that is in us dictates that we are supposed to bless others. So we give, not seeking something in return or acting out of tradition or fear or guilt; but rather giving freely according to the spirit that dwells in us.



CHAPTER 9

FALSE PROPHETS AND TEACHERS

For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine, but according to their own desires, because they have itching ears, they will heap up for themselves teachers; and they will turn their ears away from the truth, and be turned aside to fables. (II Timothy 4:3-4)

Doesn't this sound like what is going on in the Church today? Many Christians no longer want to hear the truth of God's Word. Instead, they want to hear something that will make them feel good and promise instant gratification and instant blessings. So, they listen to the false prophets and teachers who tell them what they want to hear.

Many of these men and women, especially those who advocate the message of prosperity are nothing more than motivational speakers. They spend a great deal of time trying to make their members feel good instead of just telling them what God says. If you read the bible, you would see that a lot of what God spoke through His servants was not positive or nice messages. Often, they were very harsh truths. God told them what was to come, even if it wasn't good.

I've often heard people say that the bible is too strict because it has too many rules and not enough freedom for a person to do whatever he or she wants to do. So ministers tailor their messages to what people want to hear. That's why sin is rarely mentioned now. That's why the married deacon who is having an affair with the married choir director can sit comfortably in his seat on Sunday morning. The message is not convicting enough to make either of them repent. What happened to the sermons that evoked repentance? What happened to the warnings? Maybe what the church needs is more warnings and less motivational messages.

RECOGNIZING A FALSE PROPHET

A false prophet isn't just someone who tries to say that God doesn't exist or that Christ wasn't the Messiah. Basically, a false prophet is anyone who preaches or teaches false doctrine. False doctrine could be an obvious erroneous teaching or it could be very subtle persuasion. Either way, it's anything that steers us away from God and the truth of His Word.

False prophets also may not look or act in an evil manner that clearly identifies them, but many of them may dress well and talk smoothly with words that sound convincing. They may have the appearance of godliness, but Jesus described them as wolves in sheep's clothing.

“Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ravenous wolves.” (Matthew 7:15)

These are the ones who claim that they are only doing what is best for the people or for the church, but their desire is to satisfy their own flesh.

Jesus also says that there will be those who will prophesy and perform what appeared to be miracles but when they call on His name, He will still reject them.

Not everyone who says to Me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father in heaven. Many will say to Me in that day, ‘Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in Your name, cast out demons in Your name, and done many wonders in Your

name?’ And then I will declare to them, ‘I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness!’ (Matthew 7:21-23)

The first time I read this and understood what Jesus was saying, it really scared me to think that someone could do what may appear to be the works of the Lord, yet still be out of God’s will. That’s why it is important for us to be able to discern the Spirit of God. The bible tells us that God is Spirit and we must worship Him in spirit and in truth. (John 4:24) We can’t look at everything with our natural eyes, because we will be deceived.

Paul also spoke about this appearance of godliness. In his letter to the Corinthians he told them that false apostles could transform themselves just as Satan transformed himself.

For such are false apostles, deceitful workers, transforming themselves into apostles of Christ.

And no wonder! For Satan himself transforms himself into an angel of light.

Therefore it is no great thing if his ministers also transform themselves into ministers of righteousness, whose end will be according to their works. (II Corinthians 11:13-15)

So just because we see someone on television supposedly “slaying people in the spirit” by blowing on them or slapping them on their forehead does not necessarily mean that person is truly of God. We can’t look at the signs and wonders as proof. We have to look at the spirit behind the signs and wonders or we will be deceived.

Jesus said that we would know false prophets by their fruit, because a good tree can’t bear bad fruit and a bad tree can’t bear good fruit. (Matthew 7:16) Usually, we judge fruitfulness by materialistic and financial standards, but that’s not what Jesus was talking about. I believe He was talking about spiritual fruit: love, joy, peace, longsuffering, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. (Galatians 5:22-23) These are what Jesus called “good fruit” and he gave us permission to look at the fruit of a prophet to determine if he is a true prophet sent by God or a false prophet.

In the Old Testament, the bible also gives us two very practical ways to test whether or not what a prophet proclaims is in fact from God.

Test #1 – Whatever the prophet says must come true.

If what a prophet proclaims in the name of the Lord does not take place or come true, that is a message the Lord has not spoken. That prophet has spoken presumptuously, so do not be alarmed. (Deuteronomy 18:22 NIV)

Test #2 – The prophet must not try to lead the people to worship other Gods.

If a prophet, or one who foretells by dreams, appears among you and announces to you a miraculous sign or wonder, and if the sign or wonder spoken of takes place, and the prophet says, “Let us follow other gods” (gods you have not known) “and let us worship them,” you must not listen to the words of that prophet or dreamer. The Lord your God is testing you to find out whether you love him with all your heart and with all your soul. (Deuteronomy 13:1-3 NIV)

God takes this second test so seriously, the bible goes on to say that a prophet who tries to lead the people to worship another God should be put to death. (Deuteronomy 13:5)

In the Old Testament “another God” may have been a statue or a golden calf. Today, for many people, “money” is the other God. They may not bow down to it but they still worship it. And it’s the modern day prophets who use their influence and authority to lead them to worship money. So, by Old Testament standards, these prophets should be put to death.

SELF-PROMOTION

It seems that the ministers today think self-promotion is necessary to preach the gospel. This is evident by the fact that they keep putting their name on everything they can find and selling it ... everything from posters to bobble-head dolls. (I’m still waiting on someone to tell me how a bobble-head doll of the senior pastor is going to enhance my relationship with God.)

There used to be a time when you saw very little or no advertisings for churches, but still people managed to find them. Now there are church billboards all along the interstates

with smiling photos of the church's minister. When I see them, I often wonder what or who is being advertised. Most of these advertisings seem to be more about the minister than about God or the church. And it's not just the billboards that are plastered with pictures of the church's minister. Some of these churches also display photos of the pastor and possibly his or her spouse. The church that I used to attend had a picture of the senior pastor and his wife on almost every wall in the church lobby leading into the sanctuary.

Of course, they say that all of this is to advance their ministry, but this type of ministry doesn't encourage people to seek God. Instead, it encourages them to seek man. It doesn't promote Christ. It promotes man.

And why is it that even when these people do something good for someone, there's always a video camera around to record the entire moment. There's a video of bishop So & So in Africa helping the people build wells for water. There's another video of Pastor What's His Name feeding the homeless downtown. Every good deed is a photo opportunity. I suppose they missed that scripture in the bible that talks about doing your charitable deeds in secret.

Take heed that you do not do your charitable deeds before men, to be seen by them. Otherwise you have no reward from your Father in heaven. Therefore, when you do a charitable deed, do not sound a trumpet before you as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, that they may have glory from men. Assuredly, I say to you, they have their reward. But when you do a charitable deed, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, that your charitable deed may be in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will Himself reward you openly. (Matthew 6:1-4)

The bible tells us that Jesus, who should be our example, didn't try to make a reputation for Himself, even though He was the Son of God.

Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus, who being in the form of God, did not consider it robbery to be equal with God, but made Himself of no reputation, taking the form of a bondservant, and coming in the likeness of men. (Philippians 2:5-7)

In order to really understand what Paul meant when he wrote, “let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus”, we have to look at the preceding scriptures.

Let nothing be done through selfish ambition or conceit, but in lowliness of mind let each esteem others better than himself. Let each of you look out not only for his own interests, but also for the interest of others. (Philippians 2:3-4)

Having the mind of Christ means laying aside our own selfish ambitions and desires and considering what is best for others. The phrase “lowliness of mind” means humility. Jesus walked in humility. He never tried to make a name for Himself, because He wasn’t seeking the honor of men. Also He always pointed people back to God, the Father. Likewise, a leader who wants to serve God and the people of God will not seek to promote himself but will point the people back to God.

HATED – NOT LOVED

Many of the preachers today, whose messages promise a life of comfort and financial prosperity are revered and honored wherever they go. They boast about the respect and the favor that they receive from men. In fact, some of their messages have even crossed the barrier between the church and the rest of the world. At first glance, this may appear to be a good thing, but the bible doesn’t say that we should be loved by the world, but hated by it.

“If the world hates you, you know that it hated Me before it hated you. If you were of the world, the world would love its own. Yet because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you.” (John 15:18-19)

The only reason that the gospel of prosperity is so well received by the world is because it is based on a worldly mentality. I don’t know what bible these people are reading, but God never promised us a life of ease and comfort! That’s what the world promises!

I realize it sounds crazy to want to be hated, but it’s better to be hated for telling the truth than loved for telling a lie. It’s also better to be blessed according to what the Word

says than blessed according to the standards of this world. And according to Jesus, a true prophet is blessed when he is hated by men for His sake.

Blessed are you when men hate you, and when they exclude you, and revile you, and cast out your name as evil for the Son of Man's sake.

Rejoice in that day and leap for joy! For indeed your reward is great in heaven, for in like manner their fathers did to the prophets. (Luke 6:22-24)

Woe to you when all men speak well of you, for so did their fathers to the false prophets. (Luke 6:26)

Here, Jesus is saying that a true prophet will be hated, excluded, reviled and cast out for His sake. On the other hand, a false prophet will be spoken well of by men. If the prophets of our day were really speaking what God said, they would be hated and spoken bad of, not loved and honored.

But no one wants to be hated, right? That's why so many of our leaders are not speaking the truth, even if they know the truth. The truth doesn't pack a church and increase the offering. The truth doesn't sell books or CD's. So many ministers decide instead to compromise the truth of the gospel and focus instead on self-motivating messages that appeal to a wider audience outside of the church.

They choose to preach or write what appeals to the world instead of what appeals to God.

TRUE PROPHETS VS FALSE PROPHETS

There is a startling contrast between the true prophets of God and many of the self-proclaimed prosperity prophets and teachers today. First, true prophets were chosen by God. They were not self-appointed. Second, there were no financial benefits for being a prophet. In fact, the reward for being a messenger of God was loneliness, rejection, unpopularity, possible imprisonment and sometimes even death. Third, true prophets did not have the option of saying whatever they wanted. Their messages came directly from

God and they had to say whatever God told them even it was harsh and unpopular. They didn't make up nice stories just because that's what the people wanted to hear.

Many of the modern day preachers who call themselves prophets would have us to believe that they too hear directly from God, but have you ever wondered why God seems to speak a different message to them than He did to His servants who are recorded in the bible? If I didn't know better, I'd think God was schizophrenic. But the bible tells us that He is an unchanging God.

For I am the LORD, I do not change... (Malachi 3:6a)

So, if God hasn't changed, why has His message changed? Maybe it's because much of what we hear in church today isn't God's message but man's message.

ISAIAH

Isaiah was a prophet and an advisor to the kings during the 8th-century BC. He lived during the reign of Kings Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz and Hezekiah. Isaiah was a true prophet chosen by God. He didn't just wake up one morning and appoint himself a prophet to the nation.

Also I heard the voice of the Lord, saying: "Whom shall I send, and who will go for Us?" Then I said, "Here am I! Send me." (Isaiah 6:8)

Many of Isaiah's prophecies were so elaborate in detail they had to be from God. It would have been easy to prove Isaiah to be a false prophet if one of his predictions did not come true. Isaiah predicted the fall of Babylon (Isaiah 13:19, 14:23). He also made many predictions about Christ. He predicted the virgin birth (Isaiah 7:14). He said Jesus would perform miracles (Isaiah 35:4-6); He would be spat on and beaten (Isaiah 50:6); and He would be preceded by a messenger (Isaiah 40:1-5, 9). Isaiah also predicted the destruction of the world as we know it (Isaiah 24:1-3) and the promise of eternal life (Isaiah 25:6-9).

Many prosperity preachers want to call themselves "prophets" but their generic motivational messages can't compare to the prophecies and predictions of Isaiah. While their messages are conceived on their laptops and driven by the desires of their congregants, Isaiah's messages came directly from the mind of God.

Isaiah wasn't sent to proclaim a happy message that everyone would shout about and pay to hear. He had to prophesy to people who would not hear nor accept his words. God told Isaiah that the people would hear but would not understand; would see but would not perceive.

And He said, "Go, and tell this people: 'Keep on hearing, but do not understand; keep on seeing, but do not perceive.'

Make the heart of this people dull and their ears heavy, and shut their eyes, lest they see with their eyes, and hear with their ears, and understand with their heart and return and be healed."

Then I said, "Lord, how long?" And He answered: "Until the cities are laid waste and without inhabitant, the houses are without a man, the land is utterly desolate, the Lord has removed men far away, and the forsaken places are many in the midst of the land. (Isaiah 6:9-12)

Isaiah didn't paint a pretty picture of a God who would excuse the sins of the nation and bless them anyway. His messages spoke of God's distress with the nation of Israel, her leaders and the surrounding nations. The book of Isaiah is filled with God's warnings, His pleas for repentance and vivid images of His judgment.

God also used his prophet Isaiah to speak out against the corrupt spiritual leaders of that time. He said that the leaders were the ones who ruined His "vineyard" and that they had taken from the poor.

The Lord enters into judgment against the elders and leaders of his people: "It is you who have ruined my vineyard; the plunder from the poor is in your houses." (Isaiah 3:14 NIV)

God also called Israel's spiritual leaders blind watchmen and mute dogs.

Israel's watchmen are blind, they all lack knowledge; they are all mute dogs, they cannot bark; they lie around and dream, they love to sleep.

They are dogs with mighty appetites; they never have enough. They are shepherds who lack understanding; they all turn to their own way, they seek their own gain. (Isaiah 56:10-11 NIV)

Though this particular passage was referring to the corrupt leaders of Israel, I think it still applies today. Many of our modern-day spiritual leaders are blind men and women who don't seek what is best for the church or for God's kingdom but what is best for them. They are as God puts it, "dogs with mighty appetites" who are never content.

Another difference between Isaiah and modern-day prophets and teachers is shown in how God used Isaiah as a demonstration to the people. For three years Isaiah was required to walk around stripped and barefoot as a sign against an alliance between Cush and Egypt. (Isaiah 20:1-4). For three years, Isaiah was not only stripped of his clothing but his dignity as well.

The prophet Isaiah was very different from the prosperity preachers and teachers of today. Isaiah was called to prophesy the truth, no matter how ugly or uncomfortable. He was a true servant of God in that he did what God told him to do and he spoke what God told him to speak.

JEREMIAH

Jeremiah was a prophet during the time when Babylon took control of Jerusalem from about 629 BC to 588 BC. He was chosen by God when he was very young.

Then the word of the Lord came to me saying: "before I formed you in the womb I knew you; before you were born I sanctified you; I ordained you a prophet to the nations." (Jeremiah 1:4-5)

Unlike Isaiah, Jeremiah was not quick to accept his role as a prophet. He didn't say "here I am Lord, send me." Instead, he protested and told God that he was too young. (Jeremiah 1:6) Perhaps Jeremiah sensed the tremendous task that was being placed on him. God told Jeremiah that he would have to stand against the whole land of Judah, including the priests, kings, officials and the people. He told him that they would fight him but would not overcome him. (Jeremiah 1:17-19)

Though he was reluctant to do so, Jeremiah accepted the call of the Lord. But standing alone against an entire nation was no easy task. Unlike those who preach the gospel of prosperity today, Jeremiah's messages and predictions certainly did not win him any popularity contests. In fact, Jeremiah's life was often threatened. (Jeremiah 26:7-11, 11:18-23). At one point the weight of his calling was so heavy, Jeremiah himself cursed the day that he was born. (Jeremiah 20:14-15) Despite the burden Jeremiah felt as God's chosen messenger, he still managed to deliver the word of the Lord and preached messages on topics we rarely hear today: sin, disobedience, repentance and judgment.

Like Isaiah, Jeremiah was also called by God to speak against the false prophets, teachers and corrupt spiritual leaders. God said that they were deceitful and "greedy for gain". Instead of dealing with the problems that the people had, they were trying to cover up serious issues by preaching good news.

From the least to the greatest, all are greedy for gain; prophets and priests alike, all practice deceit. They dress the wound of my people as though it were not serious. 'Peace, peace,' they say, when there is no peace. (Jeremiah 6:13-14 NIV)

Why is it that preachers today talk so much about how God is going to bless His people and so little about the sins and issues of His people? I think some of them would have us to believe that God's judgment (shown so clearly throughout the bible) no longer exists. Through Jeremiah, God expressed His distaste for preachers who delivered messages that didn't convict the people and lead them to repentance.

...They strengthen the hands of evildoers, so that not one of them turns from their wickedness. (Jeremiah 23:14b NIV)

But if they had stood in my council, they would have proclaimed my words to my people and would have turned them from their evil ways and from their evil deeds. (Jeremiah 23:22 NIV)

"Is not my word like fire," declares the Lord, "and like a hammer that breaks a rock in pieces? (Jeremiah 23:29 NIV)

God makes it clear that the burden of turning the people from their sin lay with those chosen to positions of spiritual leadership. Even though New Testament believers are no longer dependent on priests and prophets like the believers who lived before Christ, I believe that those in leadership still have a responsibility to speak the truth. They are still required to seek God's council and speak His words, not their own.

EZEKIEL

Ezekiel was called by God during the same time that Jeremiah was preaching. Ezekiel preached from 593 BC to around 570 BC. While Jeremiah was in Jerusalem delivering God's message, God chose Ezekiel to be a messenger to the Jews who were in exile in Babylon. Like the other prophets, Ezekiel was faced with people who refused to hear or accept his message, but God continually told him to speak His words whether they listened or not.

He said: "Son of man, I am sending you to the Israelites, to a rebellious nation that has rebelled against me; they and their ancestors have been in revolt against me to this very day. The people to whom I am sending you are obstinate and stubborn. Say to them, 'This is what the Sovereign LORD says.

And whether they listen or fail to listen—for they are a rebellious people—they will know that a prophet has been among them.

And you, son of man, do not be afraid of them or their words. Do not be afraid, though briars and thorns are all around you and you live among scorpions. Do not be afraid of what they say or terrified by them, though they are a rebellious people.

You must speak my words to them, whether they listen or fail to listen, for they are rebellious." (Ezekiel 2:3-7 NIV)

So Ezekiel had to say what God said whether the people listened or not. This definitely contrasts the prosperity gospel of today. The ministers who preach prosperity are never faced with people who will not listen to them. In fact, I've seen people stand in lines to get into a packed church in order to hear their messages. I know what I'm talking about

because I used to be one of those people! But doesn't Jesus tell us to beware of following the crowd?

“Enter by the narrow gate; for wide is the gate and broad is the way that leads to destruction, and there are many who go in by it.

Because narrow is the gate and difficult is the way which leads to life, and there are few who find it. (Matthew 7:13-14)

In other words, don't let the crowd fool you. Most people like to be part of what everyone else is doing, even Christians. Some of us see a church that has a lot of members and decide that's where we want to be. However, according to Jesus only a few find the right path. Just because there's a crowd of people doesn't mean God is in the midst. Remember, he only needs two. (Matthew 18:20)

Ezekiel also had to do some things for God that I doubt any of the prosperity preachers would do. He had to exhibit what we would call insane behavior today. God not only called him to speak his message to the people, but on several occasions Ezekiel had to symbolically act out the message of the Lord.

God instructed him to lie on his side for 430 days with an iron griddle in front of him and drink portions of water and eat small rations of food cooked with manure. This was done as a sign to represent how God would cut off the supply of food in Jerusalem. God told Ezekiel that the people would “eat rationed food in anxiety and drink rationed water in despair”. (Ezekiel 4:16)

God also told Ezekiel to shave his head and his beard with a sword. Then He told him to divide the hair into thirds. He had to burn one third of the hair with fire inside the city. He had to strike another third of the hair with the sword all around the city. A few strands of the last third of hair had to be burned and the rest scattered in the wind. All of this was done to demonstrate how God would deal with the people for their disobedience and idol worship. God told Ezekiel to tell the people that a third of them would die by plague or famine in the city; a third would die outside of the city and another third would be scattered. (Ezekiel 5:12) Can you picture the prosperity preachers in their tailored suits running around the city with shaved heads beating their hair with a sword?

God also told Ezekiel that He was going to take away his wife, the “desire” of his eyes, but Ezekiel could not mourn her death. He could only groan quietly.

“Son of man, behold, I take away from you the desire of your eyes with one stroke; yet you shall neither mourn nor weep, nor shall your tears run down. (Ezekiel 24:16 NIV)

Then God told Ezekiel to tell the people that He was going to do the same to them. He was going to destroy the sanctuary, the delight of their eyes. God also said their sons and daughters would die by the sword, but like Ezekiel, they could not mourn or weep. They would waste away in their sin and groan inwardly.

So, for his obedience as God’s chosen messenger, Ezekiel did not reap the same benefits as modern prosperity preachers. He didn’t get to drive a Bentley. He didn’t get a private jet or even a mansion to live in. Instead he got to be humiliated and disgraced. He also got to watch his wife die and couldn’t even openly mourn her death. It’s too bad Ezekiel couldn’t have been a prophet in the 21st century instead of the 6th century. The benefit plan is certainly better now than it was then.

Like Isaiah and Jeremiah, Ezekiel was also called to speak against the false prophets. God said that the false prophets were making up messages and then telling the people that the Lord said it. They were prophesying out of their own imagination and following their own spirit. God compared the messages of the false prophets to a “whitewashed wall”. Basically He was saying that the false prophets were leading His people astray. They were covering up serious issues and declaring peace, when God did not promise that Jerusalem would have peace during this time. He said He would send a violent storm and tear down their carefully constructed whitewashed wall. (Ezekiel 13)

I believe that God is as frustrated today with the false preachers and teachers as He was during Ezekiel’s time. Their false teachings attempt to diminish the sovereignty of God by reducing Him to our level. They weaken the image of God and reduce the “fear of the Lord” by telling people that God is no longer a God of judgment but One Who will grant our every wish and desire, no matter how sinful our lives. But the God that I believe in is not a wimp or a puppet of man. He is a vengeful God and He is still a God of judgment.

PAUL

It’s clearly obvious that the modern day prosperity preachers and teachers are very different from the true messengers of God portrayed in the Old Testament. However, one

might ask “how do they compare to God’s New Testament messengers who lived after Christ?” I’m glad you asked.

Saul, who was later called Paul, was a New Testament messenger. He was an apostle and minister of the gospel after the death of Christ. He is credited with writing a third of the New Testament. Many of the familiar scriptures that Christians quote today were written by Paul. He was also a Roman citizen and a persecutor of those who believed in Jesus. Like many of the messengers before Him, Paul received a direct call from God. While he was on his way to Damascus he had an experience that changed the course of his life.

As he neared Damascus on his journey, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. He fell to the ground and heard a voice say to him, “Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?” “Who are you, Lord?” Saul asked. “I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting,” he replied. “Now get up and go into the city, and you will be told what you must do.” (Acts 9: 3-6 NIV)

From that point on Paul became a zealous minister of the gospel of Christ. His letters to the various churches that he founded were not about prosperity or materialism. He taught about salvation, faith, grace and the love of God. He stressed the importance of being saved by grace, not by works. The bible tells us that preaching the gospel was not Paul’s only occupation. He was also a tentmaker. (Acts 18:3) Unlike the prosperity ministers today, Paul did not burden the church with keeping him in a lavish lifestyle. He worked while he preached the Gospel.

Surely you remember, brothers, our toil and hardship; we worked night and day in order not to be a burden to anyone while we preached the gospel of God to you. (1 Thessalonians 2:9 NIV)

Peter also expresses a similar attitude in telling those who ministered the gospel not to be focused on money but on service.

Be shepherds of God’s flock that is under your care, watching over them — not because you must, but because you are willing, as God wants you to be; not pursuing dishonest gain, but eager to serve; not lording it over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock. (1 Peter 5:2-3 NIV)

Like many ministers today, Paul does instruct the church of Corinth to give, but Paul didn’t ask them to give so that he could live well, but rather give to help those in need.

For I do not mean that others should be eased and you burdened; but by an equality, that now at this time your abundance may supply their lack, that their abundance also may supply your lack —that there may be equality. (2 Corinthians 8:13-14)

Here Paul beautifully expresses the purpose of giving. The purpose of giving is to be a blessing rather than to be blessed. One person’s abundance can supply another person’s lack. This is in contrast to the mentality of giving in order to get something in return that is consuming so much of Christian ministry.

The biggest difference in my opinion between Paul’s ministry and that of the prosperity ministries today is that Paul’s messages all had one central theme: Christ.

For I determined not to know anything among you except Jesus Christ and Him crucified. (1 Corinthians 2:2)

I’ve often said that if the ministers today would concentrate on preaching Christ (and only Christ) the body of Christ would be far better off. Too many churches have members who can’t even articulate who Jesus was and is. The reason is because they don’t hear enough about Him. Instead they hear about how to live a better more prosperous life. They hear more about the blessings than the One Who provides the blessings. Furthermore, some of these self-appointed preachers act as if they don’t even know Who Christ is. Let me just say once and for all for anyone who asks the question – for all those talk show hosts and everyone else out there in TV land who keep talking about the many paths to God. There is only one path. Jesus (and only Jesus) is the way to salvation! Anyone who teaches

otherwise is a false teacher. Anyone who preaches otherwise is a false preacher and anyone who prophesies otherwise is a false prophet.



CHAPTER 10

THE VEHICLE OF FAITH

Have you ever heard any of these statements or something similar?

You don't have any money because you don't have enough faith.

You're sick because you don't have the faith that you need to be healed.

You're not in that career you want, because you don't have the faith to get you there.

I can tell what kind of faith you have by the size of your bank account, the kind of car you drive and the house you live in.

When you heard it, how did it make you feel? If you're like me, it made you feel like a loser with a capital “L”. I used to look at the spiritual superstars and feel like I was nobody compared to them because I didn't have what they had. I had heard so many times that I was in lack because I didn't have enough faith until I started to believe it. I felt like God held a meeting and didn't invite me. Instead of making me strive harder for a closer relationship with God, I strived harder to be like someone else who appeared to have a godly image. I was focused on the image of man instead of the image of Christ. (Sadly, even in the case of our leaders, the two are not always the same.)

I believed that faith was the vehicle that would get me to a more financially prosperous destination. I believed that if I could just conjure up enough faith, I would get everything I wanted. So, each year when my pastor said (in November) that God was going to do something for us before the end of December, I'd put my faith into action. I'd run down the aisle with the rest of the congregation and slap my seed of faith on the altar. Then I'd close my eyes and wave my hands and scream. Apparently, we thought that the more noise we made, the faster God would show up. He didn't, and eventually I grew tired of the ritual.

I finally realized that God wasn't going to show up because we were out of order. We were trying to use faith to accomplish the wrong goals. We had taken faith and turned it into something selfish. I was tired of lying and pretending. I wanted to experience God for real. I wanted to walk in the greater works that Jesus said I would be able to do. (John 14:12)

FAITH IN THE FIERY FURNACE

During his reign as the king of Babylon, Nebuchanezzar erected a golden image ninety feet high and nine feet wide. Everyone in his kingdom was told to worship this image whenever they heard the sound of music. If anyone did not worship the golden image, the king declared that he would have them thrown into the furnace. (Daniel 3:1-6)

During this time, there were three Hebrew men, Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, who refused to worship the king's idol. So, the king summoned the three men and told them that if they did not bow down and worship his golden image, he would have them thrown into the furnace.

Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-Nego answered and said to the king, "O Nebuchadnezzar, we have no need to answer you in this matter. If that is the case, our God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the burning fiery furnace, and He will deliver us from your hand, O king. But if not, let it be known to you, O king, that we do not serve your gods, nor will we worship the gold image which you have set up." (Daniel 3: 16-18)

This made king Nebuchadnezzar so angry, he commanded soldiers to bind Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego and throw them into the furnace. He ordered that the furnace be heated seven times hotter than usual.

Therefore, because the king's command was urgent, and the furnace exceedingly hot, the flame of the fire killed those men who took up Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-Nego. And these three men, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-Nego, fell down bound into the midst of the burning fiery furnace.

Then King Nebuchadnezzar was astonished; and he rose in haste and spoke, saying to his counselors, "Did we not cast three men bound into the midst of the fire?" They answered and said to the king, "True, O king."

"Look!" he answered, "I see four men loose, walking in the midst of the fire; and they are not hurt, and the form of the fourth is like the Son of God." (Daniel 3:22-25)

Shadrach's, Meshach's and Abednego's faith in God was so strong, they didn't fear being thrown into the fiery furnace, because they knew that God could save them, and he did. I believe they were saved because of their faith. Unlike so many of us, they had faith in God, not in what God would do. They believed that God would deliver them, but their faith was not in deliverance, but in God. They told King Nebuchadnezzar that the God they served was able to save them, but if he didn't they still would not worship his false god.

How many of us would have continued to believe in God if He didn't rescue us immediately? For many of us, our faith would have stopped the moment we were thrown into the furnace. In this example, God didn't save the three Hebrew men from being thrown into the furnace, but He protected them from the flames. Sometimes we think that having faith means that God is going to somehow shield us from experiencing difficulties in life, but that's not what the bible says. Instead, having faith means that we're able to go through the difficult times with a positive attitude and never stop believing and trusting in God.

This contrasts the teachings of the "word of faith – prosperity" movement that is sweeping across the Christian Church like a parasite. This "new gospel" teaches Christians that they never have to go through anything as long as they have enough faith.

You shouldn't get sick because your faith makes you healed. You shouldn't ever struggle financially because your faith can make you rich. So by faith we can have anything we want. Anything we want includes all of the material and financial desires of our heart regardless of whether those desires are in line with what God desires for us.

The difference between this teaching and what the bible actually teaches is very subtle yet still very dangerous because the focus of faith is turned away from God. Trust is no longer in God but in man. The sovereignty of God is down-played.

The bible says that God has mercy on whom he chooses to have mercy. (Romans 9:14) This means that everyone is not going to receive the mercy of God. The bible also says that God is the potter and we are the clay and He makes us all for different purposes. (Romans 9:21) This means that we are not all created to be CEO's of our own companies no matter how much faith we have.

REAL FAITH VERSUS PROSPERITY FAITH

There's an old saying in the Church that goes like this: *He may not come when you want Him, but He's always right on time.* The premise behind this statement is that God doesn't always do what we want Him to do when we want Him to do it, but we accept His will anyway. This is the essence of real faith, not some contrived belief in a genie-like God Who grants our every wish. Real faith is accepting His will and His way, even when we don't like it or understand it.

The real message of faith says, "Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen." (Hebrews 11:1) The prosperity message of faith says, "Now faith is the belief that God is going to give me what I want." When you first think about it, it may be hard to see what's wrong with the prosperity message of faith, especially if this is what you're used to hearing. But take another look at this message. What happens to this type of faith when God doesn't give you what you wanted? Is your faith strengthened or are you disappointed? If you believed God for something in particular, more than likely you're going to be very disappointed if you don't get it.

I don't believe there's anything wrong with hoping for something. However, if that hope becomes the basis of your faith, then you're always going to be disappointed when you don't get it. I believe that real faith never disappoints because real faith is built on trust in God alone and can only come when we are completely surrendered to His will. How could we ever be disappointed when God doesn't do something that we want Him to

do or He doesn't give us what we want if we are surrendered to His will? If our faith is based on His will and not our own, we are able to be content with whatever we receive and accept whatever happens.

For example, if my faith is based on God allowing me to purchase a particular home and I can't afford it and don't get it, then my faith is diminished and I'm disappointed. However, if I just trust that God will supply my need for shelter, then I'm content with whatever home I get and can consider it a blessing. In fact, real faith keeps believing and trusting in God even if the believer is homeless. How can that be? Because real faith is built on God's will and my acceptance of His will. So, if it's His will for me to be homeless (perhaps to help some other homeless people), then so be it. Let His will be done.

Now I'm not naïve. I realize what a tough pill this is to swallow. I also realize that most prosperity-minded Christians would consider this crazy thinking because they don't believe that it could be God's will for any of us to be homeless. Instead, they believe that we're all supposed to be living the good life in our mansions. They think that as long as we have faith, God is going to make us all rich. But this is not real faith. This is prosperity faith, the faith that is built on hoping for things. Prosperity faith teaches that God will do what we ask Him to do as long as we believe.

TRUSTING GOD

Faith and trust are interchangeable because real faith is based on trust in God and it's not an option. The bible tells us that trust in God is a requirement to please Him.

But without faith it is impossible to please Him, for he who comes to God must believe that He is, and that He is a rewarder of those who diligently seek Him. (Hebrews 11:6)

You can't have faith without having trust. The faith that God wants us to have is like the faith that Job had. Job had real faith. After all that he had been through he was still able to put his trust in God. He said "though He slay me, yet will I trust Him." (Job 13:15)

Abraham was also someone who had real faith and who put his trust in God. During his life, God asked Abraham to believe something that would have been impossible to believe without faith. First God told Abraham to leave his country and his father's

household and go to a land that He would show him. He also told Abraham that He would bless him and from him He would make a “great nation”. At this time, Abraham was too old to bear children and his wife, Sarah, was barren. Still, Abraham took his family and left his home. He didn’t hesitate or question God. He just did as he was commanded. When Abraham set out, he didn’t even know where he was going, but he put his trust in God to show him.

Eventually, God followed through on His promise and Sarah bore Abraham a son, whom he named Isaac. Then God told Abraham to sacrifice Isaac. So, Abraham took Isaac and laid him out to sacrifice him, but before he could do it, God showed Abraham a ram in the bushes that he could sacrifice instead. Through all of this, Abraham had to trust God even when circumstances seemed to be against the very thing that God had promised. He had to have faith...real faith. Had Abraham not had real faith, he probably would never have left his father’s house. He definitely would not have taken his son whom God had promised him and attempted to sacrifice him. But he believed that God would do what He said He would do, no matter what it looked like.

Jesus, in the garden of Gethsemane, trusted God to the point of death. He knew what He would have to go through, and though He didn’t want to die, He was still able to relinquish His own will to do God’s will. (Matthew 26:39) Now no one, even the “word of faith” ministers would dare say Jesus didn’t have faith. Yet he allowed Himself to be nailed to a cross. Why didn’t He put His faith into action and speak Himself out of that situation? He could have done that but unlike most of us, Jesus was willing to surrender His will to the will of the Father.

The glimpse that we have of Jesus praying in the garden of Gethsemane before He is eventually arrested and crucified is the greatest picture of faith in the entire bible. Even though He knew what was going to happen to Him and was clearly agonizing over it, He was still able to say to God “nevertheless, not as I will, but as thou wilt”. (Matthew 26:39 KJV)

This is real faith. It’s not something we conjure up to get what we want. It’s trusting in God and accepting His will.



CHAPTER 11

WAKE-UP CALL

Have you ever been in your car driving along and suddenly realized that you missed your turn? It was like you were in a daze. You asked yourself, “How did I get here?” Physically, you were driving the car, but your mind was in another place. I’ve had this happen to me on more than one occasion. It’s a classic example of just going through the motions and it’s what I believe many Christians are doing every day. Somewhere along the way, we wandered off the road, and we missed the warning signs telling us that we were going the wrong way. So now, we’re just going through the motions, in a daze.

We’re doing what we’re told...not asking any questions...afraid to rock the boat or to upset the established order. We’re not really experiencing the true presence of God, but we still pretend that everything is fine. When someone asks us how we are doing, we have an automatic response. “Oh, I’m blessed and highly favored”, we say. But really, we don’t feel blessed or highly favored. In fact, we haven’t seen God in so long we’re not even sure how He looks anymore. We’re just going through the motions, in a daze.

And the sad part is that it’s almost easier to stay in the daze where it’s comfortable than to wake up and see things as they really are. Sometimes, we need someone or something to shake us in order to wake us up. That’s what happened to me. God woke me up and my prayer is that this book will do the same thing for you.

I say *God woke me* up as if it happened suddenly. It didn't. My wake up call was not as drastic as an alarm ringing in the morning. It was more of a subtle nudge. For me, it took time and it wasn't easy, because I wasn't just a church member, I was a church junkie. Then, one day I realized that the church that I was so fond of had turned into a corporation. We were operating like a business - a major money-making machine. I believe our focus had moved away from God and turned to whatever would increase our profits. We talked about those "other" churches who were always talking about money. Then we became one of them. Of course, there were signs along the way that warned us we were getting off-course, but we didn't heed the warning.

The things that I noticed, I was reluctant to talk about, because we were told that members didn't question the decisions made by the leadership. Now, thinking back to that time, I'm sure I wasn't the only one who had concerns about the path we had taken. I didn't say anything then, because I was afraid to upset the established order. I didn't want to be labeled as a troublemaker. I wanted to fit-in with everyone else. Now I don't care what label people give me, as long as I'm doing what God told me to do. Jesus was labeled a troublemaker. John the Baptist was labeled a troublemaker. Paul was labeled a troublemaker. So, I'm in good company.

It's time for the Church to wake up and see what we have become so that we can get back on track. We no longer have the luxury of waiting for a subtle nudge. We need an alarm. There's a world that's waiting on us to rise up and be the true sons and daughters of God. (Romans 8:19) And time is running out.

Since I first began writing this book, the American economy has plummeted and is now just beginning to rebound. Millions of Americans were unemployed, the housing market reached an all-time low, and many faced financial ruin.

As our nation struggles to rebuild its economy, the media continues to make sure that we are aware of the greed and failed government policies that led us to this problem and there seems to be a lot of finger pointing. Main Street is blaming Wall Street; small business is blaming big business and the current government administration is blaming the previous one. But I think there's some blame that isn't getting its fair share of media attention. I believe that the Church has some responsibility in all of this too. If we would have spent more time encouraging and teaching people to seek God instead of chasing after financial prosperity, we wouldn't be in some of this mess.

Though I don't have the statistical data to prove it, I'd venture to say that the homes that are in foreclosure belong to just as many Christians as non-Christians. It's easy for us

to join the finger pointing game and blame this problem on the greed and corruption of the world. Some of us have even started shouting prematurely because we're anticipating the fulfillment of scripture and the great transfer of wealth. The bible does say that the wealth of the wicked is stored up for the righteous, (Proverbs 13:22) but don't shout yet because the problem that we're facing as a nation is not a non-Christian problem. The Church is just as much to blame as everyone else, maybe even more so, because we're supposed to be an example.

We've been living beyond our means and chasing material wealth just like everyone else. The only difference is that many of us have been doing it with the blessings of our church leaders. We were told to purchase homes even though we couldn't really afford them. We were encouraged to go after bigger and better and we shouted about it on Sunday and praised God because we thought the increase came from Him. Well obviously it didn't because the bible tells us that God's blessings come without sorrow. (Proverbs 10:22)

Perhaps now, during these times of economic hardships, people will begin to look to God, not just as the one Who can deliver us from financial problems, but as the one Who can sustain us in the midst of all problems. Perhaps now the prosperity gospel will be exposed for the self-centered gospel of greed that it is and its leaders will be seen for the wolves in sheep's clothing that they are.

My prayer throughout the writing of this book was that God would reveal the truth of His word to me and to those who read it. We are now armed with that truth. With truth comes responsibility.

“And you shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free.” (John 8:32)