

Living Abundantly In Tough Times

It's All in Our Perspective

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It is a common misconception among non-Christians that the Christian life is, frankly, boring. Christians of every stripe are thought to be dull, humorless, rather austere people. For instance we all know the character of the Southern Baptists in the media. They are often ridiculed because they preach against things like drinking, dancing, and playing cards, and even premarital sex. This world has become so progressive that they even mock Christians for preaching against the breaking of the Ten Commandments.

When the Southern Baptists inaugurated a boycott against Disney World for its annual gay day celebration several years ago, the media's coverage was really condescending against the Southern Baptists. They acted like it was the most ridiculous thing that they could do. But their coverage could not have done more to reinforce the world's image of Christians as being intolerant, ridged, square, backward, and fundamentalists.

Modern mainline Protestants, on the other hand—some of the denominations that tend to get a lot of press, some of which my dad mentioned in the commentary—have tried to shed this “uncool” image of Christians. In many churches nowadays, even among some of the Baptists churches, there is a contemporary service, which has either replaced altogether or is in addition too the traditional service. This modern “pop culture” service features live upbeat music. “Christian rock” is what they call it. They heavily use pictures and computer graphics that are shot up on large screens in the churches, and the preachers give very short sermons, about the length of a song that you would hear played on the radio, because the people's attention spans are so small.

And the pastors have to be these high-energy people. They put the microphones on and they walk around the stage. They never stay behind a lectern, because that is just boring. They get the people excited and on their feet and raising their holy hands to the Lord, and they have to do all this stuff to get people pumped up to make church interesting. And if you have ever seen any of these on television you see mostly kids and maybe some young adults out in the audience, mostly teenagers, and they are dressed from khakis and polo shirts to shorts or blue jeans and T-shirts.

They have no respect at all for God, the church, or what they are being taught. The whole thing is taking the church and making it modern and enjoyable. Frankly, what they are trying to do is shed this dreary image, or dreary reputation, among the unchurched of what it is like to be a Christian.

Even so, if the world considers unrestrained hedonism to be the norm in terms of fun and living large, biblical Christianity will indeed appear lackluster and unyielding in comparison. If you put them side by side and you ask the normal man on the street which seems more fun and engaging, they are going to automatically pick the more hedonistic one and not the church. I am sure we are considered to be just old fuddy-duddies because we sing out of a hymnal that uses songs from centuries past, and of course songs from the good old forties and fifties that Dwight Armstrong wrote. We are like dinosaurs compared to some of these churches. Our songs do not have a beat to them.

Now the Bible clearly calls for Christians to cease behaving as the world does. Let us pick up a scripture on this. We are going to go to the epistle of I Peter 4. Peter lays it all out on the line here.

I Peter 4:1 Therefore, since Christ suffered for us in the flesh, arm yourselves also with the same mind . . .

Let us just stop right there for a minute. Putting aside that the main subject here is Christ's suffering, let us just think of the fact that Christ says here, "he lived in the flesh" and his living in the flesh was recorded for us in four gospels, that are in beginning of our New Testament, and we have that there for us to look at, to read and study, and it is there because from it comes the example of the life of Jesus Christ. So what we are talking about here is that we are to put on the same mind, to act in the same way as Jesus Christ. So now what we are doing, instead of comparing us in our fuddy-duddy religion, as people would think of it, versus the hedonistic lifestyle of the world, let us just remove us from the equation and put Jesus Christ there, because that is the one that we are supposed to be emulating. So that is the comparison here.

I Peter 4:1-2 . . . for he who has suffered in the flesh has ceased from sin; [this is where we are going.] that he no longer should live the rest of his time in the flesh for the lusts of men, [that is what the hedonistic lifestyle is all about] but for the will of God.

That is our goal. So it is very important that at the beginning of this sermon, we put this idea in our heads that we are no longer to live in the flesh for the lusts of men, but for the will of God. That is the perspective that we are supposed to have.

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I Peter 4:3-4 For we have spent enough of our past lifetime doing the will of the Gentiles—when we walked in lewdness, lusts, drunkenness, revelries, drinking parties, and abominable idolatries. In regard to these [the ones making the comparisons] they think it strange that you do not run with them to the same flood of dissipation, speaking evil of you:

They run you down, they say that you are an old fuddy-duddy, you are behind in the times, you are a traditionalist, you are a fundamentalist, you are not progressive enough. So that is the comparison that we have here. What this tells us is that the way of this world leads to death, though it also tells us that these people, who follow this way of the world that leads to death have a lot of “fun” on the way.

However just because a Christian does what these verses say in exercising self control, does not mean, necessarily, that his life is boring, underprivileged, and unrewarding. That is where people’s thinking have been skewed and influenced by Satan the Devil. Satan would like you to believe that you cannot have fun unless you sin, or that you cannot have enjoyment unless you have sinned, or even succeed unless you do it in a sinful way to get ahead. That is where our minds have been warped to a certain degree, by thinking that in order to have fun and to have an enjoyable life, you have to be as close to the edge of the cliff as you can, or even falling off the edge of the cliff—suicidal in terms of our spiritual lives.

In fact we can say that, lived properly, a Christian life is ultimately more exciting, successful, and satisfying than most people—and even some of us—can possibly imagine. I think some of us still have this idea in our mind that you have to go out there and live on the edge in order to have an enjoyable successful life. And I can understand that, because we are bombarded with that idea all the time, whether it is advertising, television, or movies. Just about every bit of the media is enforcing this idea that you have to have fun, you have to be successful in this way, you have to have pleasure, and you have to fulfill your desires. Of course all the desires are fleshly things as Peter says here, things that will satisfy our own fleshly lusts.

Now I need to say also, it is true that Christianity is full of responsibility and self restraint, and people do not like that, normally. They do not like responsibility, they do not like to control themselves, they do not like to restrain themselves from the things that they want to do, that are right there for the taking. But the rewards and the blessings that are accrued over a lifetime of pleasing God and living his way simply overwhelm the seemingly onerous duties and strictures of God’s way of life.

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People might say, “What, you don’t eat shellfish? That’s the best thing. I can’t believe you go through life without trying it.” They think that it is an onerous duty of Christians, that they will not do that. This is a simple demonstration, but there are great rewards that come, over a lifetime when we do not do it, because God has said “do not do it.” This is just one little example. What about the Sabbath? People might say, “What, you give up one day a week to God? You must be crazy. You should see the things I get done on a Saturday. If I didn’t have Saturday, my life would just be incomplete, I couldn’t clean out my garage, or go to the ball game, I couldn’t watch this on TV.” What people normally might do on a Saturday. They might come up with the excuse of, “You mean do all that on Sunday? No way, that’s the day I go to church.”

What I am trying to say is, we can look at it this way and see that because of the experiences that we have had in the church over many years, truly when you place the true Christian life against the life of this world, there is really no comparison. We realize that, we understand that, and I think the longer we are in the church the longer we are learning and growing. And as we are learning God’s way, this becomes more and more clear to us that we have chosen the right way and that this way is the one that brings ultimate blessing. Let us go to John 10. If you know your chapters this is the true shepherd chapter of John. There is one phrase here that I would like to pick up and it is the theme of my sermon.

John 10:9 I am the door [Jesus says]. If anyone enters by Me, he will be saved, and will go in and out and find pasture.

What he is telling us here in a very simple way is that we come in by Him by His blood, but there is more to it than that. We go in and out by Him all the time. What He is saying is that we live our lives according to Him, we go in and out, we do all of the things of our lives with Him as the center. So think of it that way.

John 10:10 The thief does not come except to steal, and to kill, and to destroy. I [on the other hand] have come that they might have life, and that they might have it more abundantly.

So right off the get go, He is saying that there is a huge difference between a “thief” and “Me”—a false preacher, a false teacher, a false messiah, and the true one—because He does not come to take. He does not come to mess things up. He does not come to kill and destroy. He comes, on the other hand, to give, particularly life He says here, and not only that, it is not just life, it is an *abundant* life! So He ratchets things up as He goes

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here, He is showing the difference between Him and the thief. He came to give life, that is one step and then the next step is, not just life, but a life that is so abundant and so different from what we think of life, that it is beyond compare.

Most people do not realize that this is one of the primary reasons Christ came as a man to earth—to teach us how to live an abundant, fulfilled life. He came to give us His example of the right, true way to live before God in this world. So according to the very founder of Christianity, His disciples, meaning you and me, if they follow His teachings, if they follow the True Shepherd, as the image He shows here, the disciples will live enviable, full lives, even during the hard times. As a matter of fact it does not matter what the times are like at all.

We have been saying here from this pulpit, as Joe [Baity] mentioned before, that tough times are coming. The days of wine and roses, as it were, for the United States are coming to an end. We are quickly losing the power, the prestige, and the prosperity that we have had over the last century or more. As a matter of fact this nation has been blessed for a few centuries with all the things that we need. But it does not matter in terms of our lives. I hope you will see that as we go along here.

Even though times are getting bad, that does not mean that our lives have to be bad at the same time. We have someone on our side who can make those bad times seem like the best times, because our perspective is different then the rest of this world's perspective is. So even in those tough times that seem to be coming just around the corner, we can have lives of worth, meaning, and blessing. Now this does not mean that things might not get a little scarce. Our cupboards may get bare and our wallets may be empty, but it is our perspective that is important here.

So what does Jesus mean by a life more abundantly, or more abundant? The problem arises when we begin discussing an abundant life, because the term “abundant” can be so subjective. It just means “more” or “overflowing.” What is overflowing to you might be a real pain to someone else. What is abundant living for one person may be entirely unsatisfying for another person.

Just a quick example here. If there is a hard charging, type A personality, who loves exotic vacations, sports cars, and he lives for extreme sports, if he were asked to take the place of, let us say a retiree, whose day consisted of sitting on a rocking chair on the porch, tending a small garden out back, and maybe getting in a round of golf once a week or so, do you think he would take it? Do you think he would consider that new life, the retiree life, to be abundant? I do not think so. We may not like the kind of type A things that this person would do, but they are not necessarily wrong. Now the retiree

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would say, "No way am I getting into that fast car, I might have a heart attack." But it is not wrong. For one person it would be the fulfilling thing to do, but for the other person it might not.

What is abundant to one is not necessarily abundant to the other. You can say that one person's bowl of cherries is another person's bowl of cherry *pits*. It just is not very satisfying. We all have different interests, abilities, and experiences, and they can all fall under the category of abundant life. But on the other hand none of them really are abundant life from God's perspective. They may be part of it, they may be a blessing that he gives now and then, but real abundant life to Him is far different from abundant life to us.

Now the Greek word Jesus uses in John 10:10 to describe this abundant life is "perisson" and it means super-abundant. It does not just mean abundant, but *super-abundant*. It is a superlative. It means the most abundant of all things. It means superfluous, or overflowing. It means over and above a certain quantity. Let us say that you thought life would be one hundred percent of joy and doing all the good things in life, well for God, it is not that, it is more than that. It is one hundred ten percent, if you know what I mean. You cannot really go beyond one hundred percent but, if you had set a quantity for something, what God is going to give is beyond that. If you want a quart, he will give a gallon, in other words.

If we want to put it in a phrase, perisson means a quantity so abundant as to be considerably more, not just a little bit more, but *considerably* more than what one would expect or anticipate. In short, Jesus promises us a life far better than we could ever envision. Here is an important phrase: one beyond physical life. A life far better than we can even envision, one beyond physical life, a life that overflows the bounds of what we would consider normal life.

So what Jesus is telling us here in John 10:10 is that He came to give us life, yes, but He came to give us a life that is so far beyond what normal, everyday people in this world live, that it is *unimaginable*. Like I said it is a superlative, it is the best life, the greatest life, the most fulfilling life, the most joyous life.

Jesus is not the only one that says this. Let us go to I Corinthians 2 just pick up this one scripture. This is quoted out of the Old Testament. Paul repeats it here:

I Corinthians 2:9 But as it is written, Eye has not seen, nor ear heard, nor have entered into the heart of man, the things which God has prepared for those that love Him.

That is a memory scripture. It is one that we all know quite well, but it says the same thing that Jesus taught us there in John 10—that He came to give us a life that is so much better than either the life we lived or the life that everybody else lives. It is beyond description. Move forward a few books to Ephesians. This is the end of Paul's prayer for the church here:

Ephesians 3:20 Now to Him who is able to do exceedingly abundantly above all that we ask or think, according to the power that works in us. . . .

So God is not limited to our imagination, our expectations, or what we know and what we do not know. He is able to give us exceedingly abundantly more than we would ever think to ask for. We might not ask for these things because we do not have the right knowledge or the right perspective in what we actually need, but He is able to give us these things. Remember it says in Romans 8, that Jesus is the intercessor who tells God, with groaning beyond our understanding, what we need. He knows what we need and He tells the Father what we need, even though we may not. So you could call the life that Jesus promises us a value-added life, beyond what we could even ask for or imagine.

Now, before we begin to have thoughts of palatial homes and classic automobiles and round the world trips and wads of pocket money that we can just throw here and there, we need to stop and consider what God says comprises life. This is why I said earlier that our perspective is very important here.

Once we determine His view of living, we can have a better idea of what kind of blessings we can expect as Christ's disciples. All we need to do is glance around at our own situations to know that worldly wealth, prestige, position, and power must not be at the top of God's list of blessings for his people. We know that from I Corinthians 1:26-29 where it says, "Not many mighty, not many noble, not many wise have been called." In terms of economic, academic, or social strata, most of us hail from the lower, or maybe the middle classes in this country and other countries where we may have been born. And we tend not to move very far from those particular strata. If we are low or middle class, we usually stay low or middle class. Sometimes there is some movement, but we tend to remain in a situation similar to the one in which we were called. Paul even tells us in I Corinthians 7 we should be content to stay where we were called.

So we can be sure that the Bible does not preach a prosperity gospel, "just believe in faith and God will make you rich." That is not in the Bible anywhere. So let us look at the

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life Jesus meant when He said He would give us life more abundantly. The best place to go is the Bible's own definition of life, in John 17:3. This is another memory scripture.

John 17:3 And this is eternal life, that they may know You, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom You have sent.

This is a wonderfully simple definition of life. It would not make Webster's, but it is the Bible's definition and therefore God's definition of what is life. Now notice that this definition of life makes no mention of length of days, health, prosperity, family, occupation, or anything material whatsoever. It simply says that life is to know God.

Now what does this tell us? We are going to try to think this through in terms of this particular subject of an abundant life. The first thing that it tells me is that eternal life, which is the kind of life that God is truly interested in and we should be truly interested in, is not determined by duration, but rather by a relationship with God. *It begins and ends with knowing God.* Actually it begins with knowing God and it never ends. Now let us go to I John 5. I just want to pick up something that John mentions here:

I John 5:11-13 And this is the testimony: that God has given us eternal life, and this life is in his Son. He that has the Son has life; he who does not have the Son of God does not have life. [This is fitting in so very well with John 17:3] These things I have written to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, that you may know that you have eternal life, and that you may continue to believe in the name of the Son of God.

He has told us a couple of times here that you already have eternal life. Now if we were thinking like a man, we would say that we already have endless life. That is how most people think of eternal life, that it goes on forever. But that is not what John, Jesus, and God mean by this. Eternal life is *knowing God*. So this is why once we are converted and given the gift of the Holy Spirit, Jesus Christ and God the Father come and dwell in us. They are in us, are they not, once we are truly converted? This is why we are said to have eternal life, because we have a relationship with Them. We are coming to know Them, and so we have that eternal life in us. This is different from length or duration, by a long shot.

Life, to God, is knowing Him and having a relationship with Him, and as long as we continue to have a relationship with Him we have eternal life. Though, of course, we do not have it in its fullness. We are here on earth; we are still physical human beings.

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There is more to life to come, but right now, because we have a relationship with God the Father and Jesus Christ, and They have come and made Their abode in us we have eternal life—because we are coming to know Them.

The second thing that this tells me that eternal life is to know the Father and the Son is that because of what we just went over, eternal life is about quality, not quantity. It is not duration, meaning number of years, or number of days; it is about quality, it is about a relationship—a pure relationship. It is about the most excellent thing in this universe, knowing the Father and the Son. We have often taught in this church and the Worldwide Church of God taught it, that *eternal life is life as God lives it*. That is the abundant life!

It is interesting that so many of these concepts appear in the Old Testament. We have known this for a long time obviously, but the theologians of this world would make you think that all this was new in the New Testament.

Ezekiel 33:10 Therefore you, O son of man, say to the house of Israel: Thus you say, If our transgressions and our sins lie before us, and we pine away in them, how can we then live?

So they are bringing up the subject of life. They are saying that we are full of sin, and this sin is killing us. How are we going to live? How are we going to continue? The answer here, as God tells Ezekiel in verse 11 is:

Ezekiel 33:11 Say to them, As I live, saith the Lord God, I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but that the wicked turn from his way and live. [He is saying that they need to repent, that the way they are living is going to lead to death, so they need to turn to the living the way he lives) Turn, turn from your evil ways! For why should you die, O house of Israel?

Let us go back to the New Testament.

I Peter 2:21 For to this you were called, because Christ also suffered for us, leaving us an example, that you should follow His steps:

The abundant life is the way Jesus Christ lived it on earth. There is a very similar one to this in I John 2, where John writes:

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I John 2:6 He who says he abides in Him ought himself also to walk, just as He walked.

So, if we are truly seeking God and we are truly coming to know Him, we will try to obey Him, which entails emulating His way of life. So knowing God leads to responding in obedience, which leads to following His way of life, which is eternal life. It is the abundant life.

Another thing I have taken from this because of what we have learned so far is that God is not overly concerned with our physical circumstances. We have to remember who He is. God is our provider. God can give us anything at anytime. He fed Elijah with ravens. He fed Israel with manna. He can produce baskets of loaves and fishes, from just a few samples. As a matter of fact He is God, He can create from fiat, and boom there it is. So our physical circumstances are not real important to Him, because He can fill a need.

Psalm 37:25 tells us that God will not forsake the righteous, nor will He allow the righteous man's children or descendants to beg for bread.

The whole theme of that psalm is trust in God. He is going to give you the desires of your heart. So it should be enough that He assures us time and again that we do not need to worry about our physical circumstances.

Let us go to a couple of scriptures here.

Mathew 6:25 Therefore I say to you [Jesus is speaking here], do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink; nor about your body, what you will put on. Is not life more than food and the body more than clothing?

This fits very well with what we have been saying. Let us not get overly concerned about how much food is on the table and whether we can get the new pair of shoes we saw in the window. God will provide our needs.

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

These are some pretty astounding promises. All we need to do is claim them and wait

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patiently. God knows our need and He will give it when the time is right. We will see that in a few minutes.

Another point here is that physical blessings, then, may or may not be by-products of God's way of life. Neither wealth nor poverty is a sure indication of our standing with God, because our physical circumstances do not mean all that much to Him. He will fulfill our needs. If we need money, if He needs to make us rich for some reason, He will do that. If we do not need to be rich, if we could just have enough to stay between poverty and riches, He will do that too. If we need to be run through a little bit poverty every once in a while to keep us humble, well, He will do that too.

Just think about some of the people in the Bible. Abraham and David were fabulously rich. Abraham had kings coming to him as a courtesy call because he was so wealthy. David had billions of dollars in today's money. He set aside, I do not know how many billions for the Temple and he still had gobs left over. That was the basis for the wealth of King Solomon. And then there was John the Baptist, who could not put two shekels together. He was dressed like a wild man out of the desert. And what about Ezekiel? He was a captive in Babylon; he was a slave, so he did not have much.

So, you can see the extremes here. God is able to create sons of God from the very rich and the very poor and all the people in between. So the physical, material things do not matter all that much. We think they matter a whole lot, but to God it is really not all that important. He is worried about other things. He will keep you going; He will keep supplying your need.

III John 1 The Elder, to the beloved Gaius, whom I love in the truth.

Notice how he starts this letter. Now think of it, not necessarily as John the apostle writing it, but as God writing it, because what I am thinking here is that the apostle John, by this time in his life, had the mind of God. I mean look at what he has written in the other epistles and the gospel, and you will know that John the apostle was thinking along the right lines and had been for a long time. Now notice how he puts this here:

III John 2-4 Beloved, I pray that you may prosper in all things and be in health, just as your soul prospers. For I rejoiced greatly when the brethren came and testified of the truth that is in you, just as you walk in the truth. I have no greater joy than to hear that my children walk in truth.

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“Gaius, it’s great that you are healthy and seem to be doing well, but when it all comes down to it, what’s really important is that you’re continuing to walk the walk; to walk in the way of truth.” That is what is important. So God would supply Gaius’ need, but the real big thing that was on God’s mind was keeping Gaius walking on the straight and narrow. So, certainly God desires that we prosper in all things and be in health, but He really wants to see us grow and overcome and maintain the way of truth. Will we live like royalty? Well, that is far down on the list, and it is not necessary.

The final thing that I get out of John 17:3, after all these points, is that a Christian’s life is to revolve around what Peter writes in II Peter 3:18. He says as his final note to the church:

II Peter 3: 18 But grow in grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. To Him be the glory both now and for ever. Amen.

That is what a Christian’s life is all about! “Growing in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.” This suggests then that the abundant life—the eternal life that God wants for us—is a process of experiencing, of learning, of practicing, and maturing. Those are all the positive points. There is also failing, recovering, adjusting, enduring, and overcoming. These are all part of that Christian life, which he says here is “growing in the grace and knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ.”

We experience something, we learn something. We begin to practice what is right, but oftentimes when we experience something we do not have the proper reaction and so we fail the trial, and so we have to recover from that; we have to adjust our way; we have to endure awhile of chastening perhaps, but we overcome that and we begin maturing. Now I have just used all those words I had said that Christian life is: experiencing, learning, practicing, maturing, failing, recovering, adjusting, enduring, and overcoming. That is all part and parcel of the abundant life that God has called us to.

The reason why it is like this is that we, as Paul says in I Corinthians 13:12, we see in a mirror dimly. We do not know it all. We certainly do not know it all when we are first converted, so it takes this process of doing all these things of learning and growing in the grace and knowledge of Jesus Christ, to put us to the point where we are ready for that real eternal abundant life that God will give us in the resurrection.

So we are fumbling our way through life, it seems, but through it all we are coming to a more precise understanding of how God wants us to live. Now as humans lead by human nature and all the desires that human nature has, we want to gratify the self. We

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are naturally oriented to material things, but as Christians our perspective has to change. Let us go to Colossians 3. This helps to describe how this perspective has to change.

Colossians 3:2-3 Set your mind on things above, not on things on the earth.
For you died, . . .

Let that sink in. You died! You died to that life that you lived before in the flesh, as Peter said. That life is over, it is done. It is buried in the waters of baptism. So, that was the past, you have come in, you have agreed to live a certain way, and the old way was, as it says here, “we set our minds on things of the earth.” That is the past. Now that we have been raised up from the waters of baptism, and given the mind of Christ through the Holy Spirit, our perspective always has to be, “set your minds on things above.”

Colossians 3:2-3 and your life is hidden with Christ in God.

One way to put this is: Now that you have come to this new abundant life that Jesus Christ has made possible for you, you are totally enveloped in it. It is your “everything.” So you might as well make the most of it. You might as well do as Peter said and “grow in the grace and knowledge,” because it is your life. God has made it your life and you have agreed to it, by covenant.

So, upon conversion life, and our perception of abundant life, alters drastically. All of our old goals—put them in the trash. Remember what Paul said—all of that became dung for him, for all that he could enjoy with God and Christ. And perhaps it is this fact that we have to set our minds on things above, rather than the things of this earth (changing our perspective, I mean.) Perhaps this is why we struggle so much in our trials, because we have not made the adjustment completely, and I do not think any of us have, not completely. We try to set our minds on things above, but we are so bound to this earth that our minds keep falling down, out of the “above” to what is “beneath,” and we need to always re-adjust back to what is “heavenly” rather than what is “earthly.”

What it tells me, when we have trouble in our trials—and we all do—is that we have not made this new perspective our operating vision—our operating goal. We say we have, we try, but because we are human we are still pulling back and forth with human nature, and we do not do it completely. God gives us plenty of time to try to make the change, to transform our lives.

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It takes a long time. Many of us have been in the church 30, 40, or 50 years. God has great patience with us. He gives us the vision early and He gives us usually a fairly long time to make it our own, but it takes a lot of failing, learning, growing, and overcoming in order to do that. None of us have reached the point of counting it all joy when we fall into various trials. James might have been there. He was the one that said that in James 1:2. But, it may take our entire lifetimes to transform our perspective on life to the way God looks at it. But he looks at our lives right now as a training ground for growth and maturity and preparation for His Kingdom. So He is very patient. He is willing to see the experiment through to the end.

But what about all the promises in the Bible about *physical* blessings? We cannot just ignore them; they are in God's Word. I mentioned the prosperity gospel awhile back. Using certain verses televangelists can come up with the prosperity gospel. Of course that means that they ignore a whole lot of other scriptures. But what they have done in preaching this prosperity gospel, which is if you give your life to Jesus and follow certain biblical formulas, God is obligated by promise to fulfill the promises that He has made in His Word. So in the end if you look at it from an objective viewpoint, God becomes a little more than a genie in a bottle. If you say the right words, if you rub here, if you do that, then He is obligated to come out and grant you your three wishes.

What it is, then, is sheer compulsion. That is, you are telling God what He must do if you believe this prosperity gospel. Do you know that this is the thing that God condemns Israel for? In Psalms 78, He says all through the wilderness, they tested Him. It just pushed Him to the brink and finally He said, "This whole generation is gone." Yet to these preachers, and there are a lot of them out there, you can just flip through the channels on Sunday morning, and that is what they preach. The prosperity gospel, that to them is the abundant life! And hundreds of thousands of people agree with them, people who listen in every week and write them large checks.

Now obviously the Bible is full of promises. Let us go to a couple here.

Exodus 15:26 If you diligently heed the voice of the Lord your God and do what is right in His sight, give ear to His commandments and keep all His statutes, I will put none of the diseases on you which I have brought on the Egyptians. For I am the Lord who heals you.

This is a big promise. We claim this promise frequently, do we not?

Psalms 37:4 Delight yourself also in the Lord, and He shall give you the

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desires of your heart.

We will let Jesus get into the act here.

John 14:13-14 And whatsoever you ask in My name, that will I do, [wow, that sounds pretty good] that the Father may be glorified in the Son. If you ask anything in My name, I will do it.

Wow, sounds great! That is what these prosperity guys say, “just you ask in Jesus’ name and He will give it to you. Just believe.” Now, that these are promises, and true promises, cannot be denied. God does not say anything that He will not back up. So He has to fulfill them, right? Well, not so fast. Even though the televangelists’ infer this from Scripture, in the end it is very simplistic to think this way, it is a very simplistic conclusion. Very few of God’s promises are absolute in nature. In other words, they are *conditional* promises. We saw that one in Exodus 15, where it said, if you do this and this and this, then I will not put the diseases I put on Egypt on you. But He made very strict, very clear conditions so that we would have to be very upright and obedient to be able to actually claim the promise.

These promises are governed not only by our responses to God: be obedient, and we fulfill certain requirements, but it is also subject to the perfect judgment of God. This is a very important point. Not only do we have to do certain things, it has to pass the bar of God’s judgment. Let us go to James 1:17 and just notice something here. James writes:

James 1:17 Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, [let us just say every good promise and every good blessing is from above] and comes down from the Father of lights, with whom is no variation or shadow of turning.

God gives only good and perfect gifts. That is very true. He will never give one of His children a blessing that would ultimately derail that person from God’s purpose for him, or that would be too much for him to handle. Remember I Corinthians 10:13 says that He will not give us any trial, or anything that we cannot handle. It works similarly among us. A human parent would not send a child to vocational school if he wanted him to be a doctor, even though maybe a full scholarship to the vocational school would be a good thing. See there is a goal there; you do not go off on a spur that is not going to take you to your goal. Adults know this.

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Another example would be that a parent would not entrust his child with thousands of dollars in the local Toys “R” Us, despite the fact that the kid would consider that gift to be truly good and generous. The parent would know that giving the kid that money is really not good for him. Now if parents have enough wisdom to give goal-oriented or maturity-dependent gifts to their children, how much does God?

Romans 11:33 Oh the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are His judgments, and His ways past finding out!

So if God is that much more wise and understanding than we are, then He knows when to give blessings and gifts at the right time and the right place. Let us go back to Genesis 12 and see an example of this. This is the example of Abraham and Sarah.

Genesis 12:2 I will make of you a great nation; I will bless you and make your name great; and you shall be a blessing:

Genesis 12:4 So Abram departed as the Lord had spoken to him, and Lot went with him. And Abram was seventy-five years old when he departed from Haran.

Keep that in mind he was 75 when God made him this promise to be a great nation. And being a great nation means that he would have to have children to carry on so that his family would become a great nation. Yet if you read through there, he does not have a child at 76, or 78, or even 80. When we go to chapter 14, we find him leading his 316-man army and they go and rescue Lot. Now look at Genesis 15. This is after they rescue Lot. God says in verse 1 that He is “your exceedingly great reward.”

Genesis 15:2-3 But Abram said, Lord God, what will You give me, seeing I go childless, and the heir of my house is Eliezer of Damascus? Then Abram said, Look, You have given me no offspring; indeed one born in my house is my heir!

So, this is several years later, he is 80 now and he still does not have an heir. Five years have gone by.

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Genesis 15:4-6 And behold, the word of the Lord came to him, saying, This one shall not be your heir [meaning Eliezer] but one who will come from your own body shall be your heir. Then He brought him outside and said, “Look now toward heaven, and count the stars if you are able to number them.” And He said to him, So shall your descendants be. And he believed in the Lord; and He accounted it to him for righteousness.

So Abraham at 80 knows that he is going to have an heir, yet Sarah does not become pregnant. Later, after Hagar bears Ishmael in Genesis 16, in verse 16 you will find that Abraham is 86 years old by now. 11 years have gone by since he was 75 and still no heir. He wonders there, “Is this the promised seed?” But when the boy is 13—another 13 years have gone by—Abraham is now 99 years old!

Genesis 17:19 Then God said: No, Sarah your wife shall bear you a son, and you shall call his name Isaac; I will establish My covenant with him for an everlasting covenant, and with his descendants after him.

Genesis 21:1-2 And the Lord visited Sarah as He had said, and the Lord did for Sarah as He had spoken. For Sarah conceived, and bore Abraham a son in his old age, at the set time of which God had spoken to him.

Genesis 21:5 Now Abraham was one hundred years old when his son Isaac was born to him.

God gave the promise back when Abram was 75 years old, and it took 25 years for that promise to be fulfilled! Evidently a great deal had to happen in the lives of Abraham and Sarah, predominantly in terms of spiritual maturity, before God felt that the right time had come to give them their promised baby boy. So 25 years lapsed before God fulfilled His promise. Notice there in verse 2, God performed the miracle to allow Sarah to conceive “at the set time.” God had appointed a time for this. Abraham, Sarah, Hagar, and Ishmael, and all the others that were involved, did not know what the set time was. They had to be patient and wait, but God fulfilled the promise right on His time. Ecclesiastes 3:11 basically says that God times everything perfectly. :

Ecclesiastes 3:11 He has made everything beautiful in its time. Also he has put eternity in their hearts, except that no one can find out the work that God

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does from the beginning to end.

II Corinthians 4:15 says, and this should give us some hope:

II Corinthians 4:15 For all things are for your sakes, that grace having spread through the many, may cause thanksgiving to abound to the glory of God.

So even though we may have to wait a long time for a promised blessing, it is done for our sakes. All the trials we go through in the meantime are for our sake, that grace may cause you to thank God for all the things He has done and give glory to Him.

So knowing these things, we have to ask ourselves, despite our humble or maybe modest circumstances that we live in, are we living abundant lives? That is the question. So despite our lack of toys, a mansion on the lake, Rolls Royce in the driveway, all the nice golf clubs, or whatever it is you might desire, are our lives better than we expected them to be many years ago? Or, on the other hand, do we feel that life has passed us by, that we have not done the things that we would have liked to have done by this time in our lives? If so, could it be that we need to change our perspective?

There is a story about J. Paul Getty, who at the time was probably the richest man in the world, and he said, "I hate and regret the failure of my marriages. I would gladly give all my millions for just one lasting marital success." He possessed the money to live whatever lifestyle gave him the most satisfaction, but as his life ended, he realized that a good, enduring marriage meant more to him than all of his oil money. He died feeling like a failure at life.

King Solomon lived a similar life of wealth, power, and privilege. The book of Ecclesiastes chronicles his lifelong experimentation with various lifestyles, projects, possessions, hobbies, and creature comforts that he gave himself, and what did he ultimately conclude?

Ecclesiastes 12:1 Remember now your Creator in the days of your youth, before the difficult days come, and the years draw near when you say, "I have no pleasure in them."

Ecclesiastes 12:13 -14 Let us hear the conclusion of the whole matter: Fear

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God, and keep His commandments, for this is man's all. For God will bring every work into judgment, including every secret thing, whether good or evil.

His conclusion at the end of his life was keep the commandments—Fear God and keep the commandments. That is the life that God has made man to live. His conclusion is completely compatible with Jesus' statement about abundant life in John 10:10.

Jesus did not come promising wealth, privilege, prestige, and authority on earth, although He does promise that in the world to come. But He came with the good news from His Father about how to retain eternal life. Like Solomon, His message is very clear and quite simple. In Matthew 19 He is talking the rich young ruler:

Matthew 19:17 So He said to him, Why do you call Me good? No one good but One, that is, God, but if you want to enter into life, keep the commandments.

Paul says in I Corinthians 7:

I Corinthians 7:19 Circumcision is nothing and uncircumcision is nothing, but keeping the commandments of God is what matters.

Three different witnesses to this one truth: Fear God and keep the commandments, if you want to enter into life keep the commandments; and as Paul says, keeping the commandments is what matters.

Now we have to add one more factor here.

John 1:16-17 And of His fullness we have all received, and grace for grace. For the law was given through Moses, but grace and truth came through Jesus Christ.

I want to read this again in the *English Standard Version* which translates it as:

John 1:16-17 And from his fullness we have all received grace upon grace. For the law was given through Moses. Grace and truth came through Jesus Christ.

See the big secret about the abundant life is that it flows from keeping God's commandments in tandem with the grace that is supplied through Jesus Christ. People out there in the world who have not been called can keep the commandments as much as they like, but without the grace that is given through Christ, they are not going to be living the abundant life. They will be blessed, certainly, for keeping those commandments.

But Jesus came to give man, you and me, the means by which we can properly keep God's commandments. You cannot keep God's commandments without the Holy Spirit. You cannot keep the commandments without the indwelling of the Father and the Son, not the right way. You can keep them in the letter, but to really keep them in the spirit and to keep them in the way that God wants us to keep them, we have to have Him helping us. His grace makes commandment-keeping possible and puts it all in the proper perspective.

So are our lives abundant? Are we reaping the rewards of following God's way of life? Have we begun to enjoy the benefits of keeping God's commandments? We truly are blessed in that. Every Sabbath we enjoy the benefits of keeping this day, including physical rest, time with our families, and fellowship with our fellow brethren, and communion with and instruction from God. It may not be exciting, but it is living the way He wants us to live and we should relish it.

Do we have happy, united families and marriages? This means that we are probably keeping the fifth and the seventh commandments pretty well. If people find us trustworthy and honest, we are being rewarded for keeping the eighth and ninth commandments. If we are content in our circumstances it probably comes because we practice the tenth commandment. Most importantly, if we are seeing spiritual growth in ourselves, and if we are producing good spiritual fruit, we are experiencing the results of a strengthening relationship with God, which is all encapsulated in the first four commandments. Such a relationship with our Creator is the key to abundant living. There is no greater, more satisfying accomplishment than that among men. It is to say "I know God and He knows me."