

Make Sure Of Your Focus (1998)

Concentrate on What's Important

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I am going to begin this sermon in Ezekiel 33, so I would like you to turn there. Those of you who have been in the church for quite a long period of time have heard Herbert Armstrong refer to these verses (forever, it seems) because he felt that he had been appointed by God to be a watchman for Israel. I have no reason to disbelieve that, but the watchman responsibility continues on.

Ezekiel 33:1-6 Again the word of the Lord came to me, saying, "Son of man, speak to the children of your people, and say to them: 'When I bring the sword upon a land, and the people of the land take a man from their territory and make him their watchman, when he sees the sword coming upon the land, if he blows the trumpet and warns the people, then whoever hears the sound of the trumpet and does not take warning, if the sword comes and takes him away, his blood shall be on his own head. He heard the sound of the trumpet, but did not take warning; his blood shall be upon himself. But he who takes warning will save his life. But if the watchman sees the sword coming and does not blow the trumpet, and the people are not warned, and the sword comes and takes any person from among them, he is taken away in his iniquity; but his blood I will require at the watchman's hand.'

Now if you wanted to chase this out as a study into the word "watchman" and follow it through the Bible, especially in the Old Testament, you will find that every minister of God, every prophet, every pastor, everyone appointed to a responsibility to the church of God is a watchman. And that the responsibility is to watch over the safety of the congregation.

In terms of Israel, the watchman was, I think primarily, a physical one, and secondarily, a spiritual one. Whether one was more than the other I do not know, but it seems to me, because Israel was a physical nation under God,

and they were not converted, that their main responsibility was to keep the people apprised of what was going on in the nation outside their borders and, of course, especially it fell upon the prophets to make sure that they took care of their spiritual watching.

So this is no little responsibility. For those of us who are under the New Covenant the watchman responsibility just continues right on, but it is primarily a spiritual responsibility, and warning you of physical danger certainly comes within the parameters of that responsibility, but it is secondary to the spiritual responsibility.

I think that you will agree that the church is under attack, and in the spiritual sense, the sword has come upon it and we have been scattered all over the place. But the watchman responsibility continues on. So we have gathered together in much smaller groups than we have before, but the watchman responsibility primarily falls upon me, and upon John Reid, and Richard. Our responsibility is to continue to be watchmen for you in a spiritual sense and try to apprise you of things that might be of danger to you spiritually because we do not want your blood on our head.

The overall subject of this sermon seemed a little bit unusual to me as I was preparing for it because of the occasion. Here it is the Feast of Trumpets, but the more I prepared it, the more I felt that it is really of prime importance, because if we are not headed in the right direction, we are going to end up someplace else. It is my responsibility to warn us, admonish us, help us to see whether or not we are headed in the right direction so that we are not headed in the wrong direction.

I want to lessen the possibility that we might be headed in the wrong direction as much as I possibly can. I want you to turn to Isaiah 62 for one more scripture in regard to being a watchman, and I chose this one because it ought to be of more interest to you.

Isaiah 62:6 I have set watchmen on your walls, O Jerusalem [He may as well be saying to the *church*, I have set watchmen upon your walls. You can understand that a wall is a structure that is intended to protect those who are inside]; they shall never hold their peace day or night.

That ought to let you understand how weighty this responsibility is. A watchman is never to hold his peace. Always a minister is to be speaking out in a warning sense to keep us apprised of things that are going on spiritually and physically of potential dangers that might exist.

Isaiah 62:6-7 . . . You who make mention of the Lord, do not keep silent, and [now here is where it gets interesting for you] give Him no rest. . .

Who is the Him? It is God. Give God no rest. Now how would it be that we could give God no rest? Through prayer. That expands the watchman responsibility out of not merely one of giving admonishments to a congregation to help them by warning of potential danger that may lie in their path, but also that we are to continue that night and day before God and not keeping silent talking to Him about the potential dangers to the church.

Isaiah 62:7 . . . till He establishes and till He makes Jerusalem a praise in the earth.

So our job is not over yet. I will add something else to this because in doing a bit of research on these two verses, I found out that there are two ways that these verses can be interpreted and it shifts responsibility to include not just the ministry but everybody who is in the church. Everybody is a part of the wall. Everybody has a responsibility to be a watchman.

I think that it is right to say that even though you may be involved in this too, still the greater weight comes upon the ministry to be carrying out this responsibility. It is one of our responsibilities before God to you.

I am concerned about this because there are ominous indications coming to our direction from all over the world in the form of news, that a great deal of economic instability exists in many nations, and foremost and most serious are Japan, China, Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand, and Russia, but also on the same bubble are a number of western European and South American economies that are also depressed.

One of the reasons that you are paying so little bit for gasoline right now is because the economy is depressed in Venezuela and they are flooding the American market with cheap oil, undercutting the Arabs, and the Arabs are taking a beating financially because of the Venezuelans, but you and I are getting a short term gift in having the gasoline prices down so low. But that cannot go on forever, and there is going to be change, I am sure of that. Now how long is it going to be before what these countries are going through impacts on the United States of America, especially in Canada secondarily in a dramatic way?

It has already impacted to some degree. This morning I heard on the news that the Japanese stock market hit the lowest point in twelve years and so they are still having trouble over there. I do not know whether you are aware of it but they have over \$300 billion invested in the United States of America. If their economic situation gets to the place where they feel that they need to begin withdrawing some of their investments in the United States to rescue themselves from their trouble, then it is very definitely going to hit us very hard then, and very many of you, then, within the hearing of my voice, are going to lose your jobs, simply because your employer will not be able to afford you any longer.

The dollar at this point is very strong, and maybe we might even say seems to be growing ever stronger. But what that is doing, in a sense, is working against us because the prices of exported American goods are rising in cost against foreign goods and as a result our trade imbalance is becoming ever more greater—\$14 billion last month. It was up almost \$1 billion over the previous month. Now this is impacting American manufacturers. It is beginning to cost American jobs. If our manufacturers cannot sell their goods, they have little alternative but to lay off workers.

When an economy is in trouble, very frequently political instability is produced. And all of these nations that I mentioned to you are Gentile. There is an interesting verse that you have read in somewhat different context, sermon subjects that would probably be better:

Luke 22:25 And He said to them, "The kings of the Gentiles exercise lordship over them, and those who exercise authority over them are called 'benefactors.'

The reason that I mentioned that all of these nations that are in real trouble right now are Gentile is because Gentile nations have a historical habit of supporting dictators with radical measures in mind to rescue them from their dilemmas. Israelites seem less likely to do such a thing. So in situations like we are witnessing occur, the fierce impatience of people elevates considerably, and they very quickly support someone who appears to be able to give them a quick fix.

Very frequently the fix, brethren, have been revolutions and wars. The new leader, the strong man, identifies an enemy and the people become distracted away from their original concerns.

The world is so sharply divided today along philosophical, religious, and racial lines that a major depression or a military conflict could occur very quickly.

I mentioned these two things, and I will mention some more in just a little bit, because it cannot help but have an effect on you. Now maybe you will not lose your job, but you are still going to be concerned about it. The stress level begins to arise. Our attention begins to turn toward being prepared for any eventuality that might occur. So the problem might be economic. The problem might be war. And though the United States and Canada may not be directly involved in the war, we may get involved in it, especially the United States, because we have become the world's one super power. We are the world's policemen, and it has devolved upon us to send our troops out there to fight in a war that we were not originally involved in the first place. This has already happened a couple of times in the last ten years.

In addition to those two things, the Y2K problem is looming just over the horizon and it is going to affect the nation's economy negatively. We cannot dodge the bullet. The only thing that remains is for events to show us how much damage it will create, and we do not know the answer to that until we

are in it and if you are concerned about that at all, it can leave one with a very helpless feeling because we all want to know where we stand before a thing happens in relation to what we fear is going to happen.

In addition to both of those has been added ever more concern about terrorism. This used to be something that we felt fairly safe from. But can we afford to feel safe any longer? We have already had a bomb go off in New York City, so we know it can be done. In fact, it can probably be fairly easily done.

But it does not have to be a bomb. Water supplies can be poisoned with chemicals. Water supplies can be poisoned with disease and a whole city might be decimated by disease. I think the time of us feeling secure because we have been separated by the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans is very rapidly coming to an end and it seems to me that what hangs in the balance right now is a matter of when someone will feel secure to go ahead and do it, or when God will say, Okay, now is the time.

In addition to that we hear of outbreaks of deadly diseases that mysteriously seem to come and go. Something that I was thinking of preparing for the Feast of Tabernacles, I dropped it, but I will save the material that I already have and it may be useful sometime in the future, but wild animal incursions into urban areas. This is something incidentally that is mentioned in the Bible, that God would send wild animals as well.

The news items about those things are quickening. They are coming more frequently, and some of these animals are really interesting. How about lions? I heard a report just this week that up in the state of Washington lions have come into urban areas. At first the animal control people poo-pooed it and said that it was not true. Now they have proof that these reports of "panthers," they called them, are indeed true, invading some urban areas.

Bears are showing up in city areas. I have, with my wife, seen coyotes running around in parking lots inside of cities, not afraid of the human beings at all, not afraid that it is even known that they are there. I could go on with these things. Even snakes are showing up in people's homes where they do not belong, inside of cities.

In addition to this the weather cannot seem to consistently get its act together. Violence and murder now taking place even in junior high schools and there is always the ever-present danger on the streets.

I will tell you I do not have any trouble at all convincing myself that we are getting very close to what we would call "the end."

I Timothy 2:1-2 Therefore I exhort first of all that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and giving of thanks be made for all men, for kings and all who are in authority, that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and reverence.

We are commanded by God to meet the kind of circumstances that I just mentioned to you by going on a prayer offensive. If we would read on there are two reasons for doing this. The one that I just gave, that we might lead a quiet and peaceable life, and that is that the right and proper witness might be made for God.

Right now my focus here is on the quiet and peaceable life. The reason that is my focus is that I do not want us to get distracted by all of the news that is impacting upon our ears almost constantly. It is very easy to get distracted by that and worry about that and the anxiety level gets higher and higher, and we do not need to be worried about it. We do not need to be anxious about it. We need to keep track of what is going on, but we do not want the anxiety level to get so high that it distracts us from what our primary responsibility is, and one of our primary responsibilities is to pray about these things.

There is a great deal of comfort in prayer, a great deal of encouragement in prayer of this sort where you are in a sense throwing this upon Christ, upon our Father. It is Their responsibility to oversee these things. It is only our responsibility to be aware that these things are going on to allow them to motivate us to go in the right direction.

But in the meantime we are to pray that we would be able to lead a quiet and peaceable life. Now why? It almost seems to create a dichotomy. For on the one hand we want the end to come, but with it is going to come the very kind

of distractions that could keep us from the Kingdom, if we allow it. But on the other hand, we are to appeal to God that we are able to lead a quiet and peaceable life.

In James 3 is a brief answer as to why we need a quiet and peaceable life and if we cannot have a quiet and peaceable life, at the very least we can have a quiet and peaceable spirit.

James 3:18 Now the fruit of righteousness is sown in peace by those who make peace.

Without going into a great deal of detail, it means that the best of growth, the fruit of righteousness, would be growth in the image of God, increase of God's Spirit within us, a change toward godliness in our character. The very best of that takes place in an atmosphere of peace.

It is very logical why. If you are involved in a war, where is your attention going to be focused? It is going to be on the war. It is going to be fighting the war. It is going to be defending yourself. It is going to be dealing with anxiety. We need to have peace, inner-tranquility, despite the swirl of events that are going on around us. We cannot stop those events from occurring because we know that God is going to bring them to pass in order that the end come, in order that His will work out, but we can have peace of mind to the extent that we ourselves are able to deal with the things impacting on our lives and continue to grow because we feel safe and secure in the hand of God.

When confronted by threatening situations, it is perfectly natural and not wrong to look for security, to look for a possible way of escape. Whenever we are confronted with something that is threatening us, the desire for peace and safety intensifies. If the anxiety level rises high enough, self-preservation becomes the law of life, and growth is either neglected completely or is at best a secondary consideration.

I said it is not wrong to seek to preserve the self, but how we seek to preserve the self might be wrong. Where is the place of safety? Have we not,

and are we not right at this moment, involved in seeking safety? We are. Do you not desire to protect yourself from the second death? Do you not want your life to be extended everlastingly?

That is not wrong because God gave us an invitation to do that, but at the same time let me caution that if that is your only, or your major reason, you are not in a safe position. The reason is because that is entirely self-seeking and Jesus said he who seeks to save his life will lose it, but he who loses his life for Christ's sake will find it. We have to begin to see that safety is actually a by-product of God's providence that is given to us because of God's will and because of His mercy.

Let us begin to explore something in Revelation 3. That ought to ring a bell because it is part of the message of the church to Philadelphia.

Revelation 3:10 Because you have kept My command to persevere, I also will keep you from the hour of trial which shall come upon the whole world, to test those who dwell on the earth.

That God is speaking of the time of the end is beyond question and I think that we all believe that we are in that period of time. So this is a wonderfully encouraging promise that I know gives us no small measure of hope. But even as it gives us hope, it is also at the same time an intriguing and mystifying statement because how can one say with complete assurance that he is a Philadelphian and the promise applies to him? This is not something that one can presumptuously and self-righteously assume. I am sure that God left the qualification for a Philadelphian reasonably vague in order to provide a prod toward growth because if we had an exact standard against which to measure ourselves, it would probably cause us more problems than it does leaving them vague.

The uncertainty of the statement tends to make the Philadelphian strive for higher priorities because they are zealous and because the standard is not given in exact word-for-word terms, and they are not exactly sure a Philadelphian will respond in the right way. The Laodicean would probably just coast because there is a large measure of self-righteousness in the Laodicean, but the Philadelphian will very likely dig in a little bit harder and nonetheless strive to try to meet whatever God's qualifications might be.

Considering the confusion and scattered condition of the church in relation to the subject material here in Revelation 2 and 3, I think you are going to find this next series of verses very interesting because they pertain to a time in Israel's history very similar to what the church is going through right now. I want you to turn to Zephaniah 2 and we are going to look at the first three verses.

Zephaniah 2:1-2 Gather yourselves together, yes, gather together, O undesirable nation, before the decree is issued, or the day passes like chaff, before the Lord's fierce anger comes upon you, before the day of the Lord's anger comes upon you!

Gather together before the things in verse 2 take place, and I think that we are in that period of time right now covered by these verses. We are in that period of time just before the day of the Lord's anger come upon you. Verse 3 then says,

Zephaniah 2:3 Seek the Lord, all you meek of the earth, who have upheld His justice. Seek righteousness, seek humility. It may be that you will be hidden in the day of the Lord's anger.

The first thing that I want us to notice is that going to a place of safety is not a cut and dried affair but it might appear so to those who do not research this out carefully. It seems in Revelation 3:10 that it is just a blanket promise to everybody who might be in the church and indeed I think that there were many who looked at it in this way. But now that the church has been blown apart and we are seeing ever more clearly that it was blown apart with cause by God and that out of it He wants to accomplish something that is very good for us. And now that we are beginning to see that going to the place of safety is not cut and dried, I think that we had better pay attention to what He says here. "It *may be* that you will be hidden in the day of the Lord's anger."

So going to a place of safety is not a flat-out promise, but rather it is a generality. When we look at God's Hall of Fame, what do we see? We see a mixed bag. Enoch. He was whisked away right out of the danger. Noah, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses, Samuel, and David had a lot of trouble during their lives, but they all died peacefully. But very many of the

prophets, all of the apostles, except John, but including Paul, died violently. And of course we cannot forget God's own Son died a very violent death.

The second thing to notice is that there are clear instructions given in these three verses whose implication is that if we follow them we do increase our chances for protection during the great trial. Now these three verses then also, I think, begin to give us a line on some of what a Philadelphian might be doing. The Philadelphians were faithful in doing things.

Let us look at verse 1. It says "Gather yourselves together, yes, gather together." This translation is misleading without a bit of research. A first glance the translation appears to be telling people to gather to some chosen location and some commentators and some translators follow that line of reasoning. But that is not what God's instruction is here. Both the *Keil and Delitzsch Commentary* and *Barnes' Notes* correct that impression.

I am going to quote first from *Keil and Delitzsch*. It says:

It [meaning the word "gather"] originally means to gather stubble, then generally to gather or collect, that is gather branches of wood; [new thought coming] in the hithphoel [Hithphoel is a Hebrew grammatical form and the word "gather" appears here in that form.] to gather oneself together applied to that spiritual gathering which leads to self-examination and is the first condition of conversion.

Now *Barnes' Notes* further clarifies:

The exact image is from gathering stubble or dry sticks which are picked up one by one with search and care. So must man deal with the dry and withered leaves of a past evil life. The English rendering, however, come to the same meaning. We use "collect oneself" for bringing oneself, all one's thoughts together, and so having full possession of oneself. In order to repent a man must know himself thoroughly and this can only be done by taking act by act, word by word, thought by thought, as far as he can, not in a confused heap or mass as they lie in any man's conscience, but one by one each picked apart and examined and added to the seer unfruitful heap plucking them as it were and gathering them out of

himself so that they may be by the spirit of burning fuel for the fire of God's Spirit kindling repentance, be burned up and not the sinner himself be fuel for the fire with them.

Did you get what *gather* means? The instruction here is to gather your thoughts, examine yourself and repent while there is still time and *maybe* you will be hid in the day of God's anger. I will put it another way. Zephaniah may as well be saying, "Redeem the time for the days are evil." And if we do not use this period of grace that we have been given before the day of God's anger falls we might be blown away like so much chaff, or we might become the fuel for the fire.

It is a very stern warning hoping that God will get our attention to not allow the things that are going on all around to get us so distracted that we do not pay attention to the reason why the church is in the condition that it is in right now, that we do not just excuse ourselves from it failing to realize that we were a part of the problem and taking care that we search our minds to make sure that we are no longer adding to the problem, but that we are getting our lives in order and zealously seeking Him. So the call here is for us to get up off our duff and make sure that we are not adding to the problem, that we are turning our lives around.

So then the third thing is, following repentance, he urges us to righteousness by means of diligently seeking to submit to the Word of God. Because it was sin that got us into trouble and it will be repentance and turning to God with all of our heart in sincere heartfelt, affectionate love, and then evidencing that in our lives by being obedient, righteous.

By adding Zephaniah 2:1-3 to Revelation 3:10, we can begin to see clearly that the place of safety has conditions tied to it, especially in terms of the kind of circumstance that the church has been going through the last ten or twenty years. So we cannot assume it is a free ride simply because we are part of a group. That would be very bad for our spiritual health.

In Jeremiah 7 is a principle covering those who might unconsciously be victims of group-think, and we have all been part of that.

Jeremiah 7:1-2 The word that came to Jeremiah from the Lord, saying, "Stand in the gate of the Lord's house, and proclaim there this word, and say, 'Hear the word of the Lord, all you of Judah who enter in at these gates to worship the Lord!'"

You may be somewhat familiar with this context because we have referred to it quite a bit the last several years, but I want you to notice that even as Jeremiah was sent to the gate of the Lord's house, Jeremiah was God's major prophet through the period of time before Judah went into captivity, and then all the way through the beginning thirty or forty years of their being in captivity. Before they went into captivity the Jews were still worshipping at the Temple. I want you to get that. They were "going to church" is the way that we would put it in modern language. But God was so disgusted with them that it was not long before they went into captivity.

They had a form of godliness but they were denying the power in their own lives. So here the reason God put them there is so that the people coming to church would hear the prophet proclaiming their sins, and that coming to church was not enough.

Jeremiah 7:3-7 Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel: "Amend your ways and your doings [We have to assume, brethren, that they were keeping the Sabbath, at least according to the letter of the law, and yet God wanted a change. The change had to take place in their hearts. It was a heart matter.], and I will cause you [that means I will clear the way for you] to dwell in this place. [We might think of that in terms of the place of safety as well. I will cause you to dwell there in safety, is what it means.] "Do not trust in these lying words, saying, 'The temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord are these.' For if you thoroughly amend your ways and your doings, if you thoroughly execute judgment between a man and his neighbor, if you do not oppress the stranger, the fatherless, and the widow, and do not shed innocent blood in this place, or walk after other gods to your hurt, then I will cause you to dwell in this place, in the land that I gave to your fathers forever and ever.

So we had people who were still going through the motions, but they felt that they were safe as long as services continued at the Temple. But sacred places and sacred symbols mean nothing if the heart is not right with God and that is where the problem lay. And because the heart was not right, even though they were going to services, the other six days of the week it was business as usual. Their piety did not carry into the business world of the other six days of the week.

There is a fairly good reason why those in Old Testament Israel might think this way because God made a covenant with all of Israel at the same time and these people were born right into the covenant. But with the church, our calling, conversion, and entering into the covenant with God is individually done.

Because of the scattering, the Philadelphians are also scattered and the promise to them that they will go to the place of safety is secure. The disturbing factor is that none of us knows for sure whether we are a Philadelphian. So God's promise to them will be carried out. My concern, my duty as a watchman, is to stir us up to try to make sure that we really are indeed Philadelphians seven days a week, twenty-four hours a day. And then that promise will be made to us.

Because of the scattered condition of the church, the Philadelphians are also scattered, and I do not believe that any one organization can rightly qualify as the Philadelphia group. The conclusion on this I believe is that because God works with us as individuals and because He loves us as He does, in reference to escaping to the place of safety, He will do what is best for each person according to His will, and that is why there is such a variety of ways in which even those great men and women of the past have been dealt with—some dying in bed, others dying very violently, some being taken to a place of safety, others not being taken to a place of safety. God's will has to be factored into this and we cannot presume as individuals we know exactly what God intends for us.

So you see the exact standards on this are loose as far as we are concerned and God has left it that way for our good. He hopes it will be a prod to make sure that we get there, to work hard.

God's will is always correct and I know that what I have just said might introduce a measure of fear because we do not want to go through the Tribulation, but again always remember this: God prepares us and He supplies all of our need, and He will have us ready to face what needs to be faced. He will never forsake us, Jesus said there in Hebrews 13:5.

Our responsibility in this is to reciprocate His love to us. Now turn with me to John 21. Jesus is speaking.

John 21:18-22 Most assuredly, I say to you, when you were younger [He is saying this to Peter], you girded yourself and walked where you wished; but when you are old, you will stretch out your hands, and another will gird you and carry you where you do not wish." [That is, where you do not want to go. And where it says "carry" it actually means "lead," will lead you where you do not want to go.] This He spoke, signifying by what death he would glorify God. And when He had spoken this, He said to him, "Follow Me." Then Peter, turning around, saw the disciple whom Jesus loved following, who also had leaned on His breast at the supper, and said, "Lord, who is the one who betrays You?" Peter, seeing him, said to Jesus, "But Lord, what about this man?" Jesus said to him, "If I will that he remain till I come, what is that to you? You follow Me."

Let us set this into its context. Jesus had just asked Peter, Do you love Me? three times. Do you love Me? Are you going to reciprocate My love that I have had for you? Are you going to reciprocate it back to Me? Peter was a combination of puzzled and angered. But he did not seem to be getting what Jesus wanted.

But in spite of that, Jesus gave Peter a very weighty responsibility, "Feed My sheep. Feed My lambs."

It is also good to remember that this is the same man, Peter, who denied Jesus three times. Is he going to be trustworthy? That is a question that is floating out there. Now we have to apply this to us as though God was speaking to us because we have not been unswervingly righteous in our loyalty to Him either. And we have been commissioned too. It is not as great

as Peter's. I mean the weighty responsibility is not as great as his, but every single one of us have been called by God, gifted by God, in order to add to and help build the strength of the church. Are we going to be loyal in following through on that?

And so when He says, Do you love Me, Peter?, that same question is coming to each and every one of us. Do you love Me? Are you willing to lay down your life for Me? Am I the object of your desire? Do you have an affectionate feeling for Me? Are you willing to submit to Me? That and more is involved within that. Now we can all say like Peter did here, Yes I love you. You know I love you. But how can we prove our affection for Him?

Well the answer is given here too: by committing ourselves to a life of service fulfilling His will for us. Now at first glance Peter said, Well, that's all right but what about John? See already his mind was working, comparing himself to his brother, and if I am going to go to a violent death, is John too? Are we equal in this? Is he going to be treated exactly the same way that I am?

We do not know whether Peter's question was made out of solicitude to John, or whether there was a feeling of competition with John. We do not know the answer to that because Jesus refused to answer the question. Jesus only gave Peter a grasp of his responsibility and that was that he would lead a very productive life when he was young, but when he was old he would, like Christ, be led to a violent death, and that he should not be concerned what Christ's will for John was.

Do you see the instruction? That is being said to you and me. These verses emphasize the individuality of our being worked with and used of God. And if we want to please God we will follow Christ's instructions to the best of our ability.

1. Our main business in life is to follow Christ—regardless.
2. Christ reproved curiosity about what the other fellow is going through as being vain, futile. It does not bear on the situation, your situation at all. Whether you go to a place of safety but your brother does not, or your brother does and you do not, God is dealing with

each one of us individually and He will always do what is right for His will and for you and me at exactly the same time.

3. Christ is able to take care of all of His disciples. It does not matter who they are, where they are, what circumstance they are in, He is able to take care of them.

4. We should go forward even to persecution and death without envying the other fellow. We are to see ourselves as servants bought with a price—servant, slave, whatever word you want to use. It means a person without a voice in the matter.

Now again, brethren, I know that this is something that is not exactly pleasant to contemplate, and part of the reason I think is because it is not the same as we were taught in the past, because we were taught to assume that we were the Philadelphia church, because for all intents and purposes we seemed to match the criteria. But the picture has changed and we have to reevaluate and hope that we are mature enough to take up the challenge that has been placed before us.

I think that we are, and we need to buckle down and go forward in confidence and with hope in Christ's promise that He is able to take care of us regardless of what the circumstances might be.

Let us establish something here. Let us turn to I Peter 4. I am not going to read a great deal here. I am not going to do a great deal of explaining because it is very clear.

I Peter 4:12-13 Beloved, do not think it strange concerning the fiery trial which is to try you, as though some strange thing happened to you; but rejoice to the extent that you partake of Christ's sufferings, that when His glory is revealed, you may also be glad with exceeding joy.

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

Acts 14:22 strengthening the souls of the disciples, exhorting them to continue in the faith, and saying, "We must through many tribulations enter the kingdom of God."

That is very clear. That is one side of this picture. We have to accept that reality, that the way is not going to be easy. There is going to be a lot of difficulties. There may even be a measure of persecution.

There is another side of this picture in III John 2, a very brief verse, but it is quite meaningful. This was written by John in regard to Gaius.

III John 2 Beloved, I pray that you may prosper in all things and be in health, just as your soul prospers.

Gaius evidently was doing well, growing, overcoming, changing. He was becoming God-like. So it is a compliment. That has to be looked at as being written to us. God wishes above all things that you may prosper and be in health. There is another side besides tribulation and persecution. Let us go back to Psalm 1:3 that we sing quite frequently.

Psalm 1:3 He shall be like a tree planted by the rivers of water, that brings forth its fruit in its season, whose leaf also shall not wither; and whatever he does shall prosper.

That is pretty clear. It shows God's will in regard to His children.

II Chronicles 20:20 So they rose early in the morning and went out into the Wilderness of Tekoa; and as they went out, Jehoshaphat stood and said, "Hear me, O Judah and you inhabitants of Jerusalem: Believe in the Lord your God, and you shall be established; believe His prophets, and you shall prosper."

I want us to understand that God's focus is not that we suffer; just the opposite in fact. He has revealed Himself so that the greater portion of suffering can be avoided, even while preparation for His Kingdom takes place. God is not one that is seeking our pain, but even Jesus learned obedience by the things which He suffered.

Should we consider ourselves to be above Jesus Christ and not have to go through any suffering? A lot of the suffering may simply be in regard to overcoming, not persecution, not tribulation, but rather simply that God is putting us through the paces, and I want you to see this in a scripture that Darryl used this morning, Hebrews the 12th chapter. We are only going to look at verses 5-8, and I want you to think of this in terms of the entire book. Remember these people, to whom Paul was writing, were going through some sort of trial and that trial appears to have been brought on by neglect of responsibility and, in this case, these people were in danger of failing.

Hebrews 12:5-8 And you have forgotten the exhortation which speaks to you as to sons: My son, do not despise the chastening of the Lord, nor be discouraged when you are rebuked by Him; for whom the Lord loves He chastens, and scourges every son whom He receives. If you endure chastening, God deals with you as with sons; for what son is there whom a father does not chasten? But if you be without chastening, of which all have become partakers, then are you illegitimate and not sons.

The translation here tends to make this appear to be more dire than it actually is. The Greek word *chastening* is closer to our word *disciplining*. I want to also put this in, that one aspect of disciplining is being emphasized here, as the word *scourges* and *rebuked* show. These people needed some pretty harsh treatment in order to get them turned around. But this word in the Greek that is translated *chastening* in the King James (many of the modern translations say *disciplining*) actually implies three things and either one of the three can be emphasized or all can be seen together.

Disciplining includes instruction as in a classroom situation which is kind of what we are going through right now. It also includes drill. The drill sergeant puts the troops through drill—left, right, left, right, left, right, back and forth, back and forth. The teacher does the same thing in school. Two times two equal four, and on and on. They learn the tables. They do not do it anymore, but when we went to school we went through drill. Sometimes that can be boring. Sometimes it can be very difficult when the teacher makes you stand up and spell words or give the multiplication table or whatever.

But that word *discipline* includes instruction as in a classroom in which people are receiving only. It includes drill when the instructor is with you and making you go through the paces. And that can be embarrassing when you make mistakes, and it can be painful while you are doing it. Then it also includes correction to one length or another. It could be very painful going through those.

But I want to emphasize this. He is not beating on us. He is not abusing us. It has all the elements of testing and trial, preparing us to be in His image. We are going through a scourging now and we deserve it because of the things we have done in the past. In terms of our own lives, it does not matter what the problem is. If it is a family matter, husband and wife relations, childrearing problems, overcoming a personal problem, whether it is the great tribulation, trials, everything must be considered in this light.

In what way is God disciplining me? Is this classroom instruction? Is it drill or is it correction? It might be all three. It might only be one. It might be two in combination. But always it is for our good. He has not left us simply because we feel the pain.

Now we can make a conclusion here. In other words going into the great tribulation and even martyrdom does not necessarily imply punishment. In fact, brethren, to go into the tribulation might be a tremendous honor. It might show what trust God has in you and put you in the place of an apostle, a prophet, in terms of being given the honor of being a martyr for Him. That needs to be considered.

Revelation 6:9-11 When he had opened the fifth seal, I saw under the altar the souls of those who were slain for the word of God and for the testimony which they held. And they cried with a loud voice, saying, "How long, O Lord, holy and true, until You judge and avenge our blood on those who dwell on the earth?" Then a white robe was given to each one of them; and it was said to them that they should rest yet for a little while longer, until both the number of their fellow servants and their brethren, who would be killed as they were, was completed.

Should we assume that all these prophets, the apostles, and other brethren who were martyred in a variety of persecutions and tribulations down through the ages were being punished? We cannot assume that. I think that would be a very poor judgment and the proper judgment in many cases would be of it being a trial and that within God's will He wanted this person to witness for Him. A special calling to that end.

Let us go to Psalm 91 and begin to draw this to a conclusion. It is a very encouraging psalm.

Psalm 91:1-6 He who dwells in the secret place of the Most High shall abide under the shadow of the Almighty. I will say of the Lord, "He is my refuge and my fortress; my God, in Him will I trust." Surely He shall deliver you from the snare of the fowler and from the perilous pestilence. He shall cover you with His feathers, and under His wings you shall take refuge; His truth shall be your shield and buckler. You shall not be afraid of the terror by night, nor for the arrow that flies by day, nor for the pestilence that walks in darkness, nor of the destruction that lays wastes at noonday. A thousand shall fall at your side, and ten thousand at your right hand; but it shall not come near you, only with your eyes shall you look, and see the reward of the wicked. Because you have made the Lord, who is my refuge, even the Most High, your dwelling place, no evil shall befall you, nor shall any plague come near your dwelling; for He shall give His angels charge over you, to keep you in all your ways. In their hands they shall bear you up, lest you dash your foot against a stone. You shall tread upon the lion and the cobra, the young lion and the serpent you shall trample underfoot. Because he has set his love upon Me, therefore I will deliver him; I will set him on high, because he has known My name. He shall call upon Me, and I will answer him; I will be with him in trouble; I will deliver him and honor him. With long life [eternal life] I will satisfy him, and show him My salvation.

I think once we get the picture here we understand that the language here is highly figurative. It is what we would call hyperbole. But the principles that can be extracted from this psalm show very clearly that by God's strength He

will make us equal to any persecution or trial that might come upon us—anyone.

We need not get the kind of anxiety that brings upon depression, that brings on focus upon the self, that causes distraction to be such an enemy that it draws us away in neglect of our responsibilities. Brethren, was He able to protect Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-Nego right in the midst of the fire? Of course He was. And He will be with us wherever we are, under any circumstance. "I will never leave you nor forsake you."

We have to adjust our thinking to understand that as our Redeemer He owns us. That is a circumstance that we do not feel good about. We are His slave and we have to learn to trust His judgment in every situation and be willing to submit to His will, whatever it is.

I think that His will for us right now is to follow Zephaniah 2:1-3 right to the letter of it, to gather ourselves together, to repent, to do everything that we possibly can to mend whatever gap or separation there might be between us and Him. It is only in that manner that unity of the church can be achieved, and only in that manner can we truly find ourselves in the place of safety.

Where is the place of safety, brethren? It is to be close to God wherever He is. We can expand that out and that is to be in Christ, because He will never leave us. We might even expand that out to say to be in the church, but when we start expanding it that far, then things begin to get shadowy and vague once again. It is better to do all we can to draw as close to God as we possibly can.

God spirited Enoch away to a place of safety. That is in Hebrews 11:5. In verse 7 to Noah and his family the place of safety was in a boat in which they were saved alive from the worst disaster ever to hit the earth since Satan's rebellion. Lot was literally yanked from Sodom by an angel. Jacob and his family were provided safety from the famine in Egypt. They had to go into the world in Egypt for their deliverance.

Israel under Moses was provided safety in the wilderness. How many times did God deliver Israel into safety by raising up a Deborah, an Othniel, Ehud, Gideon, Jephthah, or Samson? How many times did God rescue David, or

Israel under kings like Hezekiah, Jehoshaphat, and Josiah? God sent an angel to Peter in prison and broke him out of there.

Ecclesiastes 7:17-18 Be not be overly wicked, nor be foolish. Why should you die before your time? It is good that you grasp this, and also not remove your hand from the other; for he who fears God will escape them all.

Peter adds to this in II Peter 2:9 that God knows how to deliver the righteous out of their trouble. So what is my conclusion? We come right back to Matthew 6:33.

Matthew 6:33 "But seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things shall be added to you."

If we keep focusing on this we will never go wrong and should it work out that God's will is that we should go through the Tribulation, we will be prepared come what may, because that is God's pattern. He shows that very clearly.

Philippians 3:8-11 Yet indeed I count all things loss for the excellence of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them as rubbish, that I may gain Christ and be found in Him, not having my own righteousness, which is from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness which is from God by faith; that I may know Him and the power of His resurrection, and the fellowship of His sufferings, being conformed to His death, if by any means I may attain to the resurrection from the dead.

Notice the intensity of this man who already had a full plate of trouble, and I mean *trouble*. The picture here is of a man striving in a running race with his mind focused on the finish. Paul in verse 8 said he had already sacrificed all that he had previously held to be dear as being so much garbage. But a long time later, Philippians was probably written in the 50s AD, somewhere around there, he is still running on, disciplining himself to stay controlled.

Make Sure of Your Focus (1998) by John W. Ritenbaugh (<https://www.cgg.org>)

Brethren, we are not shooting for the place of safety. We are shooting for the resurrection of the dead, and let us make sure that we keep our focus there and not let the salvation of our physical life and the escaping of something we might consider to be a physical pain to distract us into neglect.