

Preparing Your Heart

Conversion

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Brethren, when we talk of the "heart" of something, we are talking about the most important part of whatever that 'something' is. The heart of the race car would be a good engine. Washington, D.C. is the heart of our government. The San Joaquin Valley in California would be the heart of California's fruit supply (and possibly that of the nation). The Midwest and the South is the heart of the nation's corn, wheat, and soybean production.

When we consider "heart" as it is used in the Scripture, we see it as the seat of life, the seat of our emotions, and our mind. The "heart," as used in the Bible, pictures all we are, all we do, our entire makeup. It is what harbors our thoughts, directs our thinking, and controls (or, does not control) our actions and words.

We use "heart" much the same way today in our everyday conversation. (I was surprised to realize that, I think.) It describes the way one conducts oneself, or the way one feels. I have a list here. (I tried to think of all of them; but perhaps you can think of some after I finish.) But "to break one's heart" is a depiction of an event that would cause one to deeply grieve. To "have a heart" is telling us to be kind, understanding, and generous. "His heart is in the right place," means that he is well-intentioned. "In one's heart of hearts" means in one's innermost feelings.

One who is "heartless" is merciless, vicious, and mean. "Heartfelt," on the other hand, is speaking or acting from our innermost being. "Half-hearted" is without much enthusiasm; and "light-hearted" is somebody who is cheerful and happy most of the time. "A change of heart" equals a change of mind. "His heart is just not in it" shows no enthusiasm. When one is "heartbroken," one is feeling alone and greatly dejected. Someone is referred to as "soft-hearted" when he is kind and gentle, and, possibly, an easy touch. And "tenderhearted" is someone who is sensitive and easily moved by the needs of others. When they referred to the brave crusading king of England, they

called him "Richard, the lion-hearted"—thus indicating that he was brave. Of course, the opposite of lion-hearted is being "chicken-hearted."

With the understanding that the "heart" represents what we are, who we are, and how we conduct our lives, then the condition of our spiritual heart should be of the utmost importance to us. Why is this? Because that is where Jesus Christ's examination of us is focused. The examination that we are being given is not to see if we are members of this or that organization. It is not to see if we are broadcasting to the world. It is not to see if we have all the technicalities of Israel's history understood and figured out. It is not just to see if we are keeping the Sabbath and holy days, and tithing. What Jesus Christ is truly looking for is *to see if we are converted*. This is what He is after.

I hope that this is not too simple for us to believe, because, in our minds, we tend to want to do things that are measurable before God. "I understand this. I understand that. I have this all down pat. Therefore, You owe me salvation."—something like this. But God is after much bigger fish than this. He is after our very nature being changed to reflect Him completely. This is what our calling is all about.

Let us take a look at a few scriptures on this; and I think that you will see that we are totally exposed to God. First, I Samuel 16. This is when Samuel was coming in to pick out and to anoint the new king. God told him to go to Jesse's house.

I Samuel 16:6-7 So it was, when they came, that he looked at Eliab, and said, "Surely the LORD'S anointed is before Him!" [Here was a handsome young man—strong, good looking, powerful. He looked to be just the man that God would pick for king.] But the LORD said to Samuel, "Do not look at his appearance, or at his physical stature, because I have refused him. For the LORD does not see as man sees; for man looks at the outward appearance, but the LORD looks at the heart."

That is where Jesus Christ looks—on the heart.

The next scripture is about the dedication of the temple by Solomon.

I Kings 8:37-40 "When there is a famine in the land, pestilence or blight or mildew, locust, or grasshoppers; when their enemy besieges them in the land of their cities; whatever plague or whatever sickness there is; whatever prayer, and whatever supplication is made by anyone, or by all Your people Israel, when each one knows the plague of his own heart, and spreads out his hands toward this temple: then hear in heaven Your dwelling place, and forgive, and act, and give to everyone according to all his ways, whose heart You know (for You alone know the hearts of all the sons of men), that they may fear You all the days that they live in the land which You gave to our fathers."

God knows everything about us. We are going to make that amply clear in just a moment.

This may be a little bit of overkill here, but I really want to get this across to us—that *God is looking for us to overcome individually*. It is not a collective thing. (I will probably say that several times during the sermon.)

Hebrews 4:12 For the word of God is living and powerful, and sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing even to the division of soul and spirit, and of the joints and marrow, and is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart.

I have a compilation here of quite a few commentators. But, before we get into that, this book was written to a church that was letting down in the calling they had been given. They were in danger of losing their salvation and the future that God had slated for them to have. And the apostle Paul (we think probably wrote this) was trying to warn them—to turn them around and to cause them to know that God could not be fooled by whatever little devious things they might be thinking of. God saw their hearts; and they would have to give an account of themselves for the way that they lived. Paul wanted them to fully understand it.

From the commentaries:

The design of this, and the following verses, is to show that we cannot escape complete examination by God. All insincerity, unbelief, hypocrisy, sin, laziness, wrong thoughts and attitudes will be detected by Him. And, since our hearts are completely open before Him, we should worship Him in Spirit and complete truth—never trying to fool Him, or to justify our wrongs before Him. The sense is that the truth of God is totally penetrating and searching; and that the real thoughts of the heart will be brought to light. If there is any insincerity and self-deception, there can be no hope of its escaping being detected.

The Word of God is fitted to detect hypocrisy and to lay open one's true feelings, so that there can be no escape for those who aren't correct before God. God's Word is designed to show a man (or a woman) what he (or she) is.

The apostle Paul found this out. You read about that in Romans 7. He kept the law perfectly, physically; and then, when he saw the intent of the law, he found that he was a dead man.

God's Word is sharper than any two-edged sword; and this literally means "two-mouthed sword." It was to picture that all would be devoured before it. The idea being presented is that God's Word reaches the innermost reaches of our heart. It shows the deepest, most well hidden thoughts we have. It reveals our most subtle intents, and exposes our real character to God.

Hebrews 4:13 And there is no creature hidden from His sight, but all things are naked and open [and I want you to remember that word "open"] to the eyes of Him to whom we must give account.

There will be no 'Louisiana Sidestep' when we stand in front of God. We will have to give an accurate account to Him. So, verse 13 is showing that it is impossible to hide ourselves from God; and there is no being that is not wholly known to God. All his thoughts, his feelings, his plans are distinctly understood; and all things are exposed to God and open to the eyes of Him, to whom we all must answer.

Now the word "open" caught my eye, because it means to tilt back the head to expose the throat (as in sacrifice). I majored in Animal Husbandry for a couple of years, and I watched a ram being killed. They put him up on a small trough on a table, so that he could not get his feet under him. And he had his head hanging over the edge of the table. The ram, as I said, could not get his feet under him. He could not run and hide. He was totally defenseless, completely, to the man with the knife. This is why God used that term, you see, because he could not do a thing.

God, who does not want to kill us, but to save us, wants us to understand that we are that exposed to Him. So, in case you or I think that we have hidden thoughts that God does not understand, forget it—because God understands exactly who we are, what we are, and the character that we have established. Turn over to John 4 for a little bit of proof on this. Here Jesus Christ has met the woman at the well.

John 4:14 "But whoever drinks the water that I shall give him will never thirst. But the water that I shall give him shall become a fountain of water springing up into everlasting life."

Of course, the woman at the well did not understand this. And she said, "Sir, give me of that water because I thirst, and so that I don't have to come back and draw from this well again. That would be wonderful!"

John 4:16-19 Jesus said to her, "Go call your husband, and come here." The woman answered and said, "I have no husband." Jesus said to her, "You have well said, 'I have no husband,' for you have had five husbands, and the one you now have is not your husband; in that you spoke truly." The woman said to him, "Sir, I perceive that you are a prophet."

Adam Clarke says:

The word 'prophet' does not mean one who tells the future. It denotes one who knew her heart and who, therefore, must have come from God.

You see, Jesus Christ knew her heart. He knew all about it, at a simple glance.

Now, the sermon some weeks back warned all of us that we had better not allow ourselves to go back to sleep. It referenced it by stating that we had all fallen asleep in the last few years in the Worldwide Church of God. And then we gathered enough courage, when they started to change doctrines, to exit that organization and to go, in this case, to the Church of the Great God. Even though we found the courage to leave the false doctrines that were there, yet the danger of slumbering or becoming half-hearted in our approach towards God and overcoming in our new organization is an ever-present danger. The fact that we went to sleep once means that we can go to sleep again. This is what it was warning against.

It does not matter what the organization is. We all have that option—of going to sleep. God calls each of us for the absolutely greatest opportunity ever to be offered to anybody—to be alive and to live with God as members of the God Family. And not just part of His Family, but to have offices as kings and priests; and to be able to serve others; and to be totally fulfilled with the life that is in store for us. I know that we cannot know the extent of this wonderful future that is being offered, but it has got to be far greater than anything (any environment) that we can possibly imagine! Because of this opportunity, brethren, we had better be exceedingly careful what we allow into our heart.

Years ago, in the Worldwide Church of God, we had a friend named Charles Checkel. Mr. Checkel was about 5' 6"; and he was in his late sixties, yet he was very feisty. Every time anybody would leave the church, he would go to the minister. And he would say, "Why did he leave?" Charles never wanted to gossip about the person who left, but he wanted to know what sin or problem caused the individual to give up his place in the Kingdom of God. He said, "If I understand why this person left, then I won't fall for the same trap." And he was faithful to the end of his days—a wonderful man.

I am not going to list all the situations, or sins, or problems that can befall us. I know that all of us here are aware of the tremendous change that *letting down* has produced in the church—especially since the death of Mr. Armstrong. But I am going to remind us all that we live in a very dangerous

time. We are in the Laodicean era of the church. That, of itself, is enough for us to worry about—with its attitudes that it produces: feeling rich and increased with goods, a feeling that all is well, and a feeling that there is no reason for urgency. And that last one is probably the most dangerous one. This is the attitude that prevails in this era; and it pictures, frankly, what that sermon was talking about.

As we see the world around us letting down and casting off character and morals and things of this sort, then it is easy for us to say, "It's not so bad if I do it too." No, we are living in a world that continues to become more lax morally, more violent. We see the nation's leadership floundering. We see the potential for world disaster evermore on the horizon. And yet what can lull us to sleep is: That the economy's going pretty well. There is food in the stores, gasoline for the cars, money to purchase our needs. We have credit. This produces a feeling of complacency, thinking that things are going to go on just about like they are.

It is no doubt that this is how the nation feels about this. "Aren't we the most powerful nation in the world? Isn't our army the biggest and the best? Haven't we found a huge surplus of money? Aren't we going to pay off the national debt, take care of Social Security, and reduce taxes?" (That is a little tongue in cheek.) Relaxing in supposed security and well-being is what causes us to go to sleep—and thereby slack off in worshipping and commitment to God.

Now, brethren, there are many examples of Israel not having their hearts right with God and what it took for them to again be accepted by God. I would like to have us consider one in I Samuel, chapter 7. This was the situation: Israel had been letting down for years. The priesthood, under Eli, had gone to pieces. Hophni and Phinehas were the priests; and they were committing adultery on the Temple steps. God took away the priesthood. Eli died. Hophni and Phinehas died. The glory of the Lord had forsaken Israel, basically, is what happened.

Israel was attacked by the Philistines. They were defeated; and, in two battles, thirty thousand men were killed and the ark was stolen. It was taken by the Philistines, who had the ark for seven months. The result was that God brought terrible plagues on them—hemorrhoids and mice, everywhere

they went. It was a terrible thing; and they said, "Get this ark out of here, because God's going to kill us if we don't." So they sent the ark back to Israel. And, with the return of the ark and the passage of time (of twenty years), a new era was about to start for the nation. And Samuel had a message for the people of his age—and a message, as well, for us today.

We see Samuel now, not as a little boy who was under Eli's tutelage; but as a prophet, a judge, and a leader of Israel. His words are a guide to Israel's repentance in asking them to put away all their false gods, and wrong attitudes, and wrong character; and then they could change. We can start in verse one of chapter seven.

I Samuel 7:1-2 Then the men of Kirjath Jearim came and took the ark of the LORD, and brought it into the house of Abinadab on the hill, and consecrated Eleazar his son to keep the ark of the LORD. So it was while that the ark remained in Kirjath Jearima long time; it was there twenty years. And all the house of Israel lamented after the LORD.

It is a little bit like the church today. Where has God gone? What has happened?

I Samuel 7:3 Then Samuel spoke to all the house of Israel, saying, "If you return to the LORD with all your hearts, then put away the foreign gods and the Ashtoreths from among you, and prepare your hearts for the LORD, and serve Him only."

If I had an S.P.S. for today's sermon, that would be it: Prepare your hearts. Prepare your mind, your being, everything that you do "for the Lord." And then he said, at the end of verse 3, "and He will deliver you from the hand of the Philistines." In verse 6, Israel did repent. The Philistines heard they were gathered; and Israel was terrified. A lamb was offered and Samuel prayed for the people; and God smote the Philistines. And from that time on, all during Samuel's reign, they were safe.

So, as it applies to us today, *prepare your hearts to serve the Lord, and to serve Him only*. That means to put away laziness, wrong habits, sloppy Sabbath keeping, idolatry, and the things that are against the character that God wants us to develop. We have to change! (We are going to see that.)

Many of the translations leave out the word "prepare"; but, to me, the word prepare defines what we have to do. It means to make provision for, to frame, to set aright, to ordain, to order, to make ready, to confirm, to direct, to fashion, to appoint, to establish (our mind and our heart), to fix, to apply, or to render—to prepare to serve God.

The word "prepare" (as it applies to Israel's part in overcoming) flies in the very face of the Laodicean age we live in; because—to prepare, to overcome, and to work for God—we have work to do. We cannot allow ourselves to reflect the age we live in, and just sit back and hope everything will come out all right.

The word "prepare" implies planning to achieve something. If we were to build a home, we would prepare for the job with a plan. We would prepare by hiring the right contractors, or by hiring the trades to finish off what was needed. We would prepare by saving our money to pay off the house. Or, we would have prepared by obtaining financing.

Preparing our heart, brethren, indicates that we must set a plan where we will set (or, control) our heart (or, mind) to be obedient to all that we are instructed to do, by God.

Now, the word "serve" (because we are to serve God) is a lot like "prepare" because it requires work. It means to labor to bring to pass. It means to be in service, to become a servant, to work for another. (And the 'another' is Jesus Christ.)

And the intent of Samuel's message to Israel (and by example, to us today) was that things could not go on as they had been going, if you wanted to come out of your problem. Israel had to refocus their hearts from what brought their national disaster upon them, and they had to prepare their hearts to please God; or there would be no change—no change at all. To

humbly set their hearts to serve God by being obedient to God in all His laws and intents.

In *The Living Bible*, it reads "determine to obey only the Lord." And from the *New American Standard Bible*, it reads "direct your hearts to the Lord and serve Him alone." And, if you will, that is the call for us today as we come out of the trials that we are in.

As it applies to us, we must not allow ourselves to be drawn into a Laodicean attitude; but to change from the condition that produced the scattering that we all find ourselves involved in, and to work to recapture our first love. To work to respond to God. That is quite a change, because we are so far down the road.

Now, to whom did Samuel address the message? This is important, because you always think that God is talking to the other fellow, or the other woman. "He can't be talking to me because I am obviously special." The message was addressed to every single individual! It did not just apply to the leadership—letting the lay people off the hook. And it did not just apply to the lay people—letting the leadership off the hook. This was to everybody in Israel. And it applies to each of us, the same way, today.

Whenever possible, we should be attending with a group for Sabbath services—for all the reasons that are stated in Hebrews 10: to be obedient to God, to encourage, to lift one another up, to stir each other to love and to good works, and to have the comfort of a good message. I do realize that not everyone can be in a group setting. That is why we have the telephone hook-up (Internet streaming). But, yet even on the telephone hook-up, we are all together; and this is what the Sabbath is for. We have the fellowship with the brethren.

But, in all of this, we must remember that it is our personal, individual relationship with God that must be correct for us to please God. In other words, it is not just being in the group. Now there is an attitude, I think, that we all share. It is an attitude that does not do us any good. It is an attitude that can cause us serious problems. We can read about that in Jeremiah 7.

Jeremiah 7:1-3 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!' Thus says the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel: "Amend your ways and your doings, and I will cause you to dwell in this place."

He said, "Change from the attitude you have, the character that you don't have, and the things that you are doing that are against Me; and I will cause you to dwell and to prosper in this place."

Jeremiah 7:4 "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.'

Adam Clarke:

The people expressed the conviction that they would be saved as long as temple service continued; for they supposed that God would not give it up into profane hands. [This is what the people thought.] But sacred places and sacred symbols are nothing in the eyes of God when the heart is not right with Him.

What is important to God is *the heart*! We may not cry "The temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord"—and that is fine. But, today, many do look to the group that they belong to as what will save them. "If I'm in this group, then I'll go to a place of safety. If I'm in this group, I will have salvation." Belonging to a specific group of itself will not save anyone; because God's criterion for judgment is not based on the group, but the individual growth in the things that are important to God: overcoming, loyalty, faithfulness, true love, forgiveness, mercy, purity, kindness, gentleness, thoughtfulness—all the things that God is, and all of the things that He wants His people to be.

Whether we like it or not, there is a competitive spirit between the groups. I do not think that anybody really wants it that way; but it just tends to be that way. (It must be an Israelite trait.) We see differences in attitudes,

approaches, and focus. Because God has scattered us, we associate with the groups that we feel comfortable with. But in whatever group we belong to, we have to ask the question: What is God's criterion for us to be saved? I realize that we are saved by grace, but we also have the option (or, the choice) to fail as well. What criterion is used to determine our reward—how many cities we will rule, or what positions we might hold? What criterion is established for God to take one to a place of safety—if He so chooses (because He has the option not to). Is it the organization we belong to, or is the criterion what we read of in Revelation 2 and 3? "To him who overcomes, I will give. . ." It is obviously overcoming and preparing one's heart for the service of God. That is exactly what the calling is all about.

Matthew 7:21-23 "Not everyone who says to Me, 'Lord, Lord,' shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he [whose heart is right, he who is obedient] who does the will of My Father in heaven. [And then a word that should sort of chill us.] Many will say to Me in that day, 'Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in Your name, cast out demons in Your name, and done many wonders in Your name? And then I will declare to them, 'I never knew you; depart from Me, you that practice lawlessness!' [you who have a heart that does not belong to me].

God is after bigger things than just "things." He is after conversion.

When the Church of the Great God was formed, John Ritenbaugh told us that we would be self-governed. And people immediately had a ball with that. They missed the whole point! They were going to rearrange the hall. The minister would no longer stand up "over" the people. We were all going to sit at round tables. And I said, "You just missed the point! We aren't talking about organization of church services." We were being told that the ministry would teach the truth to the best of their ability and that we were to govern ourselves, based on that truth, to the best of our ability. And we would govern ourselves in this fashion. We were to govern ourselves to what intent? To prepare our hearts, or our minds, or our very being to serve God. This is what the calling is all about. If we do not do this, we fail with the calling that we have been given.

II Chronicles 12:13-14 Thus King Rehoboam strengthened himself in Jerusalem and reigned. Now Rehoboam was forty-one years old when he became king, and he reigned seventeen years in Jerusalem, the city which the LORD had chosen out of all the tribes of Israel, to put His name there. His mother's name was Naamah, an Ammonitess. And he did evil [Why?], because he did not prepare his heart to seek the LORD.

It was not his basic purpose for living. And it *is* our basic purpose for living! It was not his reason for being alive. He had bigger fish to fry than to obey God. He had a way of life that he wanted to pursue; and he did it. And he really did not care two hoots what God thought.

Another warning is given in I Chronicles 28. David is talking to Solomon; and he is charging him:

I Chronicles 28:9 "As for you, my son Solomon, know the God of your father, and serve Him with a loyal heart and with a willing mind; for the LORD searches all hearts. . ."

You see, brethren, that is probably why God called you in the first place. He saw something in your heart that He wanted. He searched your heart. He does not call everyone.

I Chronicles 28:9 ". . . and [He] understands all the intents of the thoughts. If you seek Him, he will be found by you; but if you forsake Him, he will cast you off forever."

Brethren, God loves us. He knows that we make mistakes. But, when our heart is right before Him, He is on our side completely; and He forgives. Be turning over to II Chronicles 19. King Jehoshaphat went in league with Ahab to go to war against Syria. It was sort of interesting that he did not see what Ahab was doing; but Ahab said, "You wear your royal robes and I'll go in just a plain old soldier's outfit." And so when the battle was joined, the Syrians had the command to attack and to get the leader—forget the soldiers and the officers. *Get the leader!* And they saw Jehoshaphat in his robes. (Of

course, Ahab was not a lover of God.) So, they came toward him; and, at the last minute, Jehoshaphat said, "Help me! They are coming at me. They're going to kill me!" And God saved his life.

The story picks up here, when Jehoshaphat returns to Judah.

II Chronicles 19:1-3 Then Jehoshaphat the king of Judah returned safely to his house in Jerusalem. And Jehu the son of Hanani the seer went out to meet him, and said to King Jehoshaphat, "Should you help the wicked and love those who hate the LORD? Therefore the wrath of the Lord is upon you. Nevertheless good things are found in you, in that you have removed the wooden images from the land, and have prepared your heart to seek God."

You see, God noticed that—even though he made a foolish mistake.

II Chronicles 19:4-9 So Jehoshaphat dwelt at Jerusalem; and he went out again among the people from Beersheba to mountains of Ephraim, and brought them back to the LORD God of their fathers. Then he set judges in the land throughout all the fortified cities of Judah, city by city, and said to the judges, "Take heed to what you are doing, for you do not judge for man, but for the LORD, who is with you in the judgment. [Again, God reads the heart.] Now therefore let the fear of the LORD be upon you; take care and do it, for there is no iniquity with the LORD our God, no partiality, nor taking of bribes. Moreover in Jerusalem, for the judgment of the LORD, and for controversies, Jehoshaphat appointed some of the Levites and priests, and some of the chief of the fathers of Israel, when they returned to Jerusalem. And he charged them, saying, "Thus shall act in the fear of the LORD, faithfully and with a loyal heart."

II Chronicles 30:15-20 Then they slaughtered the Passover lambs on the fourteenth day of the second month. The priests and the Levites were ashamed, and sanctified themselves, and brought the burnt offerings into the house of the LORD. They stood in their place according to their custom, according to the Law of Moses the man

of God; the priests sprinkled the blood received from the hand of the Levites. For there were many in the assembly who had not sanctified themselves; therefore the Levites had the charge of the slaughter of the Passover lambs for everyone who was not clean, to sanctify them to the LORD. For a multitude of the people, many from Ephraim, Manasseh, Issachar, and Zebulun, had not cleansed themselves, yet they ate the Passover contrary to what was written. [In other words, they did it against what was correct.] But Hezekiah prayed for them, saying, "May the good LORD provide atonement for everyone who prepares his heart to seek God, the LORD God of his fathers, though he is not cleansed according to the purification of the sanctuary." And the LORD listened to Hezekiah, and healed the people.

Forgiveness was extended because they prepared their hearts to seek God. God shows great mercy to those whose heart is right before Him.

But what is the first step to preparing our heart to serve God? In the book of Nehemiah we have, to me, one of the most beautiful examples of repentance in the Bible. Israel fully admitted their sins. They knew that they had to take steps to separate themselves from the world. And, too, they knew that they had to repent of the cause, and the mindset, and the actions that produced the condition that they found themselves in. There could be no response on God's part until they returned and repented to Him with a whole heart.

The Jews, at that time, were returning to God's laws as given through Moses. They recognized that they were a called 'people of God.' And they recognized that so many blessings came from God for obedience; and yet they found themselves a slave people. They realized that if they wanted freedom, their own land, and their own leaders—then they had to totally repent before God. It was an absolute must, and it was also a painful lesson for them.

Here in Nehemiah 9, he rehearsed all the history of Israel before them. He told them that Israel had been a slave people, and that God had brought them out of Egypt. He brought them to the Promised Land. The first time, they rebelled. The uprising (in Numbers 16) was Korah's. Then he went into the Promised Land; and, after the Promised Land, they rebelled again, and again,

and again. And God put them into captivity; brought them out; showed mercy; showed love. It was the history of the nation. They just could not keep it together!

Nehemiah 9:26-28 Nevertheless they [Israel] were disobedient and rebelled against You, cast Your law behind their backs and killed Your prophets, who testified against them to turn them to Yourself; and they worked great provocations. [This was God's people, His nation.] Therefore You delivered them into the hand of their enemies, who oppressed them; and in the time of their trouble, when they cried to You, You heard them from heaven; and according to Your abundant mercies You gave them deliverers who saved them out of the hands of their enemies. But after they had rest [and prosperity], they again did evil before You. Therefore You left them in the hand of their enemies, so that they had the dominion over them; yet when they returned and cried out to You, You heard from heaven; and many times You delivered them according to Your mercies."

And, of course, God will do the same for us if we cry to Him in repentance.

Nehemiah 9:29-32 "And You testified against them, that You might bring them again to Your law. Yet they acted proudly, and did not heed Your commandments, but sinned against Your judgments, 'which if a man does, he shall live by them.' And they shrugged their shoulders [They just gave Him a smart shrug of the shoulder.], stiffened their necks, and would not hear. Yet for many years You had patience with them, and testified against them by Your Spirit in Your prophets. Yet they would not listen; therefore You gave them into the hand of the people of the lands. Nevertheless in Your great mercy You did not utterly consume them, nor forsake them; for You are God, gracious and merciful [and a loving, and a kind, and a gentle] Now therefore, our God, the great, the mighty, and the awesome God, who keeps covenant and mercy; do not let all the [hardship and weariness and] trouble seem small before You, that has come upon us. . ."

Consider our condition, where we are, how we're lost and helpless—consider it before You.

Nehemiah 9:32-37 . . .that has come upon us, on our kings, on our princes, and on our priests, and on our prophets, and on our fathers, and on all Your people, since the time of the kings of Assyria unto this day. Howbeit You are just in all that is brought upon us; for You have done right, but we have done wickedly: Neither have our kings, our princes, our priests, nor our fathers, kept You law, now hearkened unto Your commandments and Your testimonies, wherewith You did testify against them. For they have not served You in their kingdom, and in Your great goodness that You gave them, and in the large and fat land which You gave before them, neither turned they from their wicked works. Behold, we are servants this day, and for the land that You gave unto our fathers to eat the fruit thereof and the good thereof, behold, we are servants in it: And it yields much increase unto the kings [the enemies, to punish us] whom You have set over us because of our sins: also they have dominion over our bodies, and over our cattle, at their pleasure, and we are in great distress.

It is a lot like the church is right now. However, there was no antagonism, in this case, toward the ministry—or toward the leaders of the land. Everybody was in the same boat.

Nehemiah 9:38 And because of all this we make a sure covenant, and write it; and our princes, Levites, and priests, seal unto it.

Now let us look at two verses in chapter 10.

Nehemiah 10:28-29 And the rest of the people [This was everybody.], the priests, the Levites, the porters, the singers, the Nethinim, and all they that had separated themselves from the people of the lands unto the law of God, their wives, their sons, and their daughters, every one having knowledge, and having understanding; They clave to [joined with] their brethren, their

nobles, and entered into a curse [And the curse was "*if we don't do what You say, You can punish us.*"], and into an oath, to walk in God's law, which was given by Moses the servant of God, and to observe and do all the commandments of the LORD our Lord, and his judgments and statutes.

You see, Israel sought God's help and miracles in the only way that God could be reached and touched. And that was by their repenting and getting their lives in order—by making their hearts right before God. All the wishing, and all the prayers, and all the offerings and all the physical things that they had to do would not have done it. It required *great repentance* before God would listen to them. And they appreciated His having selected them for His people, and for His laws.

Just as with the Jews in Nehemiah's days, the first step for us too is to get our hearts right—to humble ourselves deeply and repent of any hatred, of any wrong attitudes towards others, of being puffed up (thinking we are better than others), of laxness in keeping God's laws, in laziness in prayers and study, in showing disrespect and any competitive attitudes that we happen to have in us. And then, maybe, we can beseech God to gather us again as His people.

In case we want to point fingers, we must remember that Jesus Christ died for every single human being. (We had better not be doing that!) We must remember that we would not be in different groups, if God did not want us in different groups. That is really pretty simple. God, who is in full control, has separated us; and it will only be God who will bring us together again. Some may not like that; but that is exactly how it is. Even though we desire, perhaps, to be together—we do not have the power to accomplish it. Only by the power of God will the people of God be re-gathered.

If the pattern of how God does things is correct, that will only be after we humbly come before Him in repentance—asking Him, again, to accept us as His obedient children. It is not going to be by this or that. It is going to be by *God*. That is how it is going to be.

God provides us a scripture to measure against:

Isaiah 66:2 "But on this one will I look, on him who is poor and of a contrite spirit, and trembles at My word."

I think we have to ask ourselves, "Does that picture us?" (I know it does not picture me.) This is a standard to certainly strive for and to grow towards.

So, step one in preparing one's heart to serve God is to repent. And step two follows right along with it. The second step is to study to find out what God expects from you, and from me, as individuals.

The danger in having a fine pastor—and, to my way of thinking (and I have known John Ritenbaugh for 30 years), we have one of the finest pastors that, I think, is on the horizon today. But the danger is that we will all let him do our studying for us. We come to services each week; and we hear a good sermon from the ministry; and we go home and we say, "Boy, wasn't that great! And I'm going to go back next week and hear another one." In the meantime, they have discovered so many interesting things; and they give you such good messages that "I don't know that I can do anywhere near that good, so I'm just really not going to apply myself to study." I am here to tell you that God does not want you to have that attitude at all!

I remember that after we left Worldwide, we were coming back from Oregon. We had gone to see a friend of ours there; and he did not throw us out (although he did not agree with us, at the time). But he provided two tapes, given by two evangelists; and we were driving home listening to them—and I almost drove the car off the road. One tape was on how, because we left, we had hurt the church financially. (That was fine.) The second tape was from a well-known evangelist; and he said (because of all the questions that were coming into headquarters) "It's a shame that God's people have Bibles!—because they study into them, they look into them and they come up with questions. And they don't have the ability to understand what God wants. So it'd be far better if they'd just let the ministry teach them and guide them and not have Bibles." I could not believe it. I almost drove off the road. My wife looked at me and asked, "What's wrong with you?" And the car was doing exciting things.

But you see, brethren, God *does* want us to have a Bible; and He *does* want us to study; and He does not want us to have the attitude of letting John [Ritenbaugh], or the ministry, do it for us.

God will teach us personally, as we diligently study His Word. And, I mean personally. He will teach you things that apply to you, specifically, as you study. So that is one of the things that we have to do. That is the second step: to study.

II Timothy 2:15 Be diligent [It means to hurry—believe it or not—and to be diligent.] to present yourself approved to God, a workman who does not need to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth.

The word "study" here means to study with diligence, with effort, and with energy. It was written to a minister, and urges him to study as well; but are we not all going to minister? (We will get to this in a minute.) We all have offices we have to fulfill. Are we expected to grow to the point where we can make sound and solid decisions, based on God's Word? Will we be expected to handle God's Word rightly and correctly? Of course, we will! That is what the training we are in is for.

We have to continue to remind ourselves who we are. (I said this not too long ago.) We are the *firstfruits of God* that are being called for the purpose of ruling and leading in the World Tomorrow. You see, ours is not a passive calling—where we just sit, and God does it all. In many of the churches of the world, people go to church, they sit, they drop their anchors, they get up, they go play golf, they do whatever they want to do. It is just sort of a formality.

But our calling, brethren, is a proactive calling. We have to be actively pursuing what is being offered to us. We cannot just sit on our bottoms and think that it will somehow assimilate into us through the cushion.

To show ourselves approved, we must study with care. If we are to please God, it will be as the result of deliberate effort on our part to live our lives correctly. By faithfully performing this duty, then we will be "a workman

that need not be ashamed." We will be able to *rightly divide God's truth*. This is the only place that phrase appears in the New Testament. And it means that we are to cut straight through and to divide correctly; and we are to understand God's Word and to be able to apply it. The allusion being offered here is to a minister—or, by extension, to a king or a priest in the Kingdom of God—who makes proper distribution to each one under his care, learning to apply the principles of God's law correctly in every circumstance, and knowing how to nourish those who have been given to us. That includes knowing how to solve their problems and to help them.

Proverbs 15:28 The heart of the righteous studies how to answer.

Putting a spin on that verse, as how it applies to us, this shows that studying God's Word gives you the ability to consider and to respond rightly, and wisely, in a manner that is truly helpful to the one being talked to—as opposed to the unthinking, foolish, babble that just seems to come from those who have not considered God's wisdom.

Proverbs 22:17 Incline your ear and hear the words of the wise, and apply your heart to my knowledge.

What he's saying here is to apply your heart towards advanced instruction. Apply your heart to my knowledge and that instruction that is advanced—or going on to perfection.

Proverbs 22:18 For it is a pleasant thing if you keep them within you; let them be fixed upon your lips.

The sense of this is what a pleasant sight (to God) it is—to see, in man, the union of two things: right beliefs being put into actions; and actions based on right beliefs. You see, this is another facet that we are going to touch on in a minute here.

Proverbs 22:19-21 So that your trust may be in the LORD; I have instructed you today, even you. Have not I written to you excellent

things of counsels and knowledge, that I may make you know the certainty of the words of truth, that you may answer the words of truth to those who send to you?

Adam Clarke:

These words of truth are certain. They are not dubious or of difficult interpretation. They point directly to the great end for which God gave them. They are promised; and they are fulfilled; and he who practices them by faith receives their fulfillment in the spirit and power of divine love. The scriptures, as far as they concern the salvation of the soul, are to be understood by use. And it is by use every believer has witness in himself and knows the certainty of the words of truth.

You see the fruit that is produced by obeying God. Luke 4:4 and Matthew 4:4—we are to live by every word of God. God wants us to put our words into our lives.

Hosea 6:1-6 Come, and let us return to the LORD; for He has torn, but He will heal us; He has stricken, but He will bind us up. After two days He will revive us; in the third day He will raise us up, and we shall live in His sight. Let us know, let us pursue the knowledge of the Lord. His going forth is established as the morning; and He shall come to us like the rain, like the latter and former rain to the earth. [And then God speaks.] "O Ephraim, what shall I do to you? O Judah, what shall I do to you? For your faithfulness is like the morning cloud, and like the early dew it goes away. Therefore have I hewn them by the prophets, I have slain them by the words of My mouth; and your judgments are like the light that goes forth. For I desire mercy and not sacrifice, and the knowledge of God more than burnt offerings."

What he was saying here was that Israel thought it would be nice to return to God (Wouldn't that be nice?) and to be obedient. But as far as having a mindset and a heart to do it, they were not serious. God looked at their faithfulness and He said, "It's just like the morning dew. You have a small cloud. As soon as the sun comes out and it gets warm, the cloud dissipates.

So does your faithfulness." God stated that He put them through heavy trials; but none seemed to produce what He wanted. He tells them that what He really wants is faithfulness in their commitment and not just the show of sacrifice—but the knowledge of Him put into practice in their lives.

And, of course, that is what He wants from us today—which brings us to the final command of Samuel, which is to serve God. At this time, how do we serve God? Well, the two great commandments are (1) to love God with every fiber of our being and (2) to love our neighbor as ourselves. That means the setting of the heart to do good to others. That is the love that God pictures here; and this includes husbands, wives, children, all in the church, and all those we come in contact with in the world.

At this time, how do we serve God? We serve by obeying His law and by putting it into practice in our lives every single day—in our relationship with God, and with our neighbor. This is what God expects of us. The result of that daily obedience produces something that I do not think we notice; but it is exactly what we all want. What that produces is *godly character*. As we obey, we gain the habit. We gain the mind of God. This character can never be acquired by just head knowledge alone or by a casual effort to obtain it. It will only come by drawing close to God in prayer, in fasting, and studying and by putting God's words into practice in our life.

When anybody in the world thinks of serving God, they consider it to be a real burden. They have to give up so much! They have to remove all the fun in their lives. They cannot hate their parents anymore. Or kill. Or commit adultery. Or take pot, or go to jail or something like this. But I hope that none of *us* ever think that serving God is a burden. I know that our weaknesses are going to cry out for gratification from time to time; but we should never, ever take that attitude into our minds. Serving God is *not* a burden.

The word "serve"—as used in *serving God*—does not depict heavy bondage. It depicts a joyous, and a liberating, and a happy and wonderful experience. Working to obey God produces wonderful things in your life. The greatest is that you are now on God's side and He is on your side. You are now working together as a team. You are now responding positively to your calling and to be a faithful servant and a faithful steward before God.

I thought it would be good to look at some of the requirements of a steward, because that is what we are. We are stewards of God's Word.

I Corinthians 4:2 Moreover it is required in stewards that one be found faithful.

Paul is commenting here on the ministry, of course—that they have been entrusted with God's words. As such, they must be absolutely faithful. It is *required* in stewards that a man (or a woman) be found faithful. Each of us are stewards of God's calling. God has called you. He has given you His Spirit. And we are expected to be faithful, and to be diligent, in the calling we have been given.

Being a physical steward offers opportunity, many times, to steal from your employer—especially when you have been there a long time. Most of us have been in the church for a long time. If you know what you are doing (when you have been a physical steward), it is easy to slack off and not do the job as you should do it.

I have listed five things here that a steward should be. You see, we cannot afford to let our stewardship degenerate.

(1) We, as a servant, are to be devoted to our Master's service. It is just that simple. We are to be devoted to the One who is over us.

(2) We should be faithful to the calling and the trust that has been given to us, and work to never abuse it or violate it.

(3) We should not be concerned about what the world thinks of us; but we should always be (by obedience) looking for approval from the One whose servants we are.

(4) As a physical servant represents the one he serves, we are to represent the One we serve and to do nothing to bring shame to the Name that we carry—to bring no disrespect to the One we serve.

(5) We must remember that the only proof of a servant's worth is by the result of his labors. Therefore, we should labor, to the best of our ability, to be approved of Him whom we serve.

How, then, are we to obey? (I think you know this, but we'll just read it quickly.)

Ephesians 6:5-7 Bondservants, be obedient to those who are your masters according to the flesh, with fear and trembling, in sincerity of heart, as to Christ; not with eyeservice, as men-pleasers; but as bondservants of Christ, doing the will of God from the heart, with goodwill doing service, as to the Lord, and not to men.

We will not go into all the other explanations; but I did list three points for this.

- We have been purchased from death with the greatest price ever paid. Therefore, we should focus on serving our Lord and Master in everything we do—in our diligence in prayer, in study, in being kind and considerate and forgiving others, and in every aspect of the law—living it in the lives that we have been given.
- We, as His servants, should not just treat our calling with lip service but with 100% effort.
- With whatever we set out to do, we should do it with energy and with diligence, remembering that we are working directly for Jesus Christ.

Luke 12, verses 35 through 48, tells us about the faithful and the evil servants.

Luke 12:35-37 "Let your waist be girded and your lamps burning [What He is saying is to be ready to meet Jesus Christ. Be prepared.]; and you yourselves be like men who wait for their master, when he will return from the wedding, that when he comes and knocks they may open unto him immediately. Blessed are those servants whom the master, when he comes, shall find watching. Assuredly, I say to you, that he will gird himself and have them sit down to eat, and will come and serve them."

That is the great God of heaven, who will come to those who are serving and working correctly. He will sit them down; and He will serve them—in deep thanks, and love, and appreciation for all that they've done.

Luke 12:38-43 "And if he should come in the second watch, or come in the third watch, and find them so, blessed are those servants. But know this, that if the master of the house had known what hour the thief would come, he would have watched and not allowed his house to be broken into. Therefore you also be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an hour you do not expect." Then Peter said to him, "Lord, are you speaking this parable only to us, or to all people [that is, to us today also]?" And the Lord said, "Who then is that faithful and wise steward, whom his master shall make ruler over his household, to give them their portion of food in due season? Blessed is that servant whom his master will find doing when he comes."

This is the one who will receive all the accolades, all the power, and all the rulership.

Luke 12:45-48 "But if that servant say in his heart, 'My master delays his coming,' and begins to beat the male and female servants, and to eat and drink, and to be drunk, the master of that servant will come on a day when he is not looking for him, and at an hour when he is not aware, and will cut him in two and will appoint him his portion with the unbelievers. [That is no small statement!] And that servant who knew his master's will, and did not prepare himself or do according to his will, shall be beaten with many stripes. But he who did not know, yet committed things deserving of stripes, shall be beaten with few. For to everyone to whom much is given, from him much will be required. [And much has been given to each one of us.]; and to whom much has been committed, of him they will ask the more."

When you have been committed much, then more is expected of you. We do not know when the Lord (the Master of the house) is coming, so we had best continually be ready. As faithful servants, we should be living as if that return is imminent.

Brethren, there is not any question that our focus (during this failing society, at the end times) should be to get our hearts and our minds and our very beings right with God. Today we find the churches of God scattered. I have done, as probably all of you have done, and wondered "What could bring us all back together?" We seem to all believe the same things. We all get along at funerals or combined church socials. We hug and kiss each other and comment, "It's good to see you." And then, right after that, we go back to the organizations that we belong to and our particular focus.

In the past, I have wondered, "What would bring us together?" I thought that maybe a common crisis would cause all the churches to forget their differences and come together. But, I have got to tell you, I think that would work for a while. But I know that it would not produce the kind of results that Jesus Christ wants, because it would not be lasting. As soon as the common crisis went away, the same problem would exist again. People would go their own way.

I even thought of the Tribulation. I wondered if the churches going through the tribulation would again unite them. But, again, when the pressure was off, would they go their own way? And even if it became a matter of life and death, it would still be an individual choice of whether to stand for God or to recant one's beliefs.

You see, brethren, we have to come to understand that having our hearts right with God is not a collective thing. So, where does that leave us? It leaves us (you and me, as individuals) with the job of getting our hearts right with God. Somewhere, some time, God will have to say to each of us individually (not collectively), "Now I know *you*."

Am I, in any way, saying that we should not attend church? That we should sit and be an "in homer"? (I do not mean that with disrespect.) A person who stays home and [has the attitude of] "It's just You and me, Lord." No, I am

not saying that; because that would be in violation of God's instruction in Hebrews 10—to not forsake the assembling of ourselves. We are to assemble, and to encourage, and to have a good message from a minister. That is what God wants! That is why He ordained ministers. That is why you read about it in Ephesians 4. We are to meet together on the Sabbath, and hear a good message, and to encourage one another to stand fast—and to not let down in the calling that we have been given.

The command to *prepare our hearts*—given to Israel during Samuel's time, and to us down through the ages—is for all the greater churches of God. It is not just for this group or that group. *This is the truth: When all of us are united with Christ, then all of us will automatically be united with each other.* When we all have prepared our hearts to be right with God, we will have hearts that will be completely right with each other.

Some have viewed those that have this focus in their lives as being selfish, self-centered, and not concerned with those in the world. Nothing could be further from the truth! Are we not told to take the log out of our own eye before we help others? You bet we are! I will tell you, I do not know that we are ready to help the world at this time. (I do not mean that you cannot send the message. I do not mean that at all.)

What is our human nature like? What are our tendencies? In Deuteronomy 5, God is says:

Deuteronomy 5:29 'Oh, that they had such an heart in them that they would fear Me and always keep all My commandments, that it might be well with them and with their children forever!'

In Isaiah 48, God is saying He is our provider. He will take care of you.

Isaiah 48:17-18 Thus says the Lord, your Redeemer, the Holy One of Israel: "I am the LORD your God, who teaches you to profit, who leads you by the way that you should go. Oh, that you had heeded My commandments! Then your peace would have been as a river, and your righteousness as the waves of the sea."

I would like for you to turn back to Ezekiel 33. God had told Israel that He was going to bring tremendous punishment upon them. This was their response.

Ezekiel 33:30-33 "As for you, son of man, the children of your people are talking against you beside the walls and in the doors of the houses; and speak to one another, everyone saying to his brother, 'Please come and hear what the word that comes from the Lord.' [They loved Ezekiel and all that he was saying.] So they come to you as people do, they sit before you as My people, and they hear your words, but they do not do them; for with their mouth they show much love, but their hearts pursue their own gain. Indeed you are to them as a very lovely song of one who has a pleasant voice and can play well on an instrument; for they hear your words, but they do not do them. And when this [the disaster] comes to pass—surely it will come—then they will know that a prophet has been among them."

James tells us that it is the *doer*, not the hearer, which God wants.

We will not turn to Matthew 23:37 but here Christ says, "How often I wanted to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing!" They did not prepare their heart.

I hope we can see that Israel's tendency is to forget their God. Give them wealth, success, and a prosperous nation, and although they give God lip service, their heart will be far from Him. And give us today a Laodicean environment, and if we are not extremely careful we will fall into the same attitude as our forefathers' and go to sleep.

I am just going to read you chapter and verse (not the scripture itself) but they all just about say the same thing and they all point to something. Ezekiel 11:19; Ezekiel 36:26; Deuteronomy 30:6; Psalm 51:10, where David says, "Create in me a clean heart, O God, and take not Your Spirit from me." Psalm 110:3; Jeremiah 24:7; Jeremiah 31:33; Jeremiah 32:39; Jeremiah 50:4-5; John 3:3-5; II Corinthians 5:17; Galatians 6:15; Ephesians 2:10; and Revelation 21:5.

They all say basically the same thing. They all give the same message that God will give us a new heart and a new spirit—to His people that they might obey Him. That He will make all things new through that process. They do not all say exactly that but that is the intent.

Brethren, we who have been called at this time have been given a new heart. And it is the only new heart we will ever have. Based on that we better not be letting down but prepared to faithfully serve God by doing all we can to overcome, to be obedient to all of His laws, and to love one another.

I Peter 4:17-19 For the time has come for judgment to begin at the house of God; and if it begins with us first, what will be the end of those who do not obey the gospel of God? Now "If the righteous one is scarcely saved, where will the ungodly and sinner appear?" Therefore let those who suffer according to the will of God commit their souls to Him in doing good, as to a faithful Creator.

I would like to take a few of these phrases and just go through them:

"For the time has come." Everyone who has been called should have expected that the time would come when we would be judged—individually.

That "judgment to begin at the house of God." This does not mean that He looks at a record of your life and says you pass or you did not pass. God is not that casual or sloppy or inefficient or ineffective a God. The sense of that phrase is that testing is going to come upon each one of us individually that will define, once and for all, if we are what we profess to be. If we are, in fact, what we say we are. God is going to have testing for each of us individually that will identify us. And I frankly believe that the disaster in the greater churches of God is a test that God has put forth on His people at this time to see just where they stand. To see if they are going to be faithful. And if it first begins at the house of God, it is logical that we would have to be tested or examined first, and judged. Because God is going to know where we stand before He works with the rest of the world.

"And if the righteous one is scarcely saved." The sense of this phrase is that the righteous are saved through great difficulties (now listen to this),

designed specifically to bring them to salvation. We know what it says in Philippians 1:6. That once God starts a work in us, He will perfect us, that He will continue that specific work until it is finished.

All of our trials are not the same because God is the perfect Father. He knows what we individually need and this should not be strange to any of us who have children. Because each child that we have is different and requires different direction, different motivation. I will tell this on Brian. When he was small if he did something that was wrong and I would say, "Brian, you've let us down." and his heart would melt. "I've let down the family name. I've let down God." But other children, "you can't ride your bike for a week" "you're grounded." Different things apply to different children and God does this for us. We are given specific things that will cause us to come to salvation. Now why does God do this? So that our hearts might be prepared to serve Him and thus ready to receive salvation—the salvation that He is offering to us.

"Therefore let those who suffer according to the will of God." In other words, we are to trust God in all the trials we are going through because He is faithful in His efforts toward us in bringing us to salvation. And, in turn, we should respond to His faithfulness by being faithful to Him and having a faithful heart, and by serving Him with love and obedience to all of His laws.

Hebrews 10:16-23 "This is the covenant that I will make with them after those days, says the Lord: I will put My laws into their hearts, and in their minds I will write them," then He adds, "Their sins and their lawless deeds I will remember no more." Now where there is remission of these, there is no longer an offering for sin. Therefore, brethren, having boldness to enter the Holiest by the blood of Jesus, by a new and living way which He consecrated for us, through the veil, that is, His flesh, and having a High Priest [who knows what we have gone through] over the house of God, let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water. Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for He who promised is faithful.

Brethren, this is the time that God is putting His laws in our heart, so let us do all we can to cooperate with God and follow the admonition of Samuel: To prepare, to repent, to learn, and to do. It is just that simple. And if we do this, we will be preparing our hearts to serve God.