

Wilderness Wandering (Part 2)

John W. Ritenbaugh

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If there is anything that the Days of Unleavened Bread teach us, it is that Christ did not do it all for us. There is much we have to do to get where we are going, but as we saw in the previous sermon, if we do not know where we are going, we might end up some place else. It is very helpful to know *who* we are as well as where we are going. Knowing this will help us to be prepared for what we will be going through and to make the most of each situation as it occurs.

The trials of our life are stressful. I once heard a portion of an interview with the author of the book, *The Joys of Stress*, and he said, "Most people do not handle stress very well." I think that is an understatement. He also said, "Many people are dying too soon because of their inability to handle stress." He went on to say, "Most Americans would qualify to have this epitaph written on their gravestone: 'He died of mismanagement.'" I thought, "How right he is." It is not just the mismanagement of stress, but the mismanagement of most of their life's activities.

God has called us to convert us and to get things in the right order through allowing Him to guide our life and choices.

We are going to begin in Romans 8:28-29, which are two very familiar, very loved, and relied-upon verses.

Romans 8:28-29 And we know that all things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are the called according to His purpose. [Notice things work good only for the called—a particular group of people.] For whom He foreknew, He also predestined to be conformed to the image of His Son, that He might be the firstborn among many brethren.

What these verses say is good, but even better if we understand them more specifically. Our trials, our stresses that result from this way of life, occur in order that we be conformed to the image of Christ. Christ is the standard. God's law is the way, and the Holy Spirit is the guide into truth, but we are the ones who have to use these things in order to overcome the bad residue of Satan's spirit that we have managed to acquire since birth through ignorance, false teaching, and mismanagement.

What we have to understand better regarding what Paul is saying here is about the "good." Good in this context does not refer to earthly comfort like we might *wish* it would. It does not refer to earthly comfort, though that might be given on occasion as well, but it refers to conformity with Christ, closer fellowship with God within the relationship, and the bearing of good fruit for the Kingdom.

All of those things are really good toward God's purpose, but what are we looking for in this good? Is it to get wealth? Is it to get health? Those things of course are good in their purpose and in their place, but we have to remember this is a spiritual Book, and what God is concerned about is *His* work, *His* purpose. And so the good that comes out of these difficulties we go through, with all their accompanying stresses, is good toward *His* purpose—our relationship with Him, being more like Jesus Christ, and bearing fruit for God's Kingdom.

In the sermon on last Sabbath [April 23, 2011], I was emphasizing similarities and differences between Israel and ourselves in our calling by God, and the experiences of Israel in the wilderness as compared to *our* experiences in *our* pilgrimage. Their calling was as a mass of people—an entire nation of slaves. Every once in a while He refers to these people as though they were only one person because He was looking at them corporately. But they definitely were called as a group, as an entire nation—the children, the grandchildren, and so forth of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, who were now an entire nation of slaves.

We too are slaves, but we are called separately as individuals in order to *become* a corporate group. They walked by sight, following the Cloud. We are to walk by faith, following the guidance of God's truth. You can see all along here there are parallels, and there are places where we are *not* so parallel. So eventually everything fits into the parallel, but not *everything* fits into the parallel, and this is primarily attributed to the differences we see between the two.

They were *not* called to salvation, so God never gave them His Spirit. We are called to share eternity in the Family of God as His children, though what we will specifically be within that family is not yet clear. It is essential to the foundation of our relationship with God that we understand who and what we are, and these things I just gave you were basically what we covered in that first sermon.

God gives grace to the humble. This does not occupy too much of this sermon, but it is a very important part of the foundation of our relationship with Him and our calling by Him. God gives grace to the humble. The proud He resists because the proud resist Him, so we must choose to humble ourselves before Him.

Let us continue tracking our conversion process against "the Israel in the wilderness" analogy. We are going to go from here to I Corinthians 6. Remember that Paul was writing this to a church in which supposedly everybody was converted. We hope they were anyway, and so Paul says:

I Corinthians 6:9-11 Do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived. Neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor homosexuals, nor sodomites, nor thieves, nor covetous, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor extortioners will inherit the kingdom of God. And such were some of you. But you were washed, but you were sanctified, but you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus and by the Spirit of our God.

What right do we have to resist Him when this is what we were when He called us? We might not have done every one of those things Paul mentions there, but we probably did some of them, maybe actively; others we at least thought about, so that they passed through our minds, and the desire was there to do them, and so that was sin too. So in some way, even within the spirit, we have qualified ourselves maybe as fornicators, unrighteous, and so on. See, we have no logical right before God to be anything but humble before Him. What do we have to brag on when this is what we are when He calls us?

The foundation of humility before Him must be there if the journey on our pilgrimage is really going to make progress, because if we are proud before Him of what we think we are and what we think we have accomplished, and because we think that maybe God called us because we were really good people and we were already mostly qualified for His Kingdom, we *are* going to resist Him. If

someone thinks he is right, the defenses go up. If someone knows he is not very skilled at doing something—in this case living, and especially living God's way—he is very likely to bend his ear and listen, and that is what God is looking for.

Let us go to Romans 2 to get a little bit more of this.

Romans 2:2 But we know that the judgment of God is according to truth against those who practice such things.

The "such things" he is referring to are those things *named* by him in chapter 1, and they include some of the very same things that are given in I Corinthians 6:9-11. Paul said the Corinthian members were practicing some of these things.

Romans 2:3-4 And do you think this, O man, you who judge those practicing such things, and doing the same, that you will escape the judgment of God? Or do you despise the riches of His goodness, forbearance, and longsuffering, not knowing that the goodness of God leads you to repentance?

I chose this verse because of that very last phrase, that the goodness of God leads us to repentance in order that we might become part of His Family.

As we are being called by Him, and being led along the way to where we can be baptized, receive His Spirit, and be part of His Family, and we are showing signs that we not only truly believe that He is but that we are beginning to truly submit to Him, He offers us a deal, a covenant. This is a very important third step in His conversion of us. The first step is to call us. The second is to reveal Himself and lead us to repentance, and then the third step is to enter into a covenant with us. He will do this because the outlines of His purpose are becoming more specific to us.

We are going to go back to Exodus 19 where Israel and God entered into the Old Covenant, because we are going back to a beginning here, and it is good to start, as it were, on the ground floor. This is the basic deal God offered to those people, and as we are going to see a little bit later, some of the same things that are mentioned here in verses 5 and 6 are also in the New Covenant.

Exodus 19:5-6 Now therefore, if you will indeed obey My voice and keep My covenant, then you shall be a special treasure to Me above all people; for all the earth is Mine. And you shall be to Me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.' These are the words which you shall speak to the children of Israel."

He is letting these people know what a privilege they have, that the Great God, the Creator, has bent down, as it were, and picked this group of slaves out, and now He has offered them a deal that they really cannot turn down once they begin to think about it, "Hey, this is pretty good."

This covenant has conditions tied to it, and it tends to show at least some of the future potential for these people if they will take it and do something with fulfilling their responsibilities within it. Those making the agreement are set apart to obey, and progressively—and that is very important—become a peculiar treasure, a kingdom of priests, and also a holy nation. When this proposal stage is reached, the process of change that God wants to create within us has just barely begun.

The specific purpose of the experiences in the wilderness is preparation to fully become what He announced in this proposal. It is good to understand that the Israelites had good intentions. They were weak spiritually. They were weak morally. They had minds like slaves. That was where all their experiences were, but for the most part, essentially, when they entered into this covenant, they had good intentions about what was going to be the fulfilling of their responsibility. Their lack of commitment was because of their lack of faith, and so things went awry in a hurry, as we found that within a week or two they were complaining about having no water. So things went awry.

We are now going to jump forty years to Deuteronomy 4. I am doing this for *our* benefit, because these four or five verses that we are going to read say, about as clearly and succinctly as I could find anyway, why God did what He did. Moses is the speaker here.

Deuteronomy 4:4-5 But you who held fast to the LORD your God are alive today, every one of you. "Surely I have taught you statutes and judgments, just as the LORD my God commanded me, that you should act according to them in the land which you go to possess.

Get the picture now. Of the original group of people that came out of Egypt and were over 20 when they came out, they are all dead. So those to whom Moses is speaking have had that time to get prepared for this moment, and it happened within a month of them hearing this that they actually went into the land. Moses is telling these people, "I fulfilled my responsibility," and so they were not without having instruction. He said, "I have taught you statutes and judgments, just as the Lord my God commanded me, that you should act according to them in the land which you go to possess."

There is a very direct and succinct statement from God through Moses why He did this. He wanted these people to act according to His law when they got in the land. Do you get the point? He wants *us* to act according to His law when we go into the Kingdom of God, and we will be prepared to do it. But in order to be prepared to do it, we have to go through an awful lot of experiences to get rid of that residue of Satan that is within us. It does not come out quickly. It is not easily overcome.

Deuteronomy 4:5-6 "Surely I have taught you statutes and judgments, just as the LORD my God commanded me, that you should act according to them in the land which you go to possess. Therefore be careful to observe them; for this is your wisdom [God's way is our wisdom.] and your understanding in the sight of the peoples who will hear all these statutes, and say, 'Surely this great nation is a wise and understanding people.'

We are going through all these things so that after Jesus Christ returns, and we are in the Kingdom of God, the people will be able to look at us for examples. They will be able to trust us when we teach them God's Word. We will have lived it, and will be able to talk to them with conviction and firmness because we know it works. They are unconverted. They have never seen anything like this before, and I tell you, I think we will be pretty persuasive if we have learned the lesson.

Deuteronomy 4:7-8 "For what great nation is there that has God so near to it, as the LORD our God is to us, for whatever reason we may call upon Him? And what great nation is there that has such statutes and righteous judgments as are in all this law which I set before you this day?"

So there we are. Now we are looking forward to this, but we are still on our pilgrimage. These people were ready to go into the land to take it over, and this is why I said to you in my first sermon in this series that in many ways we are more like the first group to come out of Egypt than we are to these people. They are going into the land right away, but we are still on our pilgrimage.

Let us go now to Deuteronomy 8, verses 2 and 3—very familiar scriptures. God is speaking.

Deuteronomy 8:2 And you shall remember that the LORD your God led you all the way these forty years in the wilderness, . . .

He is going to do the same to us. For Evelyn and myself, it has already been fifty years. Some of you are going to do it in 20 or 30 years, or whatever.

Deuteronomy 8:2-3 . . . [What for?] to humble you and test you, to know what was in your heart, whether you would keep His commandments or not. So He humbled you, allowed you to hunger, and fed you with manna which you did not know nor did your fathers know, that He might make you know that man shall not live by bread alone; but man lives by every word that proceeds from the mouth of the LORD.

When you add that to Deuteronomy 4:4-8, He is continuing to tell us why we must be on this pilgrimage, and what He is doing. He is humbling us. He is teaching us His Word. He is testing us to see if we will live what He says to do, whether we will trust Him and honor Him with our obedience.

Drop down now to verse 14. More humbling statements are made.

Deuteronomy 8:14-18 When your heart is lifted up, and you forget the LORD your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt, from the house of bondage; who led you through that great and terrible wilderness, in which were fiery serpents and scorpions and thirsty land where there was no water; who brought water for you out of the flinty rock; who fed you in the wilderness with manna, which your fathers did not know, that He might humble you and that He might test you, to do you good in the end—then you say in your heart, 'My power and the might of my hand have gained me this wealth.' "And you shall remember the LORD your God, for it is He who gives you power to get wealth, that He may establish His covenant which He swore to your fathers, as it is this day.

God is going to make very sure that at the end of our days of training, at the end of our life, whichever comes first, we are going to be able to be trusted to humble ourselves before Him at all times. Our loyalty will have been tested, and we know, and we *know* that we know, that we only got through this because God supplied the need all along the way. There will be no bragging before Him out of our pride whatever.

Notice especially that God declares in these verses we have read here that He is with us *all the way*. That is all the way back there in verses 2 through 4. There is no time in our life that He is unaware of what is going on in our life. There are times when He is directly involved in bringing tests upon us so as to humble us so that we quit resisting Him for our good. He wants to see that we truly know that

He is with us, providing for us so that we know, and know that we know, that we do not live by bread alone, and we truly know that He is our life—it says that in Deuteronomy 30:20—and He also states that He is with us to do us good to the end.

He knows that we have selective memory. We are not to get it into our heads that we alone are responsible for any physical or spiritual prosperity. If God did not do what He does, we would still be in spiritual Egypt, and we would not be prepared for His Kingdom. So please know that the difficulties we go through are in many cases arranged by Him, and even if He did not arrange them, He is aware of them, and He has passed on them so that we have to go through them. So all of this, for whatever the reason, has His approval. Sometimes that is hard to take, but it is a truth.

Now to bring it back to the day [of Unleavened Bread], the purpose of God's involvement in our life in this way is to help us to become rid of the leaven of our former life as a slave to Satan. And even with His involvement, this requires discipline, sacrifice, and hard work on our part, and these by their very nature almost invariably produce some measure of suffering.

But there is another side to this.

John 10:10 The thief does not come except to steal, and to kill, and to destroy. I have come that they may have life, and that they may have it more abundantly.

What about this abundance? Where is it? When we put it together with the subject we are covering here, think of it in this way. Abundant life and eternal life are produced from total commitment to a way of life in which God is involved. This commitment prepares us for the greater purpose, which is that which is at the end. That is what He says in Deuteronomy 8—the latter end. This is going to make human nature very uncomfortable, and it will fight back. It does not want to go along.

We have been in Hebrews 11 a couple of times today, but it is a magnificent chapter, and we are going to go there again.

Hebrews 11:32 And what more shall I say? For the time would fail me to tell of Gideon and Barak and Samson and Jephthah, also of David and Samuel and the prophets:

Paul has done this, using all of these people as examples in order to encourage us to understand that others have been dealt with by God in the same way He is dealing with us. For each one of these people He had a specific purpose in mind regarding the trials He put them through, but some of the same trials *they* went through *we* go through and for the same purpose. God had to humble them. God had to make them wise. God had to help them to understand that man does not live by bread alone.

Hebrews 11:33-35 who through faith subdued kingdoms, worked righteousness, obtained promises, stopped the mouths of lions, quenched the violence of fire, escaped the edge of the sword, out of weakness were made strong, became valiant in battle, turned to flight the armies of the aliens. Women received their dead raised to life again. Others were tortured, not accepting deliverance, that they might obtain a better resurrection.

Hebrews 11:39-40 And all these, having obtained a good testimony through faith [at the end, faith is what they had], did not receive the promise [meaning, "at that time"], God having provided something better for us, that they should not be made perfect apart from us.

We will all be resurrected at the same time.

God frequently shows us, if we are paying attention, that the long-time rewards of submitting to Him are greater than anything the world has to offer, and that along the way, because He is providing, we can also live life with a wonderful sense of well-being. When Jesus said, "I came to give abundant life," He was not talking that it would be just filled with overflowing joy all the time, but He meant that life in the long period of time that God is working with us, we are going to be able to look back on it and say, "This is pretty good," and we are going to have a sense of accomplishment. And even as we are going through these things, we are going to understand that God indeed is with us.

We are going to follow this part of the analogy further into the New Testament. We are going to go to Ephesians 1, and we are going to look at four or five verses there, and if we have enough time we are going to come back to Ephesians 1 again and approach it from a little bit different angle.

Just listen to these words, and brethren, these are things that need to be meditated on. The intention of these words, if we believe them, is awesome.

Ephesians 1:3 Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places in Christ.

Now I want you to see something that Jesus said to Nicodemus in John 3. Jesus, it seemed, was a little bit shocked at the way Nicodemus was responding to the teaching He was giving him.

John 3:9-10 Nicodemus answered and said to Him, "How can these things be?" Jesus answered and said to him, "Are you the teacher of Israel, and do not know these things?"

It is sort of like He is saying, "What are you doing in this position?" In teaching the people of Israel, Nicodemus was (in fact I am sure that he was) probably part of the Sanhedrin, the very central core of the leadership of the Jewish people at that time, and that he was a very high-ranking person. It is very possible that he was a priest besides.

John 3:10 Jesus answered and said to him, "Are you the teacher of Israel, and do not know these things?"

Notice how definite it is—"the teacher of Israel," not just "a teacher." Jesus was talking about being born again.

John 3:11-12 Most assuredly, I say to you, We speak what We know and testify what We have seen, and you do not receive Our witness [meaning the Father and the Son's witness]. If I have told you earthly things and you do not believe, how will you believe if I tell you heavenly things?

In a sense, Jesus had to hold back in the instruction and not load everything on him at once. Nicodemus could not even grasp the spiritual intent in the simplistic way Jesus was giving it to him.

Go back again to Ephesians 1, verse 3 and notice what Paul has said to you and me.

Ephesians 1:3 Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places in Christ.

Our minds have been given things that are so awesome in terms of their spiritual value it is almost impossible to encompass their importance in our mind. Are we grateful for that? Brethren, you know already so much more than almost anybody walking down the street of any big city in the United States of America! You know more truth (and you keep it in your back pocket!) than these people with high-falutin' degrees in religion have, because God, in His mercy, has opened our minds to it. Do we appreciate it?

You will remember during the Passover sermon that was the way I began that evening's service. That service is largely held because God wants us to appreciate, because if we appreciate, we feel obligated, and if we feel obligated we are very likely going to humble ourselves before Him because we appreciate it. Wow! What have we been given? It is not just the mere fact. It is the abundance of it when it begins to impact on our mind as to what it means.

Ephesians 1:5 Having predestined us to adoption as sons by Jesus Christ to Himself, according to the good pleasure of His will.

Another awesome statement. His purpose is to take us into His Family, and Paul adds to this, it is "the good pleasure of His will." It was not an accident. It did not merely just happen. It was directed right at *you*. Soon there will be seven billion people on the earth, but it was directed right at you and me.

Ephesians 1:9 Having made known to us the mystery of His will, according to His good pleasure which He purposed in Himself.

He did not counsel with anybody. God is saying, "I did it." Boy, do we have power on high here with Him!

Ephesians 1:10-11 That in the dispensation of the fullness of the times He might gather together in one [in one family, one body] all things in Christ, both which are in heaven and which are on earth—in Him. In Him also we have obtained an inheritance.

What is our inheritance? We are co-heirs with Jesus Christ. He is going to inherit the entire earth, and He is going to share it with you and me. A pretty awesome place, is it not?

I think when my mother died I inherited eight thousand dollars. That was a lot of money. When Evelyn's mother died, I think we inherited about the same amount of money from her. I am not sure. It had to be divided up among all the kids, but still it seemed like a lot to us at the time.

But our inheritance is the whole earth! Is the journey worth it? Is the pilgrimage worth it when you begin to see what He has done to you and me, that He picked us out individually to do these things? These heavenly things represent the teachings in which God's Spirit and conversion are required to be

fully grasped. Nicodemus did not get it. God has empowered us to get it. That is the only thing that makes it different. It is what He did to our mind so we can say, "I get it." "I understand it," and we start to humble ourselves before God by submitting to Him. It is an awesome thing.

One of the things we can get out of this section of scriptures we have just gone through is that from these we are to understand that it is not a matter of whom the object of God's predestination by grace is—that is us—but that is not the real thrust of these verses. So whether they are Israelites or Gentiles, whether they are rich or poor, it is what we are predestined to that is important. Can we give our mind over to that?

Remember, I started this by saying we have to know who we are, and we have to know where we are headed. We are the object of God's love, and we are predestined to inherit this earth with Jesus Christ. So this predestination is done with a view of us being united as sons directly in His Family. It is done with the object in view that we are to be both holy and blameless. It says that in verse 4, and we will get to that a little bit more later.

Being "holy" indicates both separation from others and different from others. The separation occurs because one is different from others. In other words, what God has done is what makes us different. What God has done is what makes us holy. What God has done is separating us from others. He is, slowly but surely, as it were, gathering His Family, His people, toward a destination that He has determined. The destination for every one of us is, to one degree, the same—the Kingdom of God—but for every one of us it might be somewhat different because of the position within the family He is training us to take part of, and so it is separating us from the world around us.

The separation occurs because one is different from others. In short—and this is implied within the verses—the Christian is separated from others in the world because he is *visibly* different in purpose; that is, why he is alive and what he is doing with his life, his conduct, and attitude.

Added to this is the other word "blameless." The Greek root of that word translated into the English language was a term the Greeks used for an animal that was to be sacrificed. It was thoroughly expected by a priest to ascertain whether it was worthy to be a sacrifice to God. In this case only the best was worthy. So the sacrifice must not be second-best. Remember, the standard is perfection, and this is what God is headed toward with us.

Again, I give this to you to help you understand why we are going through all these things. God is making us worthy to be a sacrifice in terms of our life.

Ephesians 1:9 Having made known to us the mystery of His will, according to His good pleasure which He purposed in Himself.

Again, let me remind you why we are doing this. We are showing, little by little, chip by chip, a little piece of information here, a little piece of information there, why we go through what we go through in our pilgrimage. What we just read here is a big one. Please read it again.

What is the mystery of God's will as is covered by this epistle? Richard's sermon this morning covered this well. A "mystery" in Greek is not merely something that is hard to understand. Rather, it is something that is covered, concealed, and is now revealed, not to everybody, but only to those chosen to grasp it.

In verse 3 we have spiritual blessings. It is a spiritual blessing that we have been chosen to understand "the mystery of His will." Within the context of this book, what is the mystery? To me this is an awesome revelation.

Think first that this epistle was written to a Gentile congregation. The mystery in this epistle is that God has opened salvation to the Gentiles, but for a specific purpose. Salvation is of the Jews. Romans says that. First to the Jew, meaning the Israelites, and then to the Greek, meaning the Gentile.

Now go one chapter forward to Ephesians 2:11, and we will see the mystery of God's will in this particular epistle. Remember, I said this epistle is written to Gentiles.

Ephesians 2:11-18 Therefore remember that you, once Gentiles in the flesh—who are called Uncircumcision by what is called the Circumcision made in the flesh by hands—that at that time you were without Christ, being aliens from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers from the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world. But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For He Himself is our peace, who has made both one, and has broken down the middle wall of separation, having abolished in His flesh the enmity, that is, the law of commandments contained in ordinances, so as to create in Himself one new man from the two [Jew and Gentile], thus making peace, and that He might reconcile them both to God in one body through the cross, thereby putting to death the enmity. And He came and preached peace to you [Gentiles] who were afar off and to those who were near. For through Him we both have access by one Spirit to the Father.

The mystery of God's will within this epistle is that how He, through Jesus Christ, is going to end the constant warfare and disunity that has infected all the races and nations of people since Cain killed Abel. *The mystery is how God is going to create worldwide unity under Himself, His Son, and He is going to do it through the church.*

Now, a word of warning here. If we cannot humble ourselves in this one little congregation and learn how to love each other, how will we ever fit into God's Family in the Kingdom? It is taking a great deal of time for God to do what He is doing. Step by step His awesome purpose and plan to accomplish it is coming to pass. The church is the first step to the end of wars. We have to show Him that we believe in it, that we will humble ourselves before one another, and that we will love one another actively.

Remember that when we were going through so much of the book of Ephesians, I mentioned to you that there in Ephesians 5 I feel that God has lifted the activity that He put right in order. The first is that we have to love Him. The second is we have to love His Family. The third is husband and wife love. The fourth is loving our children, and our children loving us. The fifth is loving our employer and our fellow workers. He lays it right out there as to how He feels our priorities need to be, and guess what book it is in. It is in Ephesians, and He is directing our attention in those areas.

Let us go to Isaiah 11. This verse barely touches on this theme, but it will suffice for the moment. Notice what He mentions here. He is talking about the time when Christ returns.

Isaiah 11:13 Also the envy of Ephraim shall depart, and the adversaries of Judah shall be cut off; Ephraim shall not envy Judah, and Judah shall not harass Ephraim.

I think you understand that Ephraim is talking about the ten northern tribes. Look at what He is showing here. There is going to be a time when Israelites love one another. Instead of competing with one another, they are going to cooperate with one another, and they are going to get along, and Ephraim—the northern ten tribes—will not be envied by the Jews, and the Jews will not be envied by the Israelites. Very interesting.

This just touches on it, but it gives us a little idea of what is coming, and that is what He is talking about there in the book of Ephesians, and what is beginning in the church is something that will be taught—a theme that will be carried through at the return of Jesus Christ, and the next step in progress toward what is working out is going to occur.

What this verse shows is that the divisions in the relationships in this world are so great that much of the preparation for God's Kingdom for you and me involves resolving prejudices, hatreds, and envy against one another that God has also called into this body. God is aware of them, and now I am telling you that *we* need to be aware of them, and we need to begin working on them and allow God to give us the love we need for one another.

From here we are going to go to another section of God's Word that puts a great deal of emphasis on areas of preparation. We are going to go to I Peter. I feel that this section probably contains some of the most specific information in the entire Bible of what our calling is all about, but it needs to be explained a little bit. It needs to be meditated upon, searched through other portions of the Bible, but Peter has left us with quite a record so that we are without excuse.

Turn now to I Peter 2. Just think of this in terms of a body of people, and all of us so different, having different likes and dislikes, different prejudices, things that we do well, or do not do well, coming from different areas of the country, different races, nations, and whatever. The first thing he says is:

I Peter 2:1-5 Therefore, laying aside all malice, all deceit, hypocrisy, envy, and all evil speaking, as newborn babes, desire the pure milk of the word that you may grow thereby, if indeed you have tasted that the Lord is gracious. Coming to Him as to a living stone, rejected indeed by men, but chosen by God and precious, you also, as living stones, are being built up a spiritual house, a holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.

I Peter 2:9-12 But you are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, His own special people, that you may proclaim the praises of Him who called you out of darkness into His marvelous light; who once were not a people but are now the people of God, who had not obtained mercy but now have obtained mercy. Beloved, I beg you as sojourners and pilgrims, abstain from fleshly lusts which war against the soul, having your conduct honorable among the Gentiles, that when they speak against you as evildoers, they may, by your good works which they observe, glorify God in the day of visitation.

Peter is detailing the characteristics of the responsibilities of the New Testament church. Recall how closely this parallels God's intention for Israel under the Old Covenant. Go back and read Exodus 19: 5-6, and you will see some of the same terminology there as is given here. This is more complete and it is more specific.

This signals to us, to the church, that what we are going through and are going to do once that is through, is in principle very similar. Remember, God did not give them the spirit to work with, so His expectations of what they would do were pretty low compared to what He expects of us. But the implication is very strong from the nature of the terms that what we are called to is going to require a multitude of changes of conduct and attitude in order to be prepared to carry out the responsibilities in God's Kingdom. Everything is pointed in that direction.

Verses 1-3 are intended to be an exhortation to focus on attitudes that need working on in order to function within our responsibilities that will be made a few verses later. So what does he say here? "Lay aside all malice, all deceit, hypocrisy, envy, and all evil speaking." If we are doing those things, we are not going to be very receptive, not only to the instruction, or to getting along to accomplish what God wants us to accomplish.

In verse 2 he is saying that our attitude toward accomplishing this has to be like a newborn baby desiring the milk. You know how a baby wants to be fed. Waaaa! and so forth, and when they get fed, the desire is satisfied, but while they are doing that the desire is really kicking in, and so they let it be made known that they want to eat. God wants to see the enthusiasm for His Word like a baby has for milk. Why? So, that like the baby, you can grow! He says you will do this "if indeed you have tasted that the Lord is gracious."

Verse 11 is a reflection of verses 1-3, so in case we did not get the exhortation in verses 1-3, he closes off this paragraph or two by saying "abstain from fleshly lusts." In verse one it is "envy." So he is just hitting it from a little bit different angle, a little bit different sin, but he is also saying "turn yourself toward righteousness, and go at it."

Beginning with verse 4 notice how Peter begins putting into our mind a sense of community.

I Peter 2:4 Coming to Him as to a living stone, rejected indeed by men, but chosen by God and precious, you also, as living stones, are being built up a spiritual house,

"House" is a metaphor for a community. It is a house that is being built, and Christ is the builder. He is the contractor. He is the laborer. He is the bricklayer, stone-layer, whatever you want to call it, and slowly but surely, as the stones are given to Him—these are unique stones; they are living stones—they are then placed into the building by Jesus Christ, and the building is being built into a grand edifice all along the way.

Becoming part of a building requires that the stones be conformed into an already existing place in an already existing structure. We know the mind of God. He does not make mistakes. He is planning far ahead. He selects stones that He wants out of a pile of stones, and they are put into the building as He selects them, and gives them to Christ, and Christ puts them into the building where they are supposed to go. Do you get the point? We are put into an already-designed and -prepared location.

Becoming part of a building requires the stones be conformed to an already-existing place and an already-existing structure. Often stones have to be hammered on, and that is not easy to take all the time. Changes must be made, and change makes us uncomfortable as Christ takes off the rough spots or those parts that do not fit into the location so that we will be put into the location quite well. So when God calls, He is calling us both to a work, and to be worked upon in order to fit into this community.

Notice further that we are *living* stones in a spiritual house, and that is kind of interesting, because if you put together what Paul said in Ephesians 2, he said we were dead in our sins. We have to be made alive in order to fit into this living structure. This is what "born again" is about. A born again person is one who has been raised from being spiritually dead to being spiritually alive. So we come to Christ as a *living* stone. We are spiritually alive.

Usually, metaphorically, when a stone is applied to a man, it indicates stupidity or hardness of heart. It indicates unconversion. So when a person becomes a *living* stone, it indicates conversion, and that this person has been given gifts by God to understand. "Living" indicates rising from spiritual death by means of a new birth. So the person is born again. Not begotten; *born*, as Paul shows in Ephesians 2:1-6.

That person—a stone—becomes one of many such stones in a spiritual house. He does not remain alone. He must be joined into the fabric of the edifice—the church—and each stone must be reconciled to the fact that he did not possess spiritual life before becoming part of a spiritual house, and if he loses contact with the life-giving source of the house, he dies spiritually. This is very interesting to remember. He is given life before he is made part of the building, but if he departs from the building, the life begins to leave immediately because the life-source has been cut off, and that life-source is Jesus Christ Himself.

Thus, as a stone, we become part of a community. It is God's community, and there is no such thing as an independent Christian floating all over the place from group to group. That does not fit God's Word. We are made a part of it, and we remain a part of it. If we leave it to float off somewhere else, we have put ourselves into spiritual doo-doo. Therefore, many of our trials are going to be associated with managing the stresses that come on us as a part of the body of Christ.

And so the point is clear. A stone by itself accomplishes nothing without the builder. Joined with others, it becomes a structure and institution capable of doing much. And so the church has the responsibility of preaching the Gospel and instructing each other through the ministry.

Now there are things we have to do as part of the building. We have to tithe. We have to show our concern through prayer. We have to bear a portion of the attacks against the building, and we have to bear portions of the attacks against individuals within it, striving to be unified with it, and there is much leaven that needs to come out in this area.

The next thing Peter mentions after being a spiritual house is a holy priesthood. I can see I am not going to get done with this part of the sermon because this area is really rich in understanding it. We are to become a holy priesthood. This is part of our responsibility as a stone within the building, and we have to offer up spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God.

In verse 9 we can add something to that. Peter calls it "a *royal* priesthood." Are any of you royalty? I do not think so. Therefore, we must be prepared to be one of them. Pay particular attention to this aspect of our life in Christ because it shows much about our calling and what we have to learn.

Recall the design of the Tabernacle. It shows that the Levites could only approach inside the fence surrounding the Tabernacle, but only a priest could actually enter the building. You might be in a Levitical family, but if you were not a priest you were not allowed inside the door. You could go up to the building, but you were not allowed to go in. Only the priests were allowed to go in.

Now this is what we are called to. We are to be a priest; therefore, we are allowed by God to enter the Holy Place. Only the high priest could enter the Holy of Holies, and him only on the Day of Atonement one time a year. The priests *only*—everybody else was excluded from this responsibility—could handle the furniture, the vessels that were used in worshipping God, and only the priests had access to God. What an awesome gift! Only the priests had access to God, and we have to become a *holy* priesthood.

Christ's death tore the veil, thus enabling us, even the priests, to enter not merely the fence, not merely the Holy Place, but we now have the privilege of going, like the high priest, into the Holy of Holies. He was restricted to one day a year. We are allowed to come into the Holy of Holies at any time. So those called to be part of this holy priesthood—God's children having His Spirit—have *actual direct access to God!* All others are shut out. This brings responsibility.

We are going to go back ever so briefly to Numbers 8, and I will read these verses and expound them just a little bit to give you the sense of it. Moses is being instructed, and Aaron too:

Numbers 8:6 "Take the Levites from among the children of Israel and cleanse them ceremonially.

Numbers 8:9-12 And you shall bring the Levites before the tabernacle of meeting, and you shall gather together the whole congregation of the children of Israel. So you shall bring the Levites before the LORD, and the children of Israel shall lay their hands on the Levites; and Aaron shall offer the Levites before the LORD like a wave offering from the children of Israel, that they may perform the work of the LORD. Then the Levites shall lay their hands on the heads of the young bulls, and you shall offer one as a sin offering and the other as a burnt offering to the LORD, to make atonement for the Levites.

Numbers 8:14-19 Thus you shall separate the Levites from among the children of Israel, and the Levites shall be Mine. After that the Levites shall go in to service the tabernacle of meeting. So you shall cleanse them and offer them like a wave offering [as though they were a sacrifice before God]. For they are wholly given to Me from among the children of Israel; I have taken them for Myself instead of all who open the womb, the firstborn of all the children of Israel. For all the firstborn among the children of Israel are Mine, both man and beast; on the day that I struck all the firstborn in the land of Egypt I sanctified them to Myself. I have taken the Levites instead of all the firstborn of the children of Israel. And I have given the Levites as a gift to Aaron and his sons [who are the priests] from among the children of Israel, to do the work for the children of Israel in the tabernacle of meeting, and to make atonement for the children of Israel, that there be no plague among the children of Israel when the children of Israel come near the sanctuary."

Let me explain what happened here. Everyone knows that the Levitical priesthood was established to offer sacrifices, but how many of you know that they were *living* sacrifices, separated to the work of God, and as such they became forerunners of you and me. The wave offering given in this ceremony was of themselves. Symbolically and figuratively, they were sacrificing themselves, and when hands were laid on the sacrificed animals, the animals then represented *them*.

In other words, the Levites, who were offering themselves here to the direction of Aaron, laid their hands on the animals that were actually sacrificed, and when they laid their hands on the animals,

those animals figuratively became them, and then those animals were actually sacrificed, but the priest remained alive. The emphasis in the Old Testament sacrifices was not on the death of the animal, but the giving of a life—a life lived. Now where do you think Paul got the expression telling us to be living sacrifices? That is where he got it. Right there.

So what does God expect of us as priests in His family, a holy priesthood? He expects us to offer ourselves voluntarily as living sacrifices to serve Him. Are you willing to do that? It takes a bit of preparation to think those things through.

We will end the sermon today at this point. Turn to Romans 12. What scriptures could be more fitting than our responsibility before God as pilgrims heading toward the Kingdom of God?

Romans 12:1-2 I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that you present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable to God, which is your reasonable service. And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what is that good and acceptable and perfect will of God.

Paul is beseeching us to present our bodies, our life, to God. It is that for which a man gives up his life, his service, as a living sacrifice, and that service is what one does every day of one's life. True worship is all that one does *every* day, and that is the offering of his life in service to God and man.

Then Paul adds to this that we are not to be conformed, that is outwardly, to the changing fashions of the world. He is saying to us, "Don't be a chameleon which takes on the color of its surrounding." And "transformed" comes from a root meaning "unchanging shape or element." So Paul is telling us that we have to undergo a radical change of heart in order to successfully be a living sacrifice. It is not an easy job for one who has been trained in this world, but this is what our pilgrimage is about.