



Letter To A Young Christian

by Jim Buller

How Christianity
Works for Me

This booklet started out as a letter to grand-daughter, Tylea. She was going to be baptized, but because we live over 1100 miles / 1800 km away, we would not be able to attend. So I thought I would write her a letter, describing some of the things I have found helpful in living a Christian life. However, as the letter was coming together, I kept thinking of 'one more thing' that I wanted to add. And then it also occurred to me that there would probably be others who could be helped with these same thoughts. So, little by little, as things came together, that letter became this booklet.

Let me begin by sharing a bit of my story. I was born into a Christian family, and as a family we regularly went to church. I also attended Christian schools through high school. (And later, I also went to a Christian college and university.) When I was about 12 or 13, I was baptized. While in school, I was probably one of the more 'spiritual' kids, although I wasn't one of the 'student spiritual leaders.' In spite of all this however, it seemed like I was constantly struggling to stay strong spiritually and to live a consistent Christian life.

‘Spiritual High’

While in school, I remember every once in a while they would have a ‘week of prayer,’ or there would be a ‘Bible conference’ or ‘prayer conference,’ or some other program with a strong spiritual emphasis. During these programs many of us would experience a ‘spiritual high.’ After the program was over, we would try hard to hang on to this spiritual experience. But in spite of our efforts the experience would eventually fade, and things would go back to the way they had always been.

Years later, when I became a Bible teacher at a Christian high school, I saw this same thing happening with my students. As I prayed and thought about it, I realized that the reason we get a ‘spiritual high’ is because during these programs (1) we are surrounding ourselves with good spiritual influences, and (2) we are setting aside many of the things we regularly did to spend extra time on spiritual subjects and activities. After the program was over, we stopped doing both of these things and went back to what we regularly did. So it shouldn’t have been any surprise that our spiritual experience also went back to ‘regular.’

It should be easy to see that when you spend extra time with someone, you are going to feel closer to them, and it’s the same way with God. When you spend extra time with Him, and do extra things with Him, you are going to feel closer to Him. So, how can we feel close to God even on ‘regular’ days when there isn’t some special spiritual program going on?

Think about it: What is the strongest and best ‘spiritual influence’ in the universe? —God Himself is! And He has promised to “never leave you.” (Hebrews 13:5.) So, program or no program, He is *always* there. In other words, we don’t have to wait for *someone else* to put together a special program and surround us with strong spiritual influences in order for us to get close to God. We just need to recognize that He is there, and interact with Him throughout our day.

So, take the responsibility of your own personal relationship with God. Don’t wait for someone else to put

together some special program for you to get close to God. Each day, make Jesus a part of *everything* you do. “Acknowledge Him” “in *all* your ways.” (Proverbs 3:6.) Talk to Him often throughout the day. Ask Him to help you with whatever you are doing, and be sure to thank Him when things go well, (see 1 Thessalonians 5:18).

Abiding in Jesus

My ‘moment of truth’ came when, based on John 15:4-5, I was asked the question, ‘Are you trying, or are you abiding?’ Let’s look at the verses this question is based on.

Abide in Me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in Me. I am the vine, you are the branches. He who abides in Me, and I in him, bears much fruit; for without Me you can do nothing. (John 15:4-5.)

That question made me realize that up to that point, *I* had been trying to live the Christian life, by *my own* power. Instead, I just needed to “abide” in Jesus, and let *His* power, through the Holy Spirit living in me, keep me, and cause me to live for Him. In the following verses, notice ‘what’ God has promised to do:

I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you; I will take the heart of stone out of your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. I will put My Spirit within you and cause you to walk in My statutes, and you will keep My judgments and do them. (Ezekiel 36:26-27.)

Now to Him who is able to keep you from stumbling, and to present you faultless before the presence of His glory with exceeding joy. (Jude 24.)

Before I discovered this last verse, I used to worry about being ready for Jesus to come. But it lets me know that if I

focus on “abiding” or *staying connected* to Jesus, *He* will “cause” me to live for Him, and make me ready for His coming. I don’t need to worry about it.

As the apostle Paul puts it in Colossians 2:6. “As you therefore have received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk in Him.” In the same way that we spent time studying and learning about Jesus when we first connected to Him, we need to continue to spend time acknowledging Him in all our ways, learning more about Him, and letting His Spirit work in, and on, our hearts.

The Indwelling Holy Spirit

We need to put what’s been said so far together with what Jesus promised in John 14:16-17.

And I will pray the Father, and He will give you another Helper, that He may abide with you forever—the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees Him nor knows Him; but you know Him, for He dwells with you and will be in you.

Those who abide in Jesus have the Holy Spirit dwelling, or living in them! Please note that as a Christian, letting the Holy Spirit live in us is not optional.

But you are not in the flesh but in the Spirit, if indeed the Spirit of God dwells in you. Now if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, he is not His. (Romans 8:9.)

It is the indwelling Holy Spirit that gives us the power to live for Jesus. He is also the one who changes us so that we will be more like Jesus. And He is the one who enables us to witness and do the work God has for us to do.

Please also study more about ‘spiritual gifts’ in Romans 12, 1 Corinthians 12-14, and Ephesians 4.

‘Bearing Fruit’

Since God is the ruler of the universe, if we are going to abide in Him we need to let Him be in control of the relationship. That is why we call Him ‘Lord’ —which essentially means ‘Boss.’ So, we let’s talk a bit about what He is going to have us do if we let Him be in control of our lives. Going back to John 15, let’s read verses 1-8. Notice the symbolism Jesus uses here.

I am the true vine, and My Father is the vinedresser. Every branch in Me that does not bear fruit He takes away; and every branch that bears fruit He prunes, that it may bear more fruit. You are already clean because of the word which I have spoken to you. Abide in Me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in Me.

I am the vine, you are the branches. He who abides in Me, and I in him, bears much fruit; for without Me you can do nothing. If anyone does not abide in Me, he is cast out as a branch and is withered; and they gather them and throw them into the fire, and they are burned. If you abide in Me, and My words abide in you, you will ask what you desire, and it shall be done for you. By this My Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit; so you will be My disciples.

What is the symbolism used here? —A grapevine. Who is the vine? —Jesus is. He said, “I am the vine.” Who are the branches? —We are. He said, “you are the branches.” And what did He say would be the result of us being connected to Him like a branch being connected to the vine? —He said that we would “bear much fruit.” So what does “fruit” represent?

To answer this question, let’s think about plants and the different parts plants have, and, what these different parts do for the plant they are growing on. To keep things simple

we will just consider ‘roots,’ ‘stems and branches,’ ‘leaves,’ and ‘fruit.’

Roots: What do roots do for the plant? —They soak up water and soil nutrients, and hold the plant up. What would happen if we cut the roots off of the plant? —It would literally fall over and die! So, ‘roots’ are essential for the survival of the plant.

Stems and Branches: What do ‘stems and branches’ do for the plant? —They provide a framework to hold the leaves out in the sunlight so they can do what they need to do. Stems also have veins which carry the water and nutrients around so each part of the plant can have what it needs. So what would happen if we were to cut all the stems and branches off of the plant? —Again, it would die. (In fact, if you just cut a strip of bark off all the way around a tree, a process called ‘girdling,’ it will kill the tree!) So ‘stems and branches’ are also essential for the survival of the plant.

Leaves: What do ‘leaves’ do for the plant? —They use sunlight energy to turn water and carbon dioxide into sugar, a process called ‘photosynthesis.’ And although we don’t usually think of plants ‘breathing,’ they do have a gas exchange, which happens through small openings on the underside of the leaves called ‘stomata.’ So, what would happen if we took all the leaves off of the plant? —It would try to grow more! But if we keep taking them off, the plant would eventually starve to death. So, ‘leaves’ are also essential for the survival of the plant.

Fruit: What does ‘fruit’ do for the plant? —Nothing. The plant can get along just fine without bearing any fruit. So, why did Jesus use ‘fruit,’ which doesn’t do anything for the plant, to describe the result of us being connected to Him? —That is because ‘fruit,’ is something the plant doesn’t do for *itself*. ‘Fruit,’ is something the plant does for *others*! ‘Fruit’ might be food for birds and animals, it has the seeds which will start

the next generation of plants growing, and if nothing else, even if it just falls to the ground and rots, it enriches the soil.

So, if we let Jesus be 'Lord' of our lives, and let the Holy Spirit work in and through us, He is going to have us live to benefit and bless others.

Now keep in mind that Jesus doesn't expect us to "bear fruit" on our own. Remember, He said, "He who abides in Me, and I in him, bears much fruit; for without Me you can do nothing." We can only be a blessings to others as we are abiding in Him and letting His Holy Spirit work in us and through us. If we *are* abiding in Him, we *will* "bear much fruit." This is what He is going to have us do.

Unfortunately, many Christians make a difference in their thinking between their personal relationship or connection with God, and their personal ministry or the "fruit" that they are to "bear." Like the Rich Young Ruler, (see Luke 18:18-23), and the 'Goats,' in the parable, (see Matthew 25:31-46), they think that they can do what God requires as a separate thing from benefitting and blessing others. But notice that when the rich young ruler asked Jesus what he needed to do to inherit eternal life, Jesus essentially told him, 'Yes, keeping the commandments is important, but you need to go and bear some fruit!'

The 'Great Controversy'

So, in a very real way, the whole great controversy between Christ and Satan is all about selfishness -vs- unselfishness. Remember what Jesus said in Matthew 20:28. "The Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many." Here Jesus lets us know that He Himself lives to do things for others. (He doesn't just expect *us* to be unselfish.)

On the other, hand Satan's way is just to worry about yourself, and to just do what you want to do. Remember what he told Eve at the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil.

For God knows that in the day you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.” (Genesis 3:5.)

In other words he was saying, ‘If you eat this fruit *you* will know what is good or bad, right or wrong. You won’t need *God* to tell you what to do. You can do what *you* think is best.’ Unfortunately Eve listened to him and ate the fruit. In doing so, she separated herself from God to go her own way. This was the same thing Lucifer had done when he fell.

So, which side of the ‘great controversy’ we end up being on depends on whether we just want to go our own way, or whether we are willing to connect with Jesus and let Him take away our selfishness so He can use us to be a blessing to others.

While we are on this subject, there is one more idea I’d like to share. Remember who Lucifer once was. In the very beginning he was in heaven, a ‘covering cherub,’ the closest angel to God. (See Ezekiel 28:14-15.) He once *had* the things that we as Christians are striving for. Why would he give it all up? —Essentially, he gave it up in order to go his own way and do what he wanted to do. Unfortunately, Adam and Eve were deceived into making the same choice, and the human race has been infected with selfishness ever since. So in a very real way, Jesus died so we could make the exact opposite choice that Lucifer made —to give up our own way in order to re-connect with God and follow Him, letting Him use us to benefit and bless others.

Steadfastness

Unfortunately many Christians have a problem with being “double minded.” They keep going back and forth between following God, and doing what they want to do. (See James 1:6-8.) But God wants us to be steadfast.

Therefore, my beloved brethren, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord,

knowing that your labor is not in vain in the Lord. (1 Corinthians 15:58.)

As we focus on abiding in Him, God has promised to work “in us both to will, [that is, to chose], and to do ... His good pleasure. (Philippians 2:13.) If we allow Him to, He will make us steadfast.

Now may the God of peace Himself sanctify you completely; and may your whole spirit, soul, and body be preserved blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. He who calls you is faithful, who also will do it. (1 Thessalonians 5:23-24.)

Whenever we find that we have separated from Jesus to go our own way we need to stop and think about where we really want to be and what we really want to be doing with our lives. Do we really want to follow Him and let His Spirit work in us to benefit and bless others? Or do we really want to just go our own selfish way?

If we really want to be connected to Jesus and follow Him, remember the difference between Peter and Judas. Both of them did something seriously wrong —Judas betrayed Jesus, and Peter denied Him. What’s more, Jesus warned both of them about what they were going to do before they did it, and they still went and did it anyway!

The difference between them is that Peter came back to Jesus, whereas Judas went out and hung himself. (See: Matthew 26:20-25, 31-35, 69-75, 27:3-5, John 21:15-19.) So if we sin, let’s come back to Jesus and confess what we did wrong, and let Him cleanse us and reconnect us to Himself. If we use the things we do wrong to remind us to reconnect with Jesus we can still gain a spiritual victory. Keep in mind the following verses:

My little children, these things I write to you, so that you may not sin. And if anyone sins, we have an Advocate

with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous. (1 John 2:1.)

If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.(1 John 1:9.)

Expect Persecutions

As we live for Jesus we can expect that in one way or another we will be persecuted for being a Christian. Note the following verses:

Beloved, do not think it strange concerning the fiery trial which is to try 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. If you are reproached for the name of Christ, blessed are you, for the Spirit of glory and of God rests upon you. On their part He is blasphemed, but on your part He is glorified. (1 Peter 4:12-14.)

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. Remember the word that I said to you, 'A servant is not greater than his master.' If they persecuted Me, they will also persecute you. If they kept My word, they will keep yours also. But all these things they will do to you for My name's sake, because they do not know Him who sent Me. (John 15:18-21.)

Yes, and all who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will suffer persecution. (2 Timothy 3:12.)

Grow or Die

There is a very important lesson in the many parables Jesus told about plants. Let's take the Parable of the Sower in Matthew 13 and Mark 4 as an example. Just like the seed that fell in the good ground, the seed that fell in the rocky soil and the seed that fell among the thorns also sprouted and started growing. But the 'rocks' and the 'weeds' caused those new little plants to eventually stop growing and die.

The 'rocks' *in* the stony ground represent things we have *in* our lives that keep us from growing in Jesus and 'bearing fruit.' The 'thorns' or 'weeds' represent things we have *surrounded ourselves with* that choke out our spiritual growth and 'fruit bearing.'

The principle here is that either we are growing, or we are dying. Either we are choosing to continue to grow in Jesus and to 'bear fruit' to benefit others, or we are choosing to hang onto things that will cause us to die spiritually. Remember also what Jesus said in John 15:2.

Every branch in Me that does not bear fruit He takes away; and every branch that bears fruit He prunes, that it may bear more fruit.

Let's allow God to "prune" us. Let's be willing to give up the 'rocks' and 'weeds' in our lives so we can keep growing in Jesus and "bear much fruit" to bless others.

This grow or die principle also emphasizes the point that we need to *continually* choose to grow in Jesus. There will never be any 'level' that we will ever 'reach' or 'arrive' at where we can stop because we've finally 'made it.'

Are We 'Hiding' or 'Abiding?'

What's the first thing Adam and Eve did after they sinned? —They hid from God. And at the very end, people will be calling for the rocks and mountains to fall on them and hide them from God's face. (See Genesis 3:8 and Revelation 6:16.) All the time in between these two events people have been trying to hide from God. And if we are

honest, we would all have to admit that there is still something in us that wants to keep at least a little distance between us and God.

As a result, we need to be very intentional about our choice to connect with God. We simply cannot let this desire keep us from connecting and staying connected with Him. This is probably one of the reasons Daniel had three regular prayer times built into his schedule each day.

Now when Daniel knew that the writing was signed, he went home. And in his upper room, with his windows open toward Jerusalem, he knelt down on his knees three times that day, and prayed and gave thanks before his God, as was his custom since early days. (Daniel 6:10.)

“This is How the Judgement Works”

It should be no surprise that ‘hiding’ from God also figures into the judgement. Note what Jesus says just a couple verses after that famous verse in John 3:16.

This is how the judgment works: the light has come into the world, but people love the darkness rather than the light, because their deeds are evil. Those who do evil things hate the light and will not come to the light, because they do not want their evil deeds to be shown up. But those who do what is true come to the light in order that the light may show that what they did was in obedience to God. (John 3:19-21 GNT.)

Let’s note some things about these important verses:

(1) “This is how the judgement works.” Just before Jesus comes, there are three important messages that need to go out to the world. (See Revelation 14:6-16.) These messages are symbolized by three angels flying above the earth shouting their messages with loud voices. One of the things the first angel says is that the judgement hour “has come.”

So, just before Jesus comes, there is to be a judgement which will decide who will go with Him to heaven and who won't. From the other prophecies in the Bible, we understand that we are already living in this 'judgement hour' time. So it is really important that we understand "how the judgement works!"

(2) "Light *has* come into the world." In the first chapter of John, John the Baptist is preaching about the coming Messiah. Referring to Jesus as the "Light," it says, "That was the true Light which gives light to every man coming into the world." (John 1:9.) So, God's "Light" has been given to *everyone* who has ever lived throughout the *whole* world. The judgement is fair, because everyone has been given at least some "Light."

(3) Notice that there are only two different ways people respond to God's Light. Picture a big field, (maybe like a soccer field), when it is dark at night. There are people all over this field. Then, a bright light comes on at one end of the field, and the people either come over to the light, or they try to hide back in the shadows. This is the same 'hiding' from God that Adam and Eve did after they sinned. Fortunately, God came looking for Adam and Eve. And in the same way, He comes looking for each of us. He gives His "Light" to everyone who has ever come into the world. But it is up to us how we respond to His "Light." Will we come to the "Light," connect with Jesus, and let Him work through us to "bear fruit?" Or will we continue to hide back in the shadows so we can keep doing what we want to do? There are only these two possibilities: either we come to God's "Light," or we hide from it.

(4) Notice also that it says it may be "clearly seen" that the things those who come to the "Light" do has "been done *in* God." Those who come to the Light are 'abiding *in* Jesus' and letting the Holy Spirit work through them to benefit and bless others. So we are either 'hiding' or we are 'abiding.'

Four Steps to “Great Faith”

Jesus makes a very interesting statement in Luke 18:8. He says, “When the Son of Man comes, will He really find faith on the earth?” The way He words this question, it almost sounds like He’s wondering whether He will find any faith or not. So, it is especially important that we understand what ‘faith’ is and how we can have faith, so at least He will find it in us!

Note that at the tree of the knowledge of good and evil God and Satan were essentially telling Eve exactly the opposite. God was saying, “Don’t eat this fruit! It will be bad for you!” Whereas Satan was saying, “Eat the fruit! It will be good for you!”

Since Eve didn’t have any experience eating the fruit herself, she didn’t *know* what would happen. Therefore, her choice whether or not to eat the fruit, was based completely on “faith.” Who did she believe? Who did she think was telling her the truth? Who should she trust?

Unfortunately she made the wrong choice. So in a sense, everything went wrong on this planet over the issue of “faith.” So it should be no wonder then, that “faith” plays such an important part in making things right again.

Since faith is such a key element in the Bible’s teaching, it is probably safe to say that all the stories in the Bible are an illustration of faith. They either tell us about someone who had faith, or someone who was not faithful. And in the story we get to see the result.

When we look at the Bible’s stories this way, we start to notice a pattern. This pattern can be easily outlined in the story of the centurion who had a sick servant in Luke chapter 7. Notice that toward the end of the story it says,

When Jesus heard these things, He marveled at him, and turned around and said to the crowd that followed Him, “I say to you, I have not found such great faith, not even in Israel!”

This centurion didn't just have "faith," he had "great faith!" —even greater than Jesus' own disciples, (because they were a part of "Israel")! So, let's take a closer look at this story to find out how we too can have "great faith!"

And a certain centurion's servant, who was dear to him, was sick and ready to die. So when he heard about Jesus, he sent elders of the Jews to Him, pleading with Him to come and heal his servant. And when they came to Jesus, they begged Him earnestly, saying that the one for whom He should do this was deserving, "for he loves our nation, and has built us a synagogue." Then Jesus went with them. And when He was already not far from the house, the centurion sent friends to Him, saying to Him, "Lord, do not trouble Yourself, for I am not worthy that You should enter under my roof. Therefore I did not even think myself worthy to come to You. But say the word, and my servant will be healed. For I also am a man placed under authority, having soldiers under me. And I say to one, 'Go,' and he goes; and to another, 'Come,' and he comes; and to my servant, 'Do this,' and he does it." When Jesus heard these things, He marveled at him, and turned around and said to the crowd that followed Him, "I say to you, I have not found such great faith, not even in Israel!" And those who were sent, returning to the house, found the servant well who had been sick. (Luke 7:2-10.)

What is the first thing we find out about the centurion, (other than the fact that he is a centurion)? —He had a sick servant. He recognized his need for help. This is significant, because Laodicea, symbolic of the church in the last days, does not recognize its need. (See Revelation 3:17.) So, if we are going to have "great faith," the first thing we must do is to: 'Recognize Our Need.'

The second thing we find out about the centurion, or the second 'step' as we will call it, is what the centurion did about his need: He took his need to Jesus. But, it is also

important to notice his attitude as he comes to Jesus, especially in contrast with the attitude of the elders of the Jews in the story. He says, “I am not worthy.” This shows that he is humble. His statement about his relationship to authority also shows that he is submissive. And as he brings his need to Jesus, he trusts that Jesus will do what needs to be done. Therefore, the second step is to ‘Take Our Need to Jesus’ —with an attitude of humble, submissive, trust.

The third ‘step’ is what he asked Jesus for so that the sick servant would be healed. He asked Jesus to just “say the word.” Although the centurion may not have known a lot about God or Jesus, he recognized one thing —that when Jesus said something, it happened! There was *power* in Jesus’ word. This reminds us of the verses in Psalm 33:6, 9.

By the word of the LORD the heavens were made, and all the host of them by the breath of His mouth.... For He spoke, and it was done; He commanded, and it stood fast.

The centurion was confident that if Jesus simply said the word, his servant would be healed. So the third step is to ‘Obtain the Word of God Regarding Our Situation.’

The fourth ‘step’ is what the messengers did after they obtained the word. They returned to the house and found the servant well. So the fourth step is to ‘Act in Harmony with the Word of God.’

Four Steps to Great Faith:

1. Recognize Our Need
2. Take Our Need to Jesus —with an attitude of humility, submissiveness, and trust
3. Obtain the Word of God Regarding Our Situation
4. Act in Harmony with the Word of God

These four steps are also easily recognized in the story of Naaman the leper in 2 Kings 5:1-19. Naaman’s story is an even better example of the importance of the fourth step.

- (1) Naaman recognized his need —he had leprosy!
- (2) He took his need to Jesus —through the prophet Elisha.
- (3) He obtained the word of God regarding his situation —‘Go wash in the Jordan River seven times.’
- (4) However, he didn’t want to act in harmony with the word of God and wash in the muddy Jordan River! He even got mad. But as he calmed down and listened to the advice of his servants, he went to the river, washed, and was healed.

Both of these stories teach us that God is interested in much more than just working miracles. He also wants to teach us important lessons that will make us better people. For example, Naaman needed to learn about humility and submission. He also needed to learn the importance of washing, even if it is in a muddy river, because leprosy is frequently associated with a lack of personal cleanliness.

So, as you recognize needs in your own life, humbly take them to Jesus. Recognize the power of His Word, and find out what the Bible has to say about the situation you are in. Bring your life into harmony with the Word so you will be cooperating with what God is trying to do, because He wants to provide for our needs in a way that is best, not only for us, but for everyone and everything else. Claim God’s promises, and have faith that He will do what He says He will do.

And my God shall supply all your need according to His riches in glory by Christ Jesus. (Philippians 4:19.)

What Does it Mean to ‘Believe?’

There is another closely related point that many Christians have had trouble with, and that is, what does it mean to “believe.” John 3:16 says,

For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life.

Whoever believes in Jesus then, has eternal life, But James 2:19 warns us,

You believe that there is one God. You do well. Even the demons believe—and tremble!

So, what type of belief do we have? Do we have a saving belief, or do we just have the demon's type of belief? Notice from this verse that the demons simply believe that God exists. The just believe the 'facts.' Hebrews 11:6 warns us not to stop there. It says,

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.

In addition to believing that God exists, a saving belief also believes that God "is a rewarder of those who diligently seek Him." Let's be careful here, because it *could* just be a 'fact' that God rewards those who diligently seek Him. So we need to recognize that this verse is talking about those who are actually seeking God's reward. Let's look at another verse about 'seeking' in Matthew 6:33.

But seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things shall be added to you.

To "seek first" here refers to what is "first" or most important to us —what are we looking to accomplish with our lives. To seek first the "kingdom of God" means we are looking for ways to advance His kingdom. The lazy servant who buried his talent in the parable in Matthew 25:14-30 was not using his abilities to advance his master's kingdom. Let's not be like him.

We are not just to seek God's kingdom, we are also to seek "His righteousness." This refers to cooperating with the Holy Spirit as He works in us to "cause" us to do the right thing. (See Ezekiel 36:26-27).

So, a saving belief means believing that *it is worth it* to “acknowledge” God in all our ways, and let *Him* “direct” our “paths.” (Proverbs 3:5-6.) It means believing that *it is worth it* to give up ‘seeking’ our own way in order to connect with Jesus and let the Holy Spirit work in us and through us to bless others. In contrast, although the demons may believe the ‘facts’ about God, they believe it is worth it to give up God’s ‘reward’ in order to seek their own way.

‘Wise’ -vs- ‘Foolish’

There many places in the Bible where it contrasts “wisdom” and “foolishness.” For example: the Parable of the Wise and Foolish Builders in Matthew 7:24-27, the Parable of the Ten Virgins in Matthew 25:1-13, 1 Corinthians 1:18-3:23, and the whole book of Proverbs. Proverbs 2:6 tells us,

For the Lord gives wisdom;
From His mouth come knowledge and understanding.

(See also James 1:5.) In contrast, Proverbs 1:7 states that,

The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge,
But fools despise wisdom and instruction.

(See also Psalm 111:10 and Proverbs 9:10.) So, even though God generously gives wisdom, foolish people “*despise*” it. They must not be interested in what God has to offer at all. This helps us understand these parables better. So let’s take a closer look at the Parable of the Ten Virgins in Matthew 25:1-13.

The “foolish” girls are called ‘virgins,’ (which is symbolic of the true church, see 2 Corinthians 11:2 and Ephesians 5:26-27). They are going to the wedding, (which is symbolic of entering God’s kingdom when Jesus comes). They even have lamps that are burning, (which is symbolic of God Word, see Psalm 119:105). And they had been given a job to do—to light the way to the wedding, (symbolic of telling

others about Jesus and His coming kingdom). But, because they are “foolish,” they are not *really* interested in God’s ‘reward,’ or advancing His kingdom. Therefore, if they had been allowed into the wedding/kingdom/heaven, sooner or later they would only have caused problems. Remember, God’s purpose is to have a secure universe for the rest of eternity where, “Affliction will not rise up a second time.” (Nahum 1:9.) So it simply would not be safe to let them in.

If the “bridegroom had shown up ‘on time,’ all ten girls would have gone into the wedding. Therefore, there had to be a delay to separate the “foolish” from the “wise.” Hopefully the delay would also give the “foolish” a chance to repent and “seek” some “extra oil,” (which is symbolic of the Holy Spirit, see Zechariah 4:1-6). But, even though they were given extra time to get ready, instead of repenting and seeking God, the “foolish” girls only fell asleep.

So even though the message, “Jesus is coming soon,” has already been given for many years, let’s not ‘fall asleep’ and stop growing spiritually. Let’s realize that the delay was prophesied, both in this parable and elsewhere. It is an important part of God’s plan. Let’s be like Elisha, and seek for an “extra” portion of the Holy Spirit, (see 2 Kings 2:9).

Please also study the book of Proverbs to find out more about the differences between being “wise” and “foolish.” By the way, Proverbs has 31 chapters, one for each day of the month. So if you read one chapter a day, in a month you will have read the whole book!

Character Training

The last part of Proverbs 1:7 says, “fools despise wisdom and *instruction*.” The Hebrew word translated “instruction” here, (*‘musar’*), also has in it the ideas of discipline, correction, training, restraint, and self-control. Picture it like the difference between an untrained dog and a dog that has been trained. When an untrained dog gets out, he goes running all over the place playing ‘catch me if you can!’ Although he’s probably having a great time, he knocks stuff

over and causes all sorts of problems. On the other hand, a trained dog *could* also go running around. But, because he has been trained, he restrains his desire to run and obediently comes when his master calls him.

It's kind of the same way with us. God is our Master, (remember, that is what the word 'Lord' means), and He wants to train us so we don't cause problems. For example, we *are* capable of just taking something that someone else has, or even to walk over and hit them in the face if we feel like it. But because we have been 'trained,' we don't do these things. Our training and self-control keep us from causing the problems that doing these things would create.

Let's also put this together with what was mentioned earlier about "bearing fruit." God wants to do more than just train us to not cause any problems. He wants us to live productive lives that will be a blessing to others. God wants us to be more than just a dog who has been trained not to cause problems. He wants us to be like a 'working dog,' who has also been trained to be useful and productive.

As we also noted earlier, God's wants to provide a secure universe for the rest of eternity, and therefore He cannot allow, sin to rise up again, (see Nahum 1:9). Therefore, it will only be safe to bring people into His kingdom who, while here on earth, have been willing to be trained by Him, and learned restraint and self-control. We typically call this 'character training,' or 'character development.'

Our character is the total of all our habits —the type of person we are 'habitually.' Do we have the habit of looking out for others and what is best for them? Or do we habitually just worry about ourselves and what we want? Because of our sinful human nature, we all start out with selfish characters. But God wants to train us to "bear much fruit," and habitually put the needs of others first. Let's be sure we are cooperating with what He is trying to do with us —which starts with being connected to Him and letting Him give us His wisdom and His strength to do the right thing.

Avoiding Trouble

Proverbs 22:3 is a very interesting verse that applies to a lot of different situations in life. It says,

A prudent man foresees evil and hides himself,
But the simple pass on and are punished.

A prudent or wise person will recognize that something bad is going to happen and take action to avoid it. A simple example might be, if you aren't watching where you are going, you will probably run into something and maybe get hurt. Another example is, if you know that in a certain situation you will have trouble spiritually, you should do what you can to avoid the situation, or at least spend some extra time praying for God to keep you while you are in that situation.

This verse also applies to what's going to happen in the future. But, we cannot foresee the future with any degree of accuracy, only God can do that. In fact that is one of the proofs that He holds out to show that He is the only God. In Isaiah 46:9-10, He says,

Remember the former things of old,
For I am God, and there is no other;
I am God, and there is none like Me,
Declaring the end from the beginning,
And from ancient times things that are not yet done,
Saying, 'My counsel shall stand,
And I will do all My pleasure.'

Fortunately, in Amos 3:7 He has also promised us that,

Surely the Lord God does nothing, unless He reveals
His secret to His servants the prophets.

So, if we would be prudent, or wise, we will study the prophecies so we can know about the things that God has told us are going to happen and be prepared for them. Let's

not be suddenly awakened to find ourselves unprepared like the ‘foolish’ girls in the parable! (See Matthew 24;1-13.)

Understanding the Time

There is a very interesting passage in 1 Chronicles chapter 12. After Saul’s death, David was made king over the tribe of Judah, while the other tribes made Ishbosheth, one of Saul’s sons, their king, (see 2 Samuel 2:4, 8-9). 1 Chronicles 12:23 states,

Now these were the numbers of the divisions that were equipped for war, and came to David at Hebron to turn over the kingdom of Saul to him, according to the word of the Lord.

This passage goes on to list the people from the various Israelite tribes who were joining David. In the middle of this passage it talks about the people from the tribe of Issachar, and says something interesting and significant.

Of the sons of Issachar who had understanding of the times, to know what Israel ought to do, their chiefs were two hundred; and all their brethren were at their command. (1 Chronicles 12:32.)

How did they “know what Israel ought to do?” —Because they “had understanding of the times.” Evidently they knew about, and understood the prophecies God had given to Samuel that David had been anointed to be the next king. This was referred to in verse 23 about turning the “kingdom of Saul to him [David], according to the word of the Lord.” The people from Issachar knew what to do *because* they understood the prophecies dealing with their time!

In the same way, we too need to study the prophecies dealing with *our* time so we can ‘understand,’ and be able to know what *we* should do. Therefore I would especially encourage you to study the end-times prophecies of Daniel, Revelation, and Matthew chapters 24 and 25.

The End-Time “Birth Pains”

Although we don't have the space to get into a lot of the end-time prophecies here, I do want to share at least one important point. In Matthew 24:6-8, Jesus tells us that “wars,” “famines,” “diseases,” and “earthquakes” will be the “beginning” of the end-time “birth pains” that will happen just before He comes. This tells us three important things:

(1) Since ‘wars, famines, diseases, and earthquakes’ are the “beginning,” there are going to be other additional bad things that will be happening, such as an increase in crime and civil unrest, terrible accidents, fires, and floods.

(2) ‘Birth pains’ start out relatively mild and far apart, but they get closer together and become stronger until the baby is born. This let's us know that all these different bad things and disasters will become more frequent and more intense as we get closer to Jesus' coming. Therefore, we should *expect* that things are not going to get any better, they are only going to get worse until Jesus comes.

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.)

(3) Watch the news. Look at what is going on in the world around us. This is exactly what we see happening! Various types of disasters and other bad things are happening more often and getting worse and worse! So, if we see this already happening, we can be sure that the *end-time ‘birth pains’ have already begun!* And what do we do when a pregnant lady goes into labor? Do we just tell her to keep calm, that everything will be OK, and then keep on doing whatever we've been doing? —NO! It is time to take some definite action! It is no longer time for ‘business as usual!’

Now please don't misunderstand me. I'm not suggesting that we run around and do stupid and foolish things. The people that have made some movies have had a lot of fun showing the foolish things people do when they are not prepared for a pregnant lady to go into labor. But that is exactly the point. People do foolish things when they are *not* prepared! On the other hand, the lady who *is* prepared has taken some child birth classes. She has a bag all packed and ready to go, and the bag is sitting right by the front door. So when she realizes that she is in labor, she just grabs her bag and goes off to the maternity unit. No craziness. No foolish running around not knowing what to do.

In the same way, Jesus has told us to "watch," and to "be ready." (See Matthew 24:42-44.) He wants us to be 'all packed and ready to go' for when the time comes for us to leave. (See Exodus 12:11 and also Matthew 24:15-16.)

Keep in mind that even though all these bad things may be happening all around us, God is still in control, and He is always watching over those who are abiding in Him. Remember also all the promises in Psalm 91 about how God will protect His people during times of trouble.

Noah's 3-Point End-Time Preparation Plan

Jesus told us, "But as the days of Noah were, so also will the coming of the Son of Man be." (Matthew 24:37.) And Noah has given us an excellent example of what it means to "be ready." His experience is outlined in Hebrews 11:7.

By faith Noah, being divinely warned of things not yet seen, moved with godly fear, prepared an ark for the saving of his household, ...

In this verse we find three points that describe Noah's preparation plan for the end of the world in his day, and we would be wise to follow this same plan today!

(1) Be very deliberate and intentional about your relationship with God.

Genesis 6:9 says that Noah “walked with God.” In New Testament language, he was “abiding” in Jesus. So, each day, as well as several times throughout the day, like Daniel, make a purposeful choice to connect with God and stay connected with Him.

(2) Allow the Holy Spirit to work through you to benefit and bless others.

Notice what Hebrews 11:7 tells us about *who* Noah was building the ark for. He wasn’t building it to save himself. He “prepared an ark *for the saving of his household.*” (Which, by extension includes all of us —because if great, great, ... grandpa Noah hadn’t done what he did, none of us would be here!) He was letting the Holy Spirit work through him to “bear much fruit!”

(3) Be serious about preparing *physically* for what we have been “divinely warned” about.

Over the years I’ve heard various talks and sermons about how “fear,” as it is used in the Bible doesn’t mean to be ‘afraid,’ and I won’t get into all that here. But what we do need to recognize is that when it says that Noah “moved with godly fear” it lets us know that he took building the ark *very seriously!* In the same way, we too need to be very serious about preparing *physically* for the things we have been “divinely warned” about—in particular, the warning in Revelation 13:16-17 and 14:9-10 that a time will soon come when those who stay true to God will not be able to buy or sell. Therefore, we would be wise to learn how to grow our own food and make the other things we need in preparation for that time.

It is my prayer that you will find these ideas as helpful as they have been to me. Please feel free to share them with others as the Spirit may lead you.

