

Love And Fellowship

The World in the Church

John W. Ritenbaugh

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An article in today's Charlotte, N.C. newspaper said that there were 7 dead and about 1,000 people injured in a blast in New York City resulting from the Serbian/Croatian conflict. People who, as far as we know, were innocent of any direct involvement in this conflict that is being blamed for this blast going off there.

Now if the accusation that the bombers were Serbs is true, the blast serves as a warning shot across the bow of the United States to keep your nose out of our business. But it ought to serve as a different kind of reminder to you and me. A reminder of what happened with ancient Israel whenever they forgot God and did what was pleasing in their sight.

We are going to begin this sermon in Judges 1, and just review a series of scriptures that I think are applicable to what is happening to the United States, Great Britain, Canada, Australia, South Africa, New Zealand, and the democracies of northwestern Europe—because they are undergoing pretty much the same kind of things that we are experiencing here in the United States. And what we are going to be reading in the book of Judges is very similar, spiritually, to what is occurring now in our modern nations of Israel.

Judges 1:19 So the Lord was with Judah; and they drove out the inhabitants of the mountains; but they could not drive out the inhabitants of the lowland, because they had chariots of iron.

Now, just remember this phrase, "but they could not drive out the inhabitants of the lowland."

Judges 1:27, 29-34 However Manasseh did not drive out the inhabitants of Beth-shean and its villages, or Taanach and its villages, or the inhabitants of Dor and its villages, or the inhabitants of Ibleam and its villages, or the inhabitants of Megiddo and its villages: for the Canaanites were determined to dwell in the land. . . . Nor did Ephraim drive out the Canaanites that dwell in Gezer; so the Canaanites dwelt in Gezer among them. Nor did Zebulun drive out the inhabitants of Kitron. . . . Nor did Asher drive out the inhabitants of Accho, or the inhabitants of Zidon, or of Ahlab, Achzib, Helbah, Aphik, or

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Rehob: And so the Asherites dwelt among the Canaanites, the inhabitants of the land: for they did not drive them out. Nor did Naphtali drive out the inhabitants of Beth-shemesh. . . [I think you are beginning to get the picture.] And the Amorites forced the children of Dan into the mountains: for they would not allow them to come down into the valley.

Let us drop down to chapter 2, and verse 11. Remember, they had all of these Canaanites who were circulating among them. And, of course, what were the Israelites going to do with the Canaanites there? Why did God want the Canaanites out of the land? Well, God knew what would happen. The Israelites did not believe God; but, sure enough, the people of Israel then begin to pick up the religion, the way, the practices of the Canaanites.

Judges 2:11 Then the children of Israel did evil in the sight of the Lord, and served the Baals.

Baal was the god of whom? Baal was the god of the Canaanitish people.

Judges 2:12-15 And they forsook the Lord God of their fathers, who had brought them out of the land of Egypt; and they followed other gods from among the gods of the people who were all around them; and they bowed down to them, and they provoked the Lord to anger. And they forsook the Lord, and served Baal and the Ashtoreths. And the anger of the Lord was hot against Israel, so He delivered them [look at this] into the hands of plunderers, who despoiled them; and He sold them into the hands of their enemies all around, so that they could not stand before their enemies. Wherever they went out, the hand of the Lord was against them for calamity, as the Lord had said, and as the Lord had sworn to them: and they were greatly distressed.

The Israelites—greatly distressed. You think there are not a lot of people in New York City right now who are greatly distressed at what occurred in their city yesterday?

All of these examples that we have read here—from Judges 1 and 2—are types of something. Let us go a little bit further forward in history—a little bit closer to our day, but still in the book of Judges. In chapter 6, we come to the story of one of the great heroes of Israelitish history, Gideon.

Judges 6:11 Now the Angel of the Lord came and sat under the terebinth tree which was in Ophrah, that belonged to Joash the Abiezrite, while his son Gideon [now look at this] threshed wheat in the winepress [he was actually inside of it], in order to hide it from the Midianites.

If there was peace in the land—if the people did not feel fear that somehow or another they were going to be harassed, even around their homes—why would Gideon (a man of valor, a strong man, a leader) have to do his threshing in a place where he was hidden from prying eyes that might somehow try to mug him, knock him out, steal the grain that he was threshing, and he would lose his crop?

Judges 6:12-13 And the Angel of the Lord appeared to him, and said to him, "The Lord is with you, you mighty man of valor!" Gideon said to Him, "O my lord, if the Lord is with us, why then has all this happened to us? And where are all the miracles which our fathers told us about, saying, 'Did not the Lord bring us up from Egypt?' But now the Lord has forsaken us and delivered us into the hands of the Midianites."

We have only gone to the sixth chapter, but it is an oft-repeated scenario from one chapter to another. All of these examples symbolize, to us, a people who did not overcome the challenges presented to them by their calling and election of God. Instead, what they did was they decided to live with the problem, to coexist with it. And the problem—represented by the Canaanites, by the Ishmaelites, by the Amalekites, by the Ammonites—came back to haunt them, and haunt them in such a way that they were afraid for their lives. Their lives were filled with anxiety. They had to do their work in secret. They were always looking over their shoulders. Anxiety surrounded them on every side. They were afraid to go out and come in.

You can believe me, I think, brethren, when I tell you that what we witnessed on television yesterday in New York City is going to be something that is going to become more frequent in the United States as we continue to live with our moral and spiritual problems. We are going to find ourselves in the midst of trouble on every side. Now, what is going to be your reaction to that?

Psalms 55:1-5 Give ear to my prayer, O God, and do not hide Yourself from my supplication. Attend to me, and hear me; I am restless in my complaint, and moan noisily. [Notice the tenor of this psalm. We are not even out of the second verse, and already you can see that it is a complaint.] Because of the

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voice of the enemy, because of the oppression of the wicked [Does this sound like the United States?], for they bring down trouble upon me, and in wrath they hate me. My heart is severely pained within me, and the terrors of death have fallen upon me. Fearfulness and trembling have come upon me, and horror has overwhelmed me.

Look at this response. Or, look at this idea, this "What am I going to do?"

Psalm 55:6-7 So I said, "Oh, that I had wings like a dove! For then I would fly away and be at rest. Indeed, I would wander far off, and remain in the wilderness."

"Oh, I would just love to go to a place of peace and quiet, where I would have control over my life and nothing would happen outside of that that I didn't permit to happen." How many of us would love to have something like that? Where we could control the events of our life—because that is what the psalmist was asking. "Oh, if I could just go away somewhere!"

Psalm 55:8 "I would hasten my escape from the windy storm and tempest."

Last week, I began the sermon by describing a scene in which wave after wave of problems hit us so that we seem overwhelmed in the face of an impossible task. I was thinking of this again, on Thursday evening, after reading a portion of the paper. And what stuck me was the sheer magnitude of the problems faced by us today.

Now, because of modern mass communication—because of things like radio, and television, and books, and magazines, and newspapers—"our own little world" is impacted by knowledge of a tremendous number of problems. Not only is the number great, but also the impossibility of doing anything about them. Stop to think about the problems that are on the news constantly in the United States: the economic problem, the violence problem, the AIDS problem, the homosexual problem, the feminist problem, the abortion problem, the education problem, the smog problem, the traffic problem, the weather problem, the judicial problem, the jobs problem, the finding-a-good-representative-to-represent-us-in-Washington problem. Now, if you think that these problems are going to be solved, then I think that I must be more cynical than you.

When one adds to that our own personal relationship problems, family problems, it can

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very easily make one feel that life is completely out of control and that one is nothing but a helpless victim before forces too great for us to have any positive effect upon. That is what the psalmist, in Psalm 55, was thinking about. So, just like the psalmist says, it would be so nice, so comforting, to be able to insulate ourselves away from such experiences by crawling into some kind of a psychological shell so that we could be protected and not have to deal with them.

But, brethren, that is unrealistic. In fact, it is impossible.

I remember reading once, in one of those magazines that you find in the back flap of the airplane seat in front of you, of an experiment conducted by one of those university think-tanks. In this experiment they offered several young couples (I think there were about four or five of them) the opportunity of getting away from it all, by providing them with a place to live on a tropical island in the South Pacific. Now, this is not fiction. It actually did happen. They set these couples up on the island that had been virtually untouched by civilization. And these people were supplied with the necessities of life.

The island was large enough so that they did not have to live on top of one another; and yet it was not so large that they did not have easy contact with one another. Within six months, the couples were reproducing the same problems that they had left behind in the United States of America. Among the things that they were having problems with were relationship problems with each other. They were experiencing the same kind of anxieties and stresses that they had back in civilization.

One common trait that every one of them reported to those who questioned them at the university think-tank after they got back, was that they all suffered from boredom. Now, one of the things that I think this points out to you and me is that God created mankind with the need to face challenges—the need to overcome—or we quickly become subject to what the French call *ennui*.

Do you know what *ennui* means? It is a fancy word for annoyed, or the feeling of a vague sense of worthlessness, or, we might say, bored. If you look it up in *Webster's*, they will tell you that its synonym is "bored." But its specific meaning, according to Webster, is a feeling of weariness and dissatisfaction that comes on those to whom life denies nothing.

With this, I think that we can see two extremes. On the one hand, having no responsibility produces *ennui*, that is, a vague feeling of dissatisfaction. On the other hand, being confronted with a large number of challenges produces a feeling of crushed and impotent helplessness. And so either way, on the extremes, is going to leave a

person in a position where he cannot meet life and be productive.

The Bible makes very clear, right from the beginning, that God gave mankind responsibilities that he was to accomplish—things that had to be overcome. We will call them "challenges." Right in the very first chapter, He gave mankind dominion. That is a responsibility—the responsibility to exercise a certain measure of control. He did not define everything there. He only said, "I give you dominion." So, a responsibility was the first thing God gave—the responsibility of exercising a measure of control.

He then told Adam and Eve that they were to dress and keep the Garden into which they were put. That is another responsibility. It means to embellish and to preserve. That indicates that Adam and Eve were going to be confronted with the responsibility of making something more beautiful and also preserving it from decay. We can understand, then, that anything that is given to us will not stay in the condition in which it is given. It will have a tendency to deteriorate, and it is our responsibility to keep it in good condition.

To this He added the responsibility of choosing between the Tree of Life on the one hand and the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil on the other. So we can see that God intended that man meet responsibilities right from the very beginning.

Matthew 22:34-40 But when the Pharisees heard that He had silenced the Sadducees, they gathered together. Then one of them, a lawyer, asked Him a question, testing Him, and saying, "Teacher, which is the great commandment in the law?" Jesus said to him, 'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind.' This is the first and great commandment. And the second is like it: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' On these two commandments hang all the Law and the Prophets."

What we have here is a summary of all of our responsibilities. Let us consider this by defining something, again. Religion is defined by *Webster's Dictionary* as "the beliefs, attitudes, emotions, and behavior constituting man's relationship with the Deity." Remember, here are our major responsibilities summed up, by God, in two commandments. Another way of defining it is as the service and worship of God. A little bit simpler definition. But the word "religion" is the general word in the English language to denote a particular system of religious beliefs. So we talk about "the Christian religion," "the Muslim religion," or "the Jewish religion." So it is a particular system of religious beliefs.

Religion then is, in short, a way of life. There is the Christian way of life; and it is so called that in the book of Acts. It is "a way." There is the Muslim way. There is the Buddhist way, the Hindu way, the Jewish way. And so religion is "a way of life"; and a religious person is one who manifests faithful devotion to God through a prescribed way of life. So then, a religious Christian would be one who manifests, in his life, faithful devotion to God.

The religious, then, are those who are scrupulously and conscientiously faithful in their obedience to God. And, if we funnel this all back into the two great commandments, we find then that a religious person—a real Christian—is one who is scrupulously and conscientiously faithful in obedience to the two great commandments. He is carrying out his major responsibilities to God and to man.

So then, another way of putting it (I am trying to hit this from every angle that I possibly can) is that our major responsibility is to govern ourselves scrupulously and conscientiously within the framework of God's laws.

All of us have been, to some measure, victims of our parents' ignorance, their inattention. We have been victims of disease. We have been victims of society. We have been victims of the influence of our culture. And yet, as maturity and accountability come, God holds us responsible for dealing with life according to His way.

Think of this in relation to where we began in the book of Judges. I made a statement similar to this as we were going through this. They decided to *live with the problem* rather than following God's command to *get rid of the problem*. And later the problem—the Canaanites, the Hivites, the Perizzites, the Amorites—came back to haunt them and to lead them away from God. They were not willing to live up to the demands of their calling and election. Dealing with the Canaanites was part of the demand of the responsibility that God put upon these people. And He told them that He would assist them in doing it; but they did not follow through with what they were to do.

Now, to put it bluntly to you and me, we are to take what life has dealt us and make the best of it, overcoming the negative things by means of the knowledge and Spirit of God. I am thinking here, now again, of what I just said here in relation to Matthew 22:34-40, about the two great commandments, that this is the broadest and most basic statement of our responsibility—because God intends that it provide the motivation for all conduct. I am talking about the great commandment and the second one that is like it.

So here we have a broad summary of all of our responsibility; and yet, at the same time, it is also the narrowest and most specific statement because there are so many facets

to human personality that loving humanity is not easy. Have you ever thought: God is easy to love. It is man that is hard to love. That is not a wrong statement. Yet, before we can love man, we have to first love God—as God shows there in I John.

Now, mankind seems to have an innate drive—a desire—to worship God, but he becomes confused as to how to do it. What has resulted is thousands of ways—of systems, of religions, of practice—with each person seemingly choosing what appeals to him or passively accepting what is given to him by others. And the "others" are usually the parents. Is that not what it says in the book of Judges? Every man did that which was right in his own eyes. He *chose*. That is what the book of Judges shows—that each person chose his own way to worship God.

What we have here in Matthew 22 is a concise statement of what God requires of everybody. Here is our responsibility clearly stated. On the surface, this appears to be simple enough. It states that our relationship with God is to consist of total love for Him, which dominates our emotions, which directs our thoughts, and is the dynamic for every action in our life, including that of our relations with our brother. Simple to say, but very difficult to do. In fact, so difficult—there is so much disagreement—that even within Christianity there are thousands of different religions. I think that in itself is proof, because people have a tendency to *choose* what way they are going to live.

It is interesting too that the nations that pride themselves upon being "Christian"—the nations of Europe, western Europe and northwestern Europe, and the United States, the nations of Israel—are among the most dangerous ones to live in in the whole world. It is weird. That shows how difficult even having some of the knowledge of the right way is.

Just to throw something else into the mix here, the Bible reveals that there is a great fallen angel, Satan, who is invisible and actively working to deceive and to confuse mankind, thus making it even more difficult. But once God removes the veil by His calling—once God removes the veil of man's ignorance—then Satan merely fits into being a part of the mix that we must take into consideration in carrying out our responsibilities before God. So, regardless of Satan, we are still required to love God and neighbor, and to overcome.

Now, why is love so difficult? Because, by the time God calls us into His church, our character—formed by a great deal of ignorance and impacted by a world that is virtually out of control—is pretty firmly set in its own way. There is where the difficulty comes from. It is not from what God tells us to do, because, by His own Word, God says that His way is easy and His burden is light. And yet, I think that you will testify to anybody within hearing, that the way of Christianity is difficult.

But, what is making it difficult is what is already indelibly impressed in our minds by the time of our calling—and that has to be overcome. That is part of our responsibility. It is what God calls us to deal with. Just as surely as He called upon the Israelites to deal with the Canaanite, the Perizzite, the Hivite, the Amorite—we are not called to deal with that, we are called to deal with what is inside of us by the time God calls us!

It is of major importance that we strive to keep these commandments because it is in meeting the demands of keeping these two major responsibilities that God intends for man to receive a sense of satisfaction and well-being.

We have reached a crossroads in this sermon, so I will reiterate a bit. We live in a world that is out of control. We are impacted by problems that we will never make a dent in in terms of those things that the world is impressing upon us. And yet we have to live with them. We have to deal with them. We cannot turn our back on them. They are impacting our lives, and they are having an effect on the way that we think—about this world, about ourselves, and about our neighbor. And, spiritually, they are no different than "the people of the land" in the book of Judges.

We are called to keep the commandments of God. We are called to keep, or to have, or to love God with all of our mind, all of our heart, all of our will, all of our actions—everything—and to love our neighbor as ourselves in spite of what is going on around us.

In addition to that, we find that when God calls us, our character has been "set" because we have lived in the world that is all around us. It is really a formidable task, and if we do not watch ourselves it becomes very easy to get into feelings of despair, anxiety, and discouragement.

Yet we find, in other places in the Bible, that the very keeping of the commands that we just saw summarized is the very thing that God intended to give us a sense of well-being; that is, in the accomplishment of His will.

So, we do not always have a sense of well-being. But is it possible to overcome a sense of discouragement? Of despair? Is it possible to live in the kind of world that we live in right now—where things seem to be out of control and there is no hope that the situation is ever going to get any better, and we have our own problems besides? Is there a way that we can get out of the rut, or the feeling, that maybe we are not even a part of God's church? Maybe we never really repented? Maybe we never received God's Spirit?

Well, let us look, because the apostle John had something to say about this. We are

going to go back to I John 3. Remember, John must have been near ninety or one hundred years old when he wrote this. He might have been the oldest, or maybe the last living adult who had actually seen and touched and heard God-in-the-flesh. Maybe everybody else had already died; and here he was the last one alive, on earth, who could say that He actually did the things that He did at the very beginning of this book. He says:

I John 3:18-19 My little children, let us not love in word or in tongue, but in deed and in truth. [That is, not merely by word; but by deed *and* truth.] And by this we know that we are of the truth. . .

Let us read this very carefully, because every one of us is subject to periods of despair, periods of depression. We begin to examine ourselves, especially at this time of the year just before Passover. We look at ourselves; and we see failure. And so we start asking questions.

I John 3:19-23 By this we know that we are of the truth, and shall assure our hearts before Him. For if our heart condemns us, God is greater than our heart, and knows all things. Beloved, if our heart does not condemn us, we have confidence toward God. And whatever we ask we receive from Him, because we keep His commandments and do those things that are pleasing in His sight. And this is His commandment: that we should believe on the name of His Son Jesus Christ and love one another, as He gave us commandment.

In order to understand this a little bit better, I want us to go back into chapter 2.

I John 2:28 And now, little children abide in Him [that means "live" or "continue in" Him], that when He appears, we may have confidence and not be ashamed before Him at His coming.

This verse actually introduces a long section here, and it begins with a purpose statement. This is what he is going to be talking about. You do not want to be ashamed when Christ returns. You want to be confident that, when He returns, you are going to "measure up," if I can put it that way. By the time that we get to verse 18 of chapter 3, he has shifted away from being concerned about whether or not we will measure up whenever Christ comes. Now he is answering the question, "How can we be confident

that things are okay with God right now?"

We need something that we can bounce off, or measure ourselves against, judge ourselves against, and that is what he is answering here. How can we have assurance here and now? How do we know that we belong to the truth? How can we best deal with our own heart—which is condemning us and bringing us into despair, bringing us into discouragement, and doubt, and fear, and anxiety?

Well, I think that it is somewhat reassuring to know that people in the first century also had trouble with these things. Their trouble was stemming from a little bit different area, as the whole context of the book shows. They were intellectually confused regarding false doctrines that they were hearing from the Gnostics. The reason they were confused was that these false doctrines had a "ring of truth" to them, and they thought that maybe those things were true. Thus, they were confused about what was the right course of action.

We can have fears, guilt, about things not being done right—fears of old sins coming back to haunt us, because they are still in our subconscious. Thoughts arise in our head, from time to time. There are times in our life when we seem to be making no progress at all. And so, where their world was confusing because of intellectual things, today the atmosphere is somewhat different. Today, our atmosphere tends toward despair, depression, anxiety, nervousness, and despondency.

Regardless of the source—whether it is confusion, or whatever—there is something that we have to understand here. That is, we are dealing with a feeling, an emotion, and we must not allow our emotions to destroy our confidence! Man has a multifaceted personality, but we must understand that, of our personality, our emotions are the least stable—least reliable—parts of human personality because they are educated by our experiences and are almost completely subjective.

God gave us an emotional quality, and that is good. But it is subject to experiences, and people can frequently get "positive" reactions from their emotions as a result of evil things, and "negative" reactions from their emotions from things that are good in the sight of God. People can get a sexual thrill, for example, out of inflicting pain either upon themselves or somebody else—masochism—but it is a perverted feeling. It is something that has been educated into them. They are going to judge whether a thing is 'good' or 'bad' based upon how their emotions react to it, but their emotions are not a good judge.

That is what John is talking about here. There is something that is a good measurement, or standard, against which we can measure whether or not we are in the

truth; but it cannot be our feelings. Some people get a sense of well-being, even enjoyment, out of killing, robbing, fornicating, or committing adultery, while, at the same time, something good and wholesome fills them with boredom, because it is not "exciting."

Our emotional tastes have been perverted by the experiences of our life. So there has to be something realistic, something that is reliable, to enable us to judge whether we are "in the truth" when our heart condemns us. And *it is going to condemn us*—especially in a time like we are living in now, where we are so impacted.

We are dealing with two things here. One is, what is it that tends to produce a right sense of confidence and well being? Number two is, what is it that enables us to be confident as to whether we are "in the truth," whenever our heart condemns us? The combination is interesting because we can be doing the right things and still our heart will condemn us. From time to time, it will overpower us spiritually, making us feel guilty and despairing.

The answer is two-fold:

I John 3:18-20 My little children, let us not love in word or in tongue, but in deed and in truth. And by this we know that we are of the truth, and shall assure our hearts before Him. For if our heart condemns us, God is greater than our heart, and knows all things.

It is not how we *feel*, but whether or not we are *loving*.

I am leading to something that is going to be a major portion of the next sermon. The love of God is not *feeling*. If it was *feeling*, it would not be a good standard for us to measure ourselves against. We have to have a standard that changes not! Otherwise, the standards are going to be varying from person to person. Love, therefore, cannot be a feeling, because feelings will vary from person to person depending upon the experiences of that person's life. Feelings—emotions—are educated by our experiences. We will act or react—according to feelings—differently.

So, love is not a feeling. **Love is an action.** Let us get that down, so that it is firmly implanted in our minds. *Love is obedience to God.* It is that simple. It is an action.

It is one thing to *feel* compassion for somebody who is in need, but if it does not turn into *love*, no deed will take place. And so the feeling can be good because it makes us, or

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motivates us, to take action, but the feeling is not love. The *action* is love. That is why John can say, "For this is the love of God, that we keep His commandments."

Whether the love is towards God or man, it does not rest on feelings but on practical acts—deeds. So, the first test, then, is not something that is dealt with abstractly. That is, it is not a thing of the mind, but it is good, solid evidence against which we can measure ourselves. Are we keeping the commands of God? We can say, "Yes, I keep this one. I keep this one. I keep this one. I keep this one, and that one, and that one, and so forth. I've done this. I've done that." That is love. You see, we can measure ourselves against something, because God gives us accurate descriptions of exactly what love is.

That is something that we can see. We can see that we are keeping the Sabbath. We can see that we are keeping the holy days. We can see that we are tithing. We can see that we are helping our brother, or whatever it happens to be.

And so we come to this and we are discouraged, and here is God's checklist. The first one on it we can be assured by, because, yes, we are keeping the commandments regardless of the way I feel. I am still doing it.

Now the second test is very interesting. It is more abstract, because it rests on faith in the name of Jesus Christ.

I John 3:23 And this is His commandment: that we should believe on the name of His Son Jesus Christ and love one another, as He gave us commandment.

The two are tied together. "Believing on the name of Jesus Christ" is the second part of this checklist. Now, when a "name" is used in this way, it does not mean "the word by which a person is called"; but rather, "the whole nature, or character, of the person" as far as we know it, or understand it. This is why the proverb says that a good name is more precious than rubies.

Psalms 124:8 Our help is in the name of the Lord, who made heaven and earth.

I want us to begin to think about this in relation to what John said in I John 3:23. The second part of the checklist has to do with whether or not we believe in the name of

Jesus Christ. This verse says, "Our help. . ." Remember, we are being faced with all these problems. We are discouraged and in despair. We do not know, any longer, whether we are even "in the truth." So God gives the checklist. Number one: "Are you keeping the commands of God?" If you are, "Hey, you're still with Me. Regardless of what your feelings about yourself are, you are still with Me." Now the second thing is whether or not we believe in the name of Jesus Christ, because that is where our help is.

"Our help is in the name of the Lord." This is what is going to get you out of your depression. Again, this does not mean that our help lies in the fact that God is called Yahweh. There is nothing magic in that name at all. It means that our help is in His love. It is in His mercy. It is in His power. It is in His promises. It is in those things that have been revealed to us as parts of His nature, or His attributes, part of His character—and whether or not we have faith in them.

So then, to "believe in the name of Jesus Christ" means to believe in the nature and the character of Jesus Christ. It means to believe that He is the Son of God. To believe that He stands in relation to the Father in a way that no other person in the universe ever has, or ever will. It means that He can perfectly reveal the Father to us. It means that He is the Savior. It means that He is the High Priest. It means that He is the Mediator. It means that He is the Intercessor. It means that He is our soon-coming King. It means that through Him we have entrance into God's presence—not just 'entrance' only, but, actually, fellowship with Him.

This becomes very important because this is what Passover is all about. What do the Protestants call Passover? Communion. The word "communion" in Greek means "fellowship" in English.

A good bit of I John is about this subject. So, I want to go back there because here is the second part of this checklist. Here is John's opening statement, his specific purpose for the whole book.

I John 1:3 That which we have seen ["we" meaning "himself"] and heard we declare to you [he is talking about Jesus Christ], that you also may have [communion] fellowship with us; and truly our fellowship is with the Father and with His Son Jesus Christ.

Here brethren, in short, is why we have been called and elected of God—that we might have fellowship with the Father and the Son.

Now, if we are guilt-ridden and if we are conscience-stricken, rather than seeking the fellowship with God and enjoying it, we will shy away from Them, like Adam and Eve did. What did they do when they sinned? What did they do when they broke the commands of God? They ran away from God and hid themselves.

Are these two checklist items beginning to become clear? Number one, when we begin to get into discouragement and despair and self-condemnation, the first thing we need to check is, are we still keeping the commands of God? And, if we are, then the second thing to check is, are we maintaining our fellowship with God? Or, are we, of our own volition, running and hiding from Him?

I will tell you, we will not feel like His children if we are not aware of this fellowship that we have with God, and we will not seek answers to our prayers with the confidence that we should. I am getting that right out of I John 3. It is part of that checklist.

The word "confidence," in verse 21, translates the Greek word *parresia*. Now according to Dodd, who is a very famous New Testament scholar, in his commentary on the epistles of John, on page 93 he states:

The word rendered 'confidence' stood, in ancient Greece, for the most valued right of a citizen of a free state—the right to speak his mind [When we start breaking God's command, we start finding it hard to talk to Him.] unhampered by fear and shame. In our relationship to God, such freedom is not an inherent right [We have to be invited to speak to God; so such freedom is not an inherent right] but is strictly dependent upon an equally frank and straightforward obedience to the Divine will.

Spiros Zodhiates is the author of *The Complete Word Study Dictionary*. I am taking this from page 1124.

Especially in Hebrews and 1 John, the word [*parresia*] denotes confidence which is experienced with such things as faith in communion with God, fulfilling the duties of an evangelist, holding fast our hope, and acts which entail a special exercise of faith. *Parresia* is possible [now listen to this] as the result of guilt having been removed by the blood of Jesus and manifesting itself in constant praying and witnessing.

What Zodhiates has done is he has simply defined the word by the way it is used in the

New Testament.

Let us go to Hebrews 10 and we will see this word used again.

Hebrews 10:19-22a Therefore, brethren, having boldness [that is the word *parresia*, only here translated boldness] to enter the Holiest by the blood of Jesus, [Please connect this with the checklist that God gave us, through the apostle John, in I John 3:18-23.] by a new and living way which He consecrated for us, through the veil, that is, His flesh, and having a High Priest over the house of God, let us draw near. . .

Are you beginning to see that—if we are overcome with feelings of depression, feelings of despair, feelings of doubt, feelings of self-condemnation—there is a connection between those feelings and our personal relationship, our fellowship, with God? And what is happening, brethren, is that we are not taking advantage of, we are not acting in faith in the name of Jesus Christ.

It is His nature, brethren, to forgive. It is His nature to be merciful. It is His nature to open the way for us into the very presence of His Father. That is the very reason He died! Not to keep us away. Not to let us get wrapped up in our feelings. But to go to the place where there are answers, where there is help, where there is solution.

Hebrews 10:22-23 Let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water. Let us hold fast the confession of our hope. . .

Hope in what? Hope in the things that God has promised. Is it not His nature to give? Is not God infallible? Does He not always come through in what He has promised? How can we possibly be in despair for very long when we check ourselves against what God says to do? When we check ourselves and then take advantage of it and draw near in time of need.

Hebrews 10:23-25 Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for He who promised is faithful. And let us consider one another in order to stir up love and good works, not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as is the manner of some, but exhorting one another, and so much the more as you see the Day approaching.

If there is anybody that that verse applies to, it is the end time church as we see the Day approaching.

Brethren, both Paul and John are declaring that this fellowship that we have has been opened to us through Jesus Christ; and that it is the only means of salvation from death. Also, it is the only means for deliverance from the trials that beset us—and the source of our sense of well-being, of confident living. If we get down in the dumps, God has not caused it, but He can be the solution.

What do we have to do? We just read it here. We have to take advantage of His invitation to come into His presence—not to hold back, not to hide from Him—but to go running to Him. Now, look back in Psalm 16. This is a prayer to God.

Psalm 16:11 You will show me the path of life [Where?]; in Your presence is fullness of joy; at Your right hand are pleasures forevermore.

Look at this example. It is awesome, when you think of this in connection to what we are talking about. Do you realize that through prayer, through Bible study, through Sabbath services, that we are in the presence of God? And that in His presence is joy evermore! Not discouragement. Not despair. Not despondency. Not feelings of guilt, but joy!

Do you understand that He is such a powerful Personality that, when we are in His presence, it is very difficult not to be affected by what He is? This is why we need to pray. I mean, it is an absolute necessity! This is why we need to take advantage of this invitation to fellowship with Him, in study and prayer, because this great Personality wants to infuse us with what He is. And it becomes infused in us because we are around Him.

We have that proclivity to adapt to the environment in which we find ourselves. When we have grown up in this world, our character gets to be set in such a way that it is against God. It is only by being in His presence that this thing can be counteracted. This invitation to fellowship is our salvation. There is not only just "joy" in His presence. There is love. There is peace. There is goodness. There is gentleness. There is kindness. There is mercy. There is self-control and every other attribute of the Spirit of God. That is where it is at. It is in His presence.

Can you see the story that is being worked out, from Adam and Eve on? How that through the sins of mankind, man became separated from God, hid from God? But now, through Christ, the ability to get back into His presence, into fellowship as it were into

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the very Garden of Eden, has been opened to us again? It is only in His presence that all of the good attributes of His Spirit are available to us. That is the importance of Passover. It is not just the death of Christ. It is the effect of the death of Christ: communion with God, fellowship with Him.

This does not mean that the Christian will never experience depression or despair. It does mean that we will never experience it for very long, because of the fellowship with God. It will motivate us to refocus on the reality of what God is working and doing in us. In other words, our knowledge that we are keeping the commands of God and that we love our brethren and our belief in the name (that is, the nature and all of the characteristics) of Jesus Christ will pull us out of our doldrums. We know, and we know that we know, that we have experienced these things in the past, and the present dilemma that we find ourselves in is not the end of the world.

I John 3:19 And by this we know that we are of the truth, and shall assure our hearts before Him.

"By this we know." It means we know by experience. We have lived it, in the past. Now, what do we know? We know we are keeping His commands and that we do have fellowship with Him.

I John 3:24 Now he who keeps His commandments abides [continues] in Him, and He in him. And by this we know that He abides in us, by the Spirit He has given us.

That does not mean that we are doing things perfectly, because this same John says in I John 1:8 that if we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. These things that we are talking about here in I John 3 are things that even sinning Christians are able to do.

Let us go to the Psalm 118, which is a very encouraging, inspiring, uplifting psalm.

Incidentally, in doing research on this sermon, I came across some interesting speculations. In quite a number of the commentaries that I looked at, the commentators felt that this might have been the song that Jesus sang on the night of His crucifixion, Passover night. You know, the song that is mentioned there in Matthew 26:30.

Psalm 118:1-5 Oh, give thanks to the Lord, for He is good! For His mercy

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endures forever. Let Israel now say, "His mercy endures forever." Let the house of Aaron now say, "His mercy endures forever." Let those who fear the Lord now say, "His mercy endures forever." I called on the Lord in distress [Yes, a period of trial, a period of persecution, a period of discouragement, a period of self-condemnation.]; and the Lord answered me. . .

Why? Because he did not cut himself off from God. Even though he felt this way, he knew he had to get into the fellowship with God. And the Lord answered me—that is what follows up, there in I John 3:20-22.

Psalms 118:5-14 . . . and He set me in a broad place [meaning, a safe place]. The Lord is on my side; I will not fear. What can man do to me? The Lord is for me among those who help me; therefore I shall see my desire on those who hate me. It is better to trust in the Lord than to put confidence in man. It is better to trust in the Lord than to put confidence in princes. All nations surrounded me, but [remember I John 3:23] in the name of the Lord I will destroy them. They surrounded me, yes, they surrounded me; but in the name of the Lord I will destroy them. They surrounded me like bees [wave after wave of problems came on me. Buzz, biz, bang. Hit on one side. Hit on the other.]; they were quenched like a fire of thorns; for in the name of the Lord I will destroy them. You pushed me violently, that I might fall, but the Lord helped me. The Lord is my strength and song, and He has become my salvation.

Psalms 118:18 The Lord has chastened me severely, but He has not given me over to death. [It is not the end of the world. This too will pass.]

Look at the tremendous confidence that is shown here, even though he might have appeared to be overwhelmed by problems—problems that were hitting him from every angle. God was aware. And He wants us to know that in all of our adversity, that adversity is dwarfed into insignificance by our relationship to the One who helps—to the One who provides refuge; to the One who gives victory.

The name, the nature, the character of the Lord was sufficiently powerful to overcome it, because the psalmist believed what God said, and he therefore relied on Him to be the resolution of the problems.

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Psalm 11:1 In the Lord I put my trust; how can you say to my soul, "Flee as a bird to your mountain"?

Oh, had I wings like some swift dove. But David answers and says, "How can I flee, when my trust is in the Lord?" He said, "That's stupid."

Psalm 11:2-3 For look! [He says] The wicked bend their bow, they make ready their arrow on the string, that they may shoot secretly at the upright in heart. If the foundations are destroyed, what can the righteous do?

The "foundations" means the pillars, the traditions of our culture. And when everything seems to be crumbling. . . Is that not what is happening in the nations of Israel? Everything is breaking down. What can the righteous do? The psalmist is telling us. He is saying, "Work on your relationship with God." He is saying, "Take advantage of your entrance into His presence. Take advantage of the fellowship that He has made available to us through Jesus Christ. Because, he says:

Psalm 11:4-7 The Lord is in His holy temple, the Lord's throne is in heaven; His eyes behold, His eyelids test the sons of men. [God knows what is going on! He has not gone off somewhere.] The Lord tests the righteous. [That is what is happening.] But the wicked and the one who loves violence His soul hates. Upon the wicked He will rain coals; fire and brimstone and a burning wind shall be the portion of their cup. For the Lord is righteous [that is, He is fair and He judges righteously]; He loves righteousness; His countenance beholds the upright.

Brethren, God has given us a checkpoint against which we can check ourselves in those times of despondency and despair. So whether in doubt, whether in fear, whether in condemnation of self, whether the problems are moderate or deep, we have to go back to see whether we are keeping His commands and working on developing our fellowship with Him, to be assured that we are on the right track.