

Eternal Security In The Church

Is There Cause for Concern?

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Ever since the church's founding by Jesus Christ, the church has stood apart from the systems of beliefs in the surrounding society. That was true for the early church as it contended with Judaism and Gnosticism in the first century, as well as for the church in later centuries as it contended with Catholicism and then Protestantism.

Thus, from its beginning, the church of God has had doctrines that set it apart from the majority. Because of this, there has also been continual pressure on the church to conform to the beliefs of those around it.

One of the doctrines of mainline Protestantism that the church of God rejects is the doctrine of eternal security, also known as "Once Saved, Always Saved." While there are differing definitions of that doctrine, it basically teaches that when a person believes in Christ and is born again, they are saved forever at that point. The common explanation is that their salvation cannot be lost because salvation depends on God's power and faithfulness, not human effort.

There is a certain logic to that, and it is absolutely true that salvation depends on God's power and faithfulness. However, that conclusion also studiously avoids clear statements and examples in God's word that show there is more to the story. That doctrine is a classic example of proof-texting, combined with human reasoning, that is shown to be a lie if one is willing to examine and believe the whole counsel of God. It follows a pattern of reaching a conclusion before all the evidence of Scripture is considered.

Now, this sermon is not about disproving the doctrine of eternal security. That has been done, and those who subscribe to the doctrine will not accept contrary evidence anyway. They already have the conclusion they want. As Jesus said, "Their ears are hard of hearing, and their eyes they have closed." Instead, we will approach this subject with a different goal.

Officially, the church of God rejects the idea of ‘Once Saved, Always Saved.’ However, what we will explore today is that it is quite possible to know that teaching is false and yet still live as though we have eternal security.

In several messages, John Ritenbaugh used the phrase, “practical atheism.” It basically describes people who profess that there is a God, but their lives do not reflect what they claim. They say they love Him, but they refuse to do what He says. In practical terms, they live like atheists because their stated belief in God has hardly any effect on how they conduct themselves.

In a similar way, what we know and say may differ from how we live. We know from Scripture that it is possible for the called of God to fall away. Yet despite that knowledge, we may live as though, because we are baptized, and we are not practicing lawlessness, and we are kind to people, God’s grace will usher us into the Kingdom at the end. We may live as though we are sure to make it, even though God’s instruction manual gives numerous caveats and warnings that we are aware of but may not apply to ourselves.

My intent today is not to scare us—unless we need to be scared, in which case, by all means, be afraid. But really, the intent for this exercise is to examine a handful of things God recorded for us, and simply ask the question, “Is there cause for concern?” We heard several times in the lead-up to Passover that self-evaluation should not be limited to one season, and we will put that principle into practice now in the middle of summer.

So, today, during this family meeting to which we have been called, we will review some well-known passages to see if there is cause for concern. We will leave the obscure verses to Jared and his best friend, Cody, and just look at common passages today—verses that should be in our memories and probably are.

In fact, the passages we will go through today are so well known that you can probably finish them from memory as soon as we start reading them. And while it is good to have Scripture memorized, there is also a danger of God’s own Word becoming cliché to us. It may be that we have read or heard some verses so often that they have lost their gravity for us. But we

must not allow our familiarity with God's Word to diminish its living power for us.

We will begin in Ecclesiastes 8:

Ecclesiastes 8:11 Because the sentence against an evil work is not executed speedily, therefore the heart of the sons of men is fully set in them to do evil.

Modern paraphrases of this verse render it in terms of crime, saying that people readily commit crime because they see that it is not punished quickly. That is a true application, although we should understand that it applies more broadly as well.

As a somewhat recent example, between 2014 and 2019, the justice departments in major cities, including Brooklyn, Manhattan, Philadelphia, and Baltimore, decided that they would not prosecute marijuana possession up to a certain limit. They said prosecuting for small amounts was not worth their time or other resources. What is interesting is that neither the state nor federal law changed, only the enforcement. However, since enforcement was dropped, the law might as well have been abolished. People knew they could get away with possessing small amounts, and so their hearts became set to do what was still against the existing law. And because enforcement was dropped, people who may have avoided marijuana before now saw an opening and got involved, believing that they wouldn't get into trouble, at least as far as the law was concerned.

But crime is just one application. Solomon observes a core principle of human nature that goes beyond crime. Left to itself, human nature will do what it thinks it can get away with. When there are no immediate consequences for a wrong action, that action becomes engrained to the point that a person hardly gives it a second thought, even though at one time there may have been a recognition that the action was wrong. The heart becomes set.

Our carnal reasoning concludes from God's mercy in not striking us dead after a sin that He may not be all that serious about what He says, and we've got some leeway. Like drug users, human nature tends to look to

enforcement over what is written. Over time, as this continues to be practiced, standards degrade, whether in a nation, or a group (such as the church), or an individual. We become accustomed to doing things that fall short of God's standards since there don't seem to be any consequences directly linked to the sin.

So, we see things like language that was once entirely unacceptable in the church, and even in society, becoming commonplace. The younger generation has grown up with a different enforcement of values because the older generations have adjusted to what is practiced in the world around them. We likewise see a decline in the standards of dress, both at Sabbath services and in everyday life. We see changes in how the Sabbath and holy days are kept, as people give themselves permission to do their pleasure with God's time.

We know that God has standards of holiness, and yet in practice, we may live as though they are unimportant because we don't see any negative consequences for unholiness. We may live with the thought that God won't prosecute up to a certain limit. Our hearts become set with the standards we see around us rather than the standards that God intends, because we rarely observe swift enforcement by God of His standards.

God's mercy is not the issue. Rather, what should concern us is how our human nature responds to His mercy. Part of the reason God is merciful is to give us time to recognize the need to change, and then to make changes by means of His Spirit. Yet the carnal mind will take that mercy—that instance of grace—and turn it into license to keep doing whatever God has not come down on. God's mercy, combined with evaluating ourselves against what is around us, produces a sense of security that may be entirely false. So, this is what we are thinking about today—whether we have settled when we should be stirring ourselves and striving.

Another part of God's mercy is to give nudges to encourage us to think about our lives and correct our own courses so that He does not have to correct them for us. As Paul told the Corinthians, if we would judge ourselves, we would not be judged by God (I Corinthians 11:31).

However, God's nudging may take a form that we do not expect and may not even accept. God acts to signify that something is amiss in the relationship, yet if our concept of God is shallow, or if we are not in the practice of seeking Him, we may miss His communications. For example, just before Paul talks about judging ourselves, he says that many are weak and sick, and many are dead, because of not discerning the Lord's Body. Paul had to point out the cause of the effects taking place because they weren't making the connection.

In the book of Job, Elihu says, "For God may speak in one way, or in another, yet man does not perceive it" (Job 33:14). Just in that book alone, God is shown "speaking" through a variety of means. He may use a person, like Elihu. He may use dreams at other times. He may use pain and affliction to the point that a person does not even want to eat. Those are just the examples that Elihu points out.

God communicates in various ways, even unexpected ways, but if we are tuned into this world, or just into our own little world, we may miss what He says. On top of this, we don't get to choose the method or the messenger that God uses. Sometimes He uses methods and messengers that offend us, so we must humble ourselves even to accept that something came from God. Where there is pride, there is a greater chance of rejecting that God could be speaking to us through an event or a person that we feel is out of bounds.

That very scenario gave the prophet Habakkuk some angst because the instrument God chose for national correction offended Habakkuk. He saw the Chaldeans as unworthy of being used by God. Maybe he thought that being corrected by the Chaldeans was beneath sinful Judah. It is an interesting glimpse into the heart of Habakkuk at that point because, based on his words, he seemed more concerned about God's method than the fact that conditions were so bad that God judged it necessary to act, which was the real travesty.

Sometimes our concept of God limits our ability to recognize His acts. Yet God gives numerous clear statements and examples of what He will do to get His people to choose differently so He does not have to act more severely. Please turn to Haggai. In Haggai, God is dealing with a remnant of Judah

after its return from Babylon, and He uses some creative ways to communicate that the nation's focus and priorities are out of alignment with Him.

Haggai 1:3-11 Then the word of the LORD came by Haggai the prophet, saying, “Is it time for you yourselves to dwell in your paneled houses, and this temple to lie in ruins?” Now therefore, thus says the LORD of hosts: “Consider your ways! “You have sown much, and bring in little; you eat, but do not have enough; You drink, but you are not filled with drink; you clothe yourselves, but no one is warm; and he who earns wages, earns wages to put into a bag with holes.” Thus says the LORD of hosts: “Consider your ways! Go up to the mountains and bring wood and build the temple, that I may take pleasure in it and be glorified,” says the LORD. “You looked for much, but indeed it came to little; and when you brought it home, I blew it away. Why?” says the LORD of hosts. “Because of My house that is in ruins, while every one of you runs to his own house. Therefore the heavens above you withhold the dew, and the earth withholds its fruit. For I called for a drought on the land and the mountains, on the grain and the new wine and the oil, on whatever the ground brings forth, on men and livestock, and on all the labor of your hands.”

God's communications—His nudges—come in more forms than lightning bolts or the earth opening and swallowing people. Here God called for a drought, a curse, on their productivity because they were focused on their own interests rather than God's. He wanted them to work on His house so true worship could be restored, but the people had other priorities. They were putting off what God considered to be most important. So, He kept their work from prospering.

But this word through Haggai also shows that the people were out of alignment with God enough that He had to send someone to connect the dots for them. They were unable to do that on their own because of their condition. Maybe they recognized that things weren't working out as expected, but because of where their focus truly was, they weren't making the cause-and-effect connection, and God had to send Haggai.

For years, I have told people that when God acts or He wants us to act, we're not going to miss the memo. My thought has been that God has ways of making things clear, and that is true. However, I either need to stop saying that or at least qualify it, because there are biblical examples, such as this one in Haggai, that show that God's people can miss His memo if they are more concerned with their own things than the things of God.

In the book of Amos, God likewise spells out His activity in the nation of Israel. His communications went unheeded. We won't turn to it, but Amos 4: 6-11 records the very disruptive actions God took to get His people to consider their ways. He sent food scarcity, and drought, and flooding, and crop failure, and various plagues, and military losses, and massive destruction in some areas. We can find exact parallels with headlines in the nations of Israel in recent years.

God's nudges increased to national body checks and tackles, and yet, as each devastating contact ran its course and ended, the pressure was off, and any urgency to repent and look to God passed. The nation continued on, unchanged spiritually. There does not appear to have been any recognition that God was behind those things, either then or now.

We should understand that not only can God's people miss that a communication is from Him, but His nudges also do not force people to change. Where there is an unwilling heart, the rebellion picks up again as soon as the pressure is off.

That's what we see with the Pharaoh of the exodus. God sent plagues, and Pharaoh asked for relief. As soon as the pressure was off, what he promised he would do was forgotten. His heart was exactly the same as before the plague. His unwillingness to change in response to God's nudges resulted in the destruction of his firstborn and his kingdom.

Pharaoh's example shows that human nature can simply tune God out when the pressure is off. Eventually, God gives people over to what they choose, even though along the way He faithfully provides occasions for reflection and opportunities to make a different choice—a better choice. He counsels us to choose life, but He requires that we be the one to choose it—and choose it continually—rather than forcing it upon us.

Similarly, the blessings and curses chapters are plain testimonies of what God says He will do. His promises there are both judgments for sin but also increasing wake-up calls that things will continue to get worse if there is not change.

Please start turning to Leviticus 26. Leviticus 26 and Deuteronomy 28 teach that highly disruptive and even catastrophic actions are part of God's consistent and unchanging nature when conditions are right. These chapters are worth reviewing because they show another side of the same God who, as a Man, was frequently moved with compassion and healed people. He was restrained and typically gentle in His interactions. Some people have concluded that the Old and New Testaments show different Gods rather than a God with a perfectly balanced nature that mankind tries to force into his expectation.

Christ's nature is the embodiment of love. Yet how He expresses His love may challenge us at times because our perspective is skewed toward the short term and this life while His perspective encompasses eternity. He knows how everything will play out, and He acts to warn and to guide people, so they have the best chance of making right choices.

Within the curses, God promises things like blindness, and pandemics, and scattering His own people—whom He loves—because it would be unloving for Him to allow His people to continue on a bad path without communicating that there is a problem. He is faithful to give warnings.

The problem is that without a determined focus to understand the events of life and God's part within them, we can miss His actions, His communications, and then attribute His works to Satan, or to men, or to chance. This then compounds the problem in Ecclesiastes 8:11 of the heart becoming set on a destructive course because we don't recognize God's warning or His sentence.

Both chapters of blessings and curses include the promise of scattering, and we are going to stay with that for a moment. Scattering for disobedience is promised in Leviticus 26:33, and it is also found in Deuteronomy 28:64. In addition, through the major and minor prophets, the same God who founded

the church spends a great deal of time talking about scattering. This disruptive action is an aspect of His nature. Rightly understood, it is an act of love toward His people when they turn from Him. It helps to bring them to their senses so they can be drawn back to Him when they realize what they are missing.

This is relevant to us because the church of God is in a scattered condition. The consensus view within the greater church is that the cause was and is anything but God. Satan is blamed, bad ministers are blamed, and happenstance is blamed. In each explanation, the sovereign Head of the church is either absent or indirectly painted as being overruled by some far lesser force. That view of Christ should concern us.

Even so, God has been faithful to communicate with His people. In late 2010, the largest group that formed out of the WCG split in half (give or take). My concern here is not the unflattering details of that division but the fact that it happened in the church of God. Satan was blamed, and the ministry was blamed, but our first inclination is rarely to look either all the way up or deep inside ourselves.

During the Covid pandemic, another of the largest church organizations had a significant number of people break away over masking and other Covid policies. And then recently, the group that broke away also split because of disagreeing over how to define the gospel. Again, the specifics are less important than recognizing that the scattering is continuing.

This is not a complete accounting of the scattering that began in the 1990s, for that would be long and depressing. And lest anyone think I am pointing fingers, CGG has had schisms, too. Nobody has escaped unscathed. A generation and a half have grown up only knowing the church in a divided condition. I Corinthians 12:26 says that when one part of the Body suffers, the whole Body suffers. It may be one group at a time that directly suffers during a schism, but the overall spiritual condition affects all of us.

I believe our contemplation should go beyond judging which side was “right” in each instance and instead acknowledge that there is a definite pattern involving something that God says He will do. So, getting back to our question—should there be cause for concern?

While we are talking about church things, please turn to Revelation 2 so we can look at the letters to the churches. There are two points I want to highlight about these letters. The first continues the discussion on what has happened to the greater church today, and God's activity within those events. That is, the letters contain even more testimony from the Head of the church regarding what He promises to do in response to the spiritual state of His people.

The second point is a statistical one. But don't tune out because there are numbers involved. This is not complicated at all. If you look at the commonalities of the letters, one thing that stands out is that Jesus commands five of the seven to repent. Five out of seven works out to 71%—not quite three quarters. Just hold onto that number for now.

As we know, there are different ways to interpret and apply these letters. The WCG interpreted them as eras of the true church throughout time. What is interesting about that approach is that it did not originate with the WCG. The Seventh Day Adventists also interpreted the letters as eras back in the 1800s. Of course, how they identified and explained each era was different. But it did not originate with the Adventists, either. One researcher traced the concept of eras back to a 13th century Catholic monk. I don't know how the monk divided up the eras, but it must have been quite different from the view today.

As it turns out, each generation identifies the beginnings, endings, and contents of eras according to its own circumstance and recent history. The interpretation makes sense for each generation's time, but then the explanation must be updated as time moves on. This approach also tends to encourage self-dealing, meaning, it is easy to interpret according to what is most favorable for oneself or one's church or one's own time period.

A more spiritually rigorous approach is to study each letter as a timeless communication from Christ, warning of certain attitudes, tendencies, and behaviors that can be found within the church in some form throughout the ages. In other words, if the shoe fits, wear it.

This is where that 71% comes back in. There is a five in seven chance—71%—that we fall within the attitudes, tendencies, and behaviors about which the Head of the church says to repent. Those odds remind us that there is never a time to let down in our calling.

In Ephesus (Revelation 2:1-7), Jesus commends the people for some really positive traits. But His controversy with them is that they have left their first love, their most important love. They have the form but not the substance. Christ does not mention major sins here as He does in other letters, but rather, He indicates the relationship with Him has deteriorated. He is the foremost or primary love they have left.

Now, notice His threat in verse 5. I don't mean a threat like you sometimes hear parents use, where the child has learned there is a chance the parent is lying and won't actually do what he says. There are no idle threats with God. He is faithful to everything He says. If He says He will remove their lampstand from its place unless they repent, we should have the utmost confidence that He will carry through if there is not repentance.

The lampstand is what gives light. It can symbolize the witness that is made before men. But that witness is fueled by Christ's activity in the life of the group or the person. The symbol of a lampstand in the early chapters of Revelation points more to groups, but Matthew 5:14-16 shows there is an individual responsibility to let one's light shine so God is glorified. So, as mentioned, the most rigorous way to look at this is personally.

The critical point is that Christ is the source of the fuel that enables the lamp to burn. But if Christ is being neglected, as this letter shows, there won't be oil for the lampstand, and its light will be so feeble that it is basically useless, or it will go out altogether. The group or person no longer represents Christ as He wants to be represented, and the lamp is removed.

What is interesting about the Ephesus condition is that there can still be rudimentary spiritual activity. There can still be prayer and Bible study and other things that make up the basic form of a true disciple's life, but this can also give a false sense of security.

Hold your place here and turn to Zechariah 7. This is not a verse we turn to frequently, but I am classifying it as a memory verse because it has stuck in my memory. This was written to a nation that had been sent into captivity because of leaving their most important love:

Zechariah 7:4-5 Then the word of the LORD of hosts came to me, saying, “Say to all the people of the land, and to the priests: ‘When you fasted and mourned in the fifth and seventh months during those seventy years, did you really fast for Me—for Me?’

The searing way God asks His question penetrates to the core and lays bare all pretense. The people were doing a good work in terms of fasting, but God’s searching and lingering question exposes that it was essentially an empty gesture because He was not the true focus. The people undoubtedly would have claimed that of course they did it for Him, yet His question rhetorically signifies that He was not really the object of what they did.

Let’s fit ourselves into this scenario. We, too, can pray and study out of habit. Those are good and necessary habits, and yet we could be checking a daily box rather than really drawing closer to God. We can keep the Sabbath and go to the Feast, and yet not honor Him with our observances. We can serve our brethren and show kindness to our neighbors, and yet these things may not truly be for Him—not really for Him. Many good and necessary spiritual works can be performed out of self-interest.

Jesus denounced the Pharisees as hypocrites because much of what they did was calculated for how it would appear to others. He did not criticize them for giving alms, but for acting with the thought of how it enhanced their image or standing instead of serving God and man with pure hearts. Similarly, Paul tells the Philippians that some were preaching out of selfish ambition. They weren’t doing it for Christ—not really for Him.

Back to Revelation 2 and the letter to Ephesus. The critical part in this letter is that Christ is no longer truly prioritized or sought. He is no longer truly top of mind. Maybe what took His place was the world. Maybe it was an offense, or perhaps a pet doctrine, or any number of things that interfere with a disciple following Christ with his whole being. Gradually, the spiritual

vitality dries up and there is separation from God. It does not mean they become atheists, but Jesus removes the lampstand because it no longer gives His light. This is a great letter for evaluating whether there is cause for concern.

Moving on to Smyrna in verse 8. The letter to Smyrna (Revelation 2:8-11) is the shortest letter. While Jesus mentions the need to overcome, as He does in all the letters, He does not tell them to repent, which is noteworthy. He has no controversy with them. This does not mean they are sinless, but it indicates that when there is sin, they repent on their own and correct their own course with God's help, so Jesus does not have to judge them.

Even though it is written to what could be the most mature Christians, this letter is also the one that is probably read the least because it makes us uncomfortable. We don't like putting ourselves into the circumstances described here. The downside of the Smyrna approach is that because they are responding to their calling so faithfully, they offend the world and they attract Satan's attention. This leads to persecution, oppression, and tribulation. They are the ones walking in the footsteps of their Savior so closely that they experience the persecution and some of the other suffering He endured as well.

This is why we tend to hurry past the letter to Smyrna, even though God has nothing negative to say to them. Human nature wants to be considered good, but not so good that it suffers for it. That's not the kind of life that we typically seek out, even though we committed to that possibility at baptism, after (hopefully) counting the cost. Jesus says that those who lose their lives for His sake will find them, and Smyrna exemplifies that. But human nature would rather compromise and be well thought of than sacrifice like those in Smyrna. So, this letter is helpful in evaluating where our convictions truly lie.

We will skip ahead to the letter to Philadelphia (Revelation 3:7-13). If we are willing, this letter can serve as an inkblot test. What I mean is that this is the letter everybody wants to describe them, so there is a tendency to cherry pick evidence to make it apply.

I mentioned “self-dealing” before, which is stacking the deck to ensure we get the best cards. That’s what we need to be aware of in concluding that this letter describes us regardless of whether the details actually fit.

Nobody really wants to be found in the letter to Smyrna. Smyrna is too hardcore and requires too much. But Philadelphia is in the Goldilocks’ zone—it is just right. Not only is nothing really negative said—aside from only having a little strength—but there is also the promise of protection from the hour of trial. That is certainly an attractive thought. And while protection is a blessing for those on whom God bestows it, we should also question our motives if physical protection and security mean more to us than enduring whatever it takes to complete the sanctification process, even if that means going through the hour of trial instead of escaping it.

We will move on to the last letter, the letter to Laodicea (Revelation 3:14-22), which you can probably recite from memory. But we don’t want to forget who it is that speaks this letter, or that He judged it profitable for it to be included in His Word for all time. This is one of those passages for which we may need to reset our ears and eyes and minds because this letter has been covered so often in the last three decades, or more. That in itself is noteworthy—that so many of God’s servants have kept returning to this letter because they have seen an application to our circumstances.

This letter may be the foremost example of people who have been called into a relationship with God who live as though everything is fine when, in fact, they are on very perilous ground. And since our purpose today is to evaluate that very thing, this letter is quite fitting.

The crux of the letter appears in verse 17, where the Laodicean judges himself one way while Christ judges completely opposite. We should understand that the Laodicean most likely does not say the quiet part in verse 17 out loud. Most people have enough sense not to make such a presumptuous claim. Instead, those words summarize his consistent choices.

Regardless of what he professes, it is his decisions—his actions—that say to God that he doesn't need anything more, spiritually. His heart has reasoned that everything is good as it is, and that he has God's favor. His choices then reflect that self-assessment.

If he were convicted that there was a spiritual need, he would be motivated to address it, and his life would look different. But it is the content of his life—not what he says—that broadcasts to God what is important to him.

We see this even on a human level. We observe what people do and we get a picture of what is meaningful to them and what motivates them. If we see our next-door neighbor washing and waxing his sport car, and shining the chrome every other day, we have a pretty good idea of what is important to him. The obvious devotion he gives to the car is evidence of what is in his heart.

In the same way, God, who sees everything, evaluates priorities and motivations by what He sees as we arrange our lives. To use the Pharisees as an example again, they honored God with their lips, but He knew that their hearts were far from Him because of what their lives consisted of. He judged what they did, not what they claimed.

The Laodicean's belief that everything is fine in his relationship with God encourages the lukewarmness that Christ mentions. It is an indifference to the things of God, again, as seen by how he lives. The Laodicean misjudges his spirituality, so there is little urgency to really seek God. If he really believed something needed to change, he would use his time, energy, and focus differently than he does. He would reprioritize his life so God would become the most important factor in deed and not just in word.

Still in verse 17, it is easy to read the "rich and increased with goods" phrase and think that this only applies to the wealthy. And it is true that the mention of "goods" gives this phrase a decidedly materialistic texture. It is also true that many verses warn of the spiritual danger of physical prosperity. But we, on the other hand, may be looking at our budget and at the rising prices of

everything, and are definitely not feeling “in need of nothing.” And because we don’t have riches or goods like others, we may feel like this letter couldn’t describe us.

Yet we should be careful about letting ourselves off the hook too easily, because there is more than one kind of riches. If you look back to Revelation 2:9, Jesus says He is aware of their physical poverty, yet He also says they are rich. They have spiritual riches, even though they are not prosperous physically.

However, there can also be a feeling of spiritual wealth that is deceptive. In I Corinthians 4:8, Paul tells the congregation there, “You are rich!” He uses some sarcasm to reflect back to them what they were broadcasting. Again, they probably never said those exact words. But when we grasp the whole letter, Paul is referring to the pride that had developed because of the gifts that God had given, such as the ability to speak in other languages. That gifting gave them a feeling of spiritual wealth and divine favor. Yet they weren’t using their gifts for Christ—not really for Him. They were using God’s gifts for their own glory.

In the same verse, Paul says they were already reigning as kings, again using some sarcasm to puncture their egos. They felt like they had arrived. Predictably, the result was that there was no introspection, no self-evaluation, only conflict, sickness, and death. Like those in Laodicea, their riches blinded them to their spiritual need.

They may have known the right things to say—even in other languages—but their conduct revealed reasoning and priorities that perhaps they didn’t even realize they had. If they had seen their spiritual poverty and had been convicted that they absolutely needed what only God could give, their lives would have reflected that without a word being spoken. Instead, Paul spends chapter after chapter pointing out to these presumptively rich kings, who were squabbling among themselves, just how far out of alignment they were with God. Paul had to point it out because the people were unaware—they were blind.

In a similar way, we each have riches that are not reflected in our bank accounts, garages, or living rooms. Some are true spiritual riches, such as

God's many gifts, beginning with His calling. But there are also feelings of being rich that turn into a sense of self-satisfaction and complacency like this letter describes.

Such feelings of wealth could include things like spiritual understanding. That is a gift from God—true riches. Yet if we slack off in our Bible study because we've read it all before and it just isn't exciting, our study habits—our actions—declare to God that we are in need of nothing. We don't need the words of life or the One speaking them.

Other riches could include things like our church organization. We're in the true church, or the best church (aside from Smyrna), and as long as things are stable, we've got our ticket to the Kingdom. (I'm using some of Paul's sarcasm.) Similarly, we may derive a sense of security from our minister, or our time and experience in the church, or maybe our position in the church (if we have one). Anything that gives us a sense of security apart from God Himself, even if it is given by God Himself, can blunt our recognition of our need if it is what we lean on for assurance that things are fine. And when that happens, we start living as though additional seeking or sacrifice is not necessary because we are already secure.

In Revelation 3:20, Jesus says He is standing at the door and knocking. There is a question regarding whether His people will hear His voice and open the door to Him. This seems to describe a Stranger. He seems to be on the outside of their lives, not Someone whom they continually seek and welcome in. Again, they do not perceive their need. Their lives seem good as they are. And because they are self-satisfied and do not pursue Him, Jesus makes this threat-promise of spewing them out of His mouth like something revolting to Him. He offers them everything, and they say with their life choices, "Thanks, but I'm fine."

As we see, this condition can overtake us regardless of our financial status. And one final thought for consideration here: Just because we mentally apply this letter to another group or person does not mean it cannot also apply to us.

Now, we will move on to another point of evaluation. Please turn to II Corinthians 5:

II Corinthians 5:20 Now then, we are ambassadors for Christ, as though God were pleading through us: we implore you on Christ's behalf, be reconciled to God.

The New King James uses the word "pleading," and other versions use the word "begging." While the word "begging" could seem to put God in an undignified light, it helps to convey the depth of feeling Paul knew God has regarding the state of this relationship. It speaks to God's fervent desire for us to be reconciled, meaning to have peace with Him.

Romans 5:10 tells us that we were reconciled to God through the death of His Son. That happened in the past when we were justified. However, here the same author says to people who had already been brought into alignment with God that God is pleading with them to be reconciled to Him in the present. That sounds unnecessary, or even contradictory, unless we understand that the crucifixion was not the end of God's purpose.

The way to God has been opened to us through that initial reconciliation, but what we do with this priceless opportunity determines whether we remain reconciled to God. The Corinthians were really struggling in this regard, which is why Paul is so urgent in his exhortations. Among other things, it shows that Paul did not believe they were eternally secure. His epistles would have been entirely different if he thought it were impossible for God's people to lose out on eternal life in His Kingdom.

We will consider two broad applications of not being reconciled to God. The first is that if God has something against us, then we are not reconciled with Him. Protestantism basically says that's impossible because Christ's blood covers everything. But Protestantism is selective in what it reads. In three of the seven letters in Revelation, Jesus says He has something, or even a few things, against His people in those churches. For the math people, that works out to about 43%. If we carry that through, that's a decent chance He could have something against us. And if He has something against us, we are unreconciled.

In this context, Paul isn't talking about occasional, unintentional sin, but rather our overall spiritual state or trajectory. If we were tempted last month, and in a moment of weakness we gave in to our lust, and we had a helping of

squirrel, that's probably not what is in view in Paul's urging us to be reconciled to God. I John 2:1 says that we must not sin, but if there is sin, we have an Advocate, meaning we can confess and repent and be restored.

Similarly, there is a difference between telling a lie and living a lie. With true repentance, which means changing, there is reconciliation. But if one is living a lie, or living in any other sin, then God has something against us and we are not reconciled. That's Paul's concern.

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus says that if we know that someone has something against us, we need to go be reconciled before we bring a gift to God. Even more so, if we know that God has something against us, our top priority must be getting that resolved so there is peace between God and us once again.

In one sense, that is obvious. If we are aware that God has something against us, we know what we have to do. Where it is more difficult is that in several of the examples we have seen today, God's people seem to be unaware of God's controversy with them. In those examples, they either didn't recognize or wouldn't heed the indicators He gave that something was amiss. And without an awareness of the need to be reconciled, no steps will be taken.

This gets back to our question for today: Is there cause for concern? And to bring it back to Ecclesiastes 8 where we started, the fact that God has delayed a sentence, or that it appears that we are getting away with something, are not good indicators that we are reconciled to God. Psalm 50:21 describes a circumstance where God's people took His silence to mean that He was of the same mind as them. So, the lack of course corrections does not mean everything is fine. The only sure way to know is to continually seek Him.

The second application of not being reconciled to God is the other direction, meaning, we have something against God. This can happen when our senses of justice or fairness are offended. Maybe we feel God has let us down, or that He isn't acting in the way or the time we feel He should act. Being unreconciled can come from feelings that God is unloving, that He doesn't care about us, or that we cannot trust Him. Such feelings can arise when we feel dissatisfied or discontent with our lot in life, and we blame God either

for putting us in a circumstance we don't like, or for failing to deliver us. Of course, many of those sentiments should raise a red flag as being demonic. Even if Satan is not the source of them, he will happily fuel them and use them to further separate us from God.

If there is part of us that has a controversy with the perfect Creator, who has already given His life for us, God has dedicated a significant portion of His book to this very matter. It is the book of Job. Job is a man whom God testifies is blameless, upright, fears God, and shuns evil. God caused testing and trial the likes of which few have ever experienced.

God also recorded Job's responses to the trial. Part of what came to light was that, under pressure, Job's fear of God was not as complete as it could have been until God Himself answered Job from the midst of a mighty tempest.

So, if we find that we have a controversy with the Almighty, He has anticipated us and has already given us His response. It is in Job 38-41. Those four chapters have our name on them. When Job truly saw himself in relation to his sovereign Creator, he repented and was able to reconcile with God.

However, because we have a heart that hides even from itself, we may not acknowledge or perhaps even recognize that we are holding something against our Creator and Savior. When that question is posed in the light of day, not many will admit to having a bone to pick with God because we typically recognize the narcissism and presumption in that. We may need to peer into the corners of our lives to see if we are holding God at arm's length.

Something to look for is avoiding prayer. Logically, this does not make any sense because we have been granted access to the supreme Power in the universe. He actually has everything in His hands. If anyone can solve our problems, He can. And yet we hold this Being at arm's length, and resist drawing near to Him. Maybe we believe we can take better care of ourselves than He can. Maybe we think we are better off handling things on our own, especially if we are in a hurry. Maybe we are afraid He might require more than we are willing to sacrifice. Maybe He hasn't given us what we have

prayed for, so we think, “What’s the use?” And so, we avoid Him, and stumble along, fearful, unsubmitted, rejecting the peace that is available if we would seek reconciliation with Him.

Another part of the carnal nature we battle is the gambler. When it comes to spiritual preparation, it gambles that it has more time.

Please turn with me to Matthew 25. In Matthew 25:1-13 is the well-known parable of the virgins. Again, we are very familiar with it, but it, too, serves as an excellent point of contemplation for us.

Verses 3-4 show that the critical factor is the presence of absence of oil. The wise virgins have a reserve of oil that the foolish virgins do not. When the cry goes out, it is too late to get oil. And we understand that the prophetic context of this is Christ’s return, indicating that there will be a point when the time to prepare is over, and we are either welcomed into the wedding or we are left outside.

As a final nod to the numerically minded, five and five put the odds at 50%. Jesus could have used any ratio He wanted, yet He split the odds down the middle. There is a 50-50 chance here. Just another reason not to fall into complacency.

The most common interpretation of this parable holds that the oil here is a symbol of the Holy Spirit. Following through on that, the conclusion is that we need to make sure we have a supply of God’s Spirit to endure the dark times ahead. And that is a solid lesson. That’s a great take-home message. The question, though, is how exactly one does that, meaning, how does one continually acquire and store God’s Spirit?

This is one of those instances where the fact that a symbol represents something in one verse or one application does not make it a universal symbol. If we were to go through all the uses of oil in Scripture, we would find that oil easily symbolizes God’s Spirit in some places. In other places, though, making that connection requires a lot of squinting and strenuous mental stretching. And in still other places, it does not work at all.

It turns out that there is more nuance to what oil represents than just the formula that oil equals God's Spirit. The Holy Spirit is only a portion of what oil can represent in the Bible.

So, if we broaden the interpretation of the oil to incorporate its other uses in Scripture, a slightly different picture emerges, one that makes it easier to grasp what we need to do to be prepared so we are not shut out.

I will leave it to you to search out all the ways that oil is used in the Bible, and I will just give a summary of sorts. In Scripture, because of the way people used it anciently, oil stands for wealth, abundance, health, and energy. It was a vital ingredient for a good life. It was a highly prized food, in addition to being used as fuel in lamps.

Because of its many uses and value, oil was like liquid gold, and sometimes even functioned as currency. It is only fitting, then, that the Hebrew word translated as "oil" has the figurative meaning of "richness."

Thus, oil symbolizes fruitfulness, abundance, vitality, and richness. For our purposes, we will use the umbrella term of "abundance," with the understanding that it comes from God Himself. We can see that God's Spirit is an aspect of spiritual abundance, but He gives abundance in other ways as well. Yet the larger point is that He is the source of the richness. Consequently, the oil, the spiritual abundance, comes through the relationship.

Remember from the letter to Ephesus that the defunct lampstand represents a relationship that has degraded. There is nothing fueling the lamp because the Ephesians have left their most important love, Who is the source of the oil that would have kept the lamp burning.

Plugging this back into the parable, the foolish ones are basically strangers to the Bridegroom, which is why He tells them in verse 12, "I do not know you." He does not know the ones without the oil—that is the key here. They know who He is to a degree. They at least call Him "Lord." But they have not demonstrated to Him that they are intent on joining Him at the wedding. If they sought Him all along, they would have built up that supply of

spiritual energy and spiritual health, through seeing Him respond to their petitions and coming to know what He is like through inviting Him into their lives each day. Instead, when they hear the cry that goes out, they start scrambling, but it is too late.

On the other hand, the wise ones have accumulated spiritual richness, fruitfulness, and abundance through their consistent walk with God. They have sought Him and seen Him respond. They have experienced life with the Creator, which is richness itself. They have come to know Him. Their oil has accrued over their lives because of their dedicated relationship with the Giver of these things. Collecting the oil cannot be rushed—it takes a lifetime. The foolish ones have lamps that burn for a time, but they aren't interested in the One who could supply them with spiritual abundance or cause them to be fruitful. That's why they are foolish. They prioritize things that won't matter at all when the cry goes out. They neglect their salvation.

The foolish ones aren't seeking first the Kingdom of God and His righteousness. They know the verse, but their lives do not reflect it. They aren't doing everything possible to ensure that they will be there. Maybe they judge their level of preparation against some of those near them—looking around instead of looking up. Whatever the reason, they must feel secure that what they have is sufficient or else they would do something different.

Not only is the timing of the arrival of the Bridegroom unknown, but the timing of when we each go to sleep is also unknown. In the resurrection, the time for getting oil has passed. Daniel prophesies that some will awake to everlasting life and others to shame and everlasting contempt (Daniel 12:2). Perhaps we could insert the ending from another parable about foolishness. Jesus directly calls a man a fool, and He tells him, "This night your soul will be required of you." (Luke 12:20). We don't know when our night might be.

What all this indicates is that if we are not already prioritizing God, and not consistently seeking the spiritual fuel and food and health and energy that builds up from living life with Him—that precious oil—then I submit to you that we should be concerned.

Now, I know this has not been easy material. Today we have looked at a narrow subset of verses, and we have focused on what could be amiss far more than what we have going for us. My intent was not to make anyone despondent, but rather motivated or challenged, if need be. So, let's zoom way out and look at our circumstances in another light.

In the world of sports, sometimes you will hear a broadcaster or commentator use a phrase regarding a good team. They will say, "This game is theirs to lose." If you're not familiar with it, that phrase doesn't mean the team is about to lose. It means that the team has so many advantages that it's almost certain they will win *unless* they make major blunders.

In a similar way, we can say that salvation is ours to lose. It is in our grasp, and we have every advantage because of who our Captain is and what He has already done and is willing to do for us. There is no good reason for us to lose it, though it is possible.

In our case, we are squaring off against the world and our old nature. The opposing captain is our former captor, Satan. He has already been defeated, yet we can still force a catastrophic error and lose out if we neglect the fundamentals.

We may skip daily practice because of wrong priorities. We may hide from the Captain because we'd rather not hear what He has to say. We may duck the team meetings because we feel fine without them. Maybe our natural athleticism or our previous wins make us overly confident in our abilities—abilities that will decline if they are not exercised.

Maybe we've been given an attractive offer from the other team for a better position or more seniority. Although, that really is stupid because we already know which side will win. Jesus Christ will be victorious. A better position on the losing side is worthless. Yet the offer may distract us, so our head and heart are not fully in this most important of contests.

None of this has to happen. But if it does, it is because we have sabotaged ourselves, not because our Captain failed us in any way. He has the plan, the program, that assures our victory. He can and will supply every need. We

just have to keep following Him with everything we've got, putting in the time and the sweat and even blood if that is required.

The victory is ours to lose. The real question is how badly we want it, because that will determine what we are willing to sacrifice for it.