

Success In This World

Self-Improvement and Preparation

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Have you ever played the computer game called, "The Sims?" If you have not, then maybe your kids have. It is a silly computer game that attempts to simulate (that is where they get the name, "Sims") the life of normal, average people. A player usually starts with a character in their late teens or early twenties, having just finished school. And, if he does not use the anti-aging cheats (which a lot of people do), he follows this character throughout his life until he dies.

The character finds a job, gets married, has children, climbs the corporate ladder, interacts with other "Sims," and encounters various emergencies. Eventually they retire; ultimately they die.

All of it is very much like real life. A player must make sure that he keeps his "sim" satisfied on about eight to ten different levels—from his hunger, to his sleep requirements, to even how full his bladder gets, believe it or not. (That is one of funny parts of it. But you must admit, going to the bathroom is a big part of life.)

He has to have a bit of fun and a social life. His environment has to be kept clean. And if you do not, you get bugs, or things begin stinking, and things go wrong.

He has to get a certain amount of exercise, and he has to hit the shower or bath every once in a while or no one will come near him. He will start trailing green gases because he is so odoriferous.

He has to catch his ride to work. He has to keep his refrigerator full. He has to keep the house and appliances in working order. And all of this has to be done on a rather tight schedule, because time moves pretty fast in this game, even at the slowest setting. There does not ever seem to be enough time to get everything done.

As you can see, just from my short description here, it is a pretty detailed game. And it is, only now, able to be played because we have very fast computers and very streamlined programming.

However, to me, the most interesting aspect of the game is the personality and the skill meters, because you have to do things to make your "sims" improve.

At the beginning when you are constructing your "sim" (designing him/her), a player sets some basic levels. These run the spectrum from: Is he lazy or is he energetic? Is he a slob or is he neat? Is he shy or is he outgoing? And, there are various other characteristics to decide upon. These are the baselines for the character to start the game with.

But, when you get into the game, many of these things can change, depending on what you teach the "sim" to do and what you make him to study. You can send your "sim" to a bookshelf where he can find books that he can use to teach himself skills like cooking, mechanics, or whatever. Or, you can send him to the mirror where he can practice speaking and become more charismatic, improve his conversational skills, or practice a speech presentation at work.

He can paint, or he can play the piano so that he develops the artistic side of his personality. He can practice chess so that he can learn logic.

He can do all kinds of things like crossword puzzles, write in his journal, and even go pump iron in a gym. All these things help him in one way or another to improve his personality and character—developing his skills.

Now, these different aspects in the game are meaningful. If he goes through these certain processes and studies, reading and whatnot, the "sim" can make more money on the job and get a promotion. Or, he might take the initiative and clean up. This is always a nice thing. You get tired of telling your "sim" to clean up. And, after a while if he has done enough studying and cleaning up, he gains a skill point, and after a while, he will do it all on his own. Maybe he will fix something himself when you do not have to expressly command it.

It could make him more outgoing, more energetic, or friendlier. A "sim" who is made to study and practice ends the game with a high rating, while one that does not is generally a failure and scores rather poorly.

Now, my point is that the game is a light-hearted reflection of real life. Yet, to a thinking person, and to a true Christian, it can be rather sobering. In a way, it puts one into God's shoes! You are the "god" of this "sim," you have made him, you have set basic levels for him, and then you send him out into life and he has to do things and live life. Naturally, you want him to grow, to succeed, and to become a full person before he dies.

So, there you are, watching and directing a simulated life and it passes in just a few hours, depending on the speed of the game. So we can see that "sims" who learn, who continue learning, do well. But the "sims" who waste their lives on frivolous pursuits struggle, and they die little better than they started, if at all. They are kind of useless.

We are not "sims." We are the real thing. We are not simulated. We are people. In many places in Scripture, as we heard in many sermons and seen in many articles, God commands us, through His Son and apostles, not to remain stagnant. God has called us to learn, to grow, and to become better. In fact, He gives us a huge goal, which is to come into the image of His Son, Jesus Christ. He tells us He wants us to become perfect, even as He is perfect. Wow! That is more than what a "sim" has to do. A "sim" just has to score well so he can get a nice retirement.

But for us, our goal is to become like God. We have to overcome, grow, and produce fruit so that we bring God glory, give praise to Him, and please Him, and so that we are prepared for the Kingdom of God. This is the process of being conformed into His character image.

But today, I want to concentrate on an area that we, I think, neglect a great deal. And that is self-improvement in that worldly side of our lives. We talk a lot about improving in the religious side of our lives. However, very infrequently, we talk about improving in our physical pursuits.

But they do all go together as we will see.

John 17 is Jesus' prayer to the Father just before His arrest. He is speaking about His disciples and about us. He tells God,

John 17:6 "I have manifested Your name to the men whom You have given Me out of the world. They were Yours, You gave them to Me, and they have kept Your word."

John 17:11 "Now I am no longer in the world, but these are in the world, . . .

Do you see that He was going to leave the world and leave them behind?

John 17:11 . . . and I come to You. Holy Father, keep through Your name those whom You have given Me, that they may be one as We are.

His idea, here, is that He wants us to be united with Him, even though He has gone away, while we are still here in this world.

John 17:14-19 "I have given them Your word; and the world has hated them because they are not of the world, just as I am not of the world. I do not pray that You should take them out of the world, but that You should keep them from the evil one. They are not of the world, just as I am not of the world. Sanctify them by Your truth. Your word is truth. As You sent Me into the world, I also have sent them into the world. And for their sakes I sanctify Myself, that they also may be sanctified by the truth."

So, when we were called out of the world and accepted Jesus Christ as our personal Savior, we began a new life in the Spirit. And that is a wonderful thing. We have been changed, in a way, by God coming into our lives. We have a whole new perspective on things. But our physical circumstances remain largely *unchanged*.

We are still the same person underneath it all. We have the same family, we have the same education, and we have the same job, the same physical body, we are in the same basic condition as we were, and we even have the same fundamental character and personality we had before.

The only difference in our life now is that God has appeared in it. That has caused other changes, but in the main we are the same. Our circumstances are the same. And we soon realize, as we try to live God's way, being very much the same as we were before conversion, Jesus' statement here is so true. We remain in this wretched world, but we are no longer of it. We suddenly find ourselves strangers in a foreign land, even though it is the land that we grew up in, the land of our birth.

We find that suddenly the world has turned against us. It hates us. Many of the so-called freedoms and advantages that we once enjoyed, being unconverted and not knowing what was right, are now denied to us. We cannot do the same things that we used to do. As Peter says, we do not run to those things that the Gentiles do, what we once did with them. We cannot.

Satan himself, who is the architect of this evil world and system, wants us eternally dead! And so he sets his minions against us.

But we are told here in John 17 that Christ our Savior purposefully sends us into the world. But He also sanctifies us by the truth—we are set apart, we are consecrated—and He also puts us under the keeping or protection of God Himself (verse 11). "Keep them through Your word," He says.

So, we have advantages along with our disadvantages. While in the world, we are not without resources, and we are not alone. But, we are still in the world that we are not to be a part of, which hates us.

James 4:4 Adulterers and adulteresses! Do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God? Whoever therefore wants to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God.

John says something similar in I John 2:

I John 2:15-17 Do not love the world or the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For all that is in the world—the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life—is not of the Father but is of the world. And the world is passing away, and the lust of it; but he who does the will of God abides forever.

So we add another bit to this. This world, in which we have been left, this ordered system of living that is against God, becomes one of our enemies—not just Satan and his minions—but the world itself. We cannot become too friendly with it, and we certainly cannot love it. Many of its ways of doing things (many of the basic things) are so contrary to the way of God. We cannot become involved with them.

Then John adds that this world is passing away. It is a ship going down in the ocean, and we do not want to be on that ship when it goes under. But he says that if you do the will of God, you will live forever.

There is quite the dichotomy, here. There is the world on one hand and God's way on the other hand.

This next passage, II Corinthians 6, is one of the strongest admonitions in the Bible against any kind of unity or harmony with the world and certainly with unbelievers.

II Corinthians 6:14-18 Do not be unequally yoked together with unbelievers. For what fellowship has righteousness with lawlessness? And what communion has light with darkness? And what accord has Christ with Belial? Or what part has a believer with an unbeliever? And what agreement has the temple of God with idols? For you are the temple of the living God. As God has said: "I will dwell in them and walk among them. I will be their God, and they shall be My people." Therefore, "Come out from among them and be separate, says the Lord. Do not touch what is unclean, and I will receive you. I will be a Father to you, and you shall be My sons and daughters, says the LORD Almighty."

Again, we have a bit more to add to the picture. Not only are we not to be friends with the world; not only are we not to love the world; not only are we not to get onto this sinking ship of this world; but now, we are supposed to come out of it and be separate.

This puts us into a bit of a quandary, does it not?

We are to remain in the world, and Jesus *sent* us into the world, yet we are to come out of the world and are not to be friends with the world. We are not to love the world. We are to remain in the world, while not being a part of it. We are given the task of coming out of it.

It sounds paradoxical, does it not? It sounds almost contradictory. Here we are, in the world, sent into it purposefully, but told to come out of it.

Now I still have one more bit to add to all this in Matthew 5. Here is one of the fundamental things from the Sermon on the Mount:

Matthew 5:14-16 "You are the light of the world. A city that is set on a hill cannot be hidden. Nor do they light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on a lampstand, and it gives light to all who are in the house. Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works and glorify your Father in heaven.

Jesus Himself said it, but now the apostle Paul repeats it here in the instructions to the New Testament church of God:

Philippians 2:14-16 Do all things without complaining and disputing, that you may become blameless, and harmless children of God without fault in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation, among whom you shine as lights in the world, holding fast the word of life, so that I may rejoice in the day of Christ that I have not run in vain or labored in vain.

We are to be shining examples to the world, while we are in the world and coming out of the world. We are to be that beacon on the hill of true Christian living. We are to be God's witnesses before this crooked and

perverse generation, silently preaching God's righteous way by our conduct, while we hold fast to the truth and grow in Christ's image (verse 16) all the way to eternal life.

Now, in my mind, this puts a Christian into a strange position, to say the least. We remain in the world, but we are to be separate from it. We are not to love it. We are not to be too friendly with it. But rather, we are sent into it as instruments of godly love, to be shining examples to it of God's way of life.

How do we strike this balance between being in and coming out; not getting involved, yet being examples? It seems very confusing.

Some have decided that because it is so confusing, or because they do not see a real answer to the problem, they have decided to run away from the world. This is not just a church-of-God problem, but in the past there have been whole communities during medieval times that tried to do this. They were known as monks.

Monasticism was a way in which people tried to get away from the world and live in special communities so that they could devote themselves to God's way of life without the distractions of the world around them.

That did not work.

Some in the church of God have tried similar things too. They go all by their lonesome off to the desert, or to some rural area off the beaten path, to form a commune of likeminded people. And they gather together and try to live together according to God's way. I have never heard of any of them being successful.

Do you know why that is?

They never left the world behind them. The world is still *in* them. They simply took their sins, faults, problems, and wrong ways of thinking with them to whatever wilderness area they decided to go to. Then those things

come out, and they are played out within their community. It, then, affects everyone. All they did, in the end, was go out and create a new community of the world in the wilderness.

When you boil it down, the world is not necessarily a physical place. It is a state of mind. It is a way of life.

The world that God wants us to flee and not to become friendly with is not out there, but in our minds and hearts. It is what we have absorbed of Satan's way of life.

It gets played-out *out* there, but that is only because everybody has absorbed that same way of thinking, including us. And so, Jesus Christ has left us in the world to live a life that is different—a way that is counter to the way that the rest of the world lives, as a witness to it.

The Bible, if we would think about it, has suggested all along that going out into the wilderness is not the answer. To become monks, to have a commune of supposedly similar-thinking people, does not work.

Did you know that by the time you get to the end of chapter 3 in Genesis, we are already getting this very lesson? Adam and Eve were sent out into the wilderness away from the Garden. They were separated from God. In chapter 4, the wilderness was Cain's punishment! The children of Israel spent 40 years in the wilderness, and all of them died there, including Moses and Aaron, for being faithless. The wilderness did not save them. Being a community of likeminded people did not save them. They all died in the wilderness and never entered the Promised Land.

There is more. Saul chased David mercilessly through the wilderness. There was very little refuge for David, but he did survive the ordeal. But, how many times did Saul almost catch him? It was a place of trial for David.

Elijah had his great pity party out in the wilderness, and he lost his job. And here is a big one—Jesus went out into the wilderness, and who did He meet there? The great temptation of Matthew 4 and Luke 4 took place in the wilderness where Satan tempted Him. There was no part of the world out there, but Satan found Him and tempted Him.

Jesus Christ, of course, overcame him. But this all shows you that the wilderness is not a safe place for such things. Just because very few people are out there does not mean that Satan does not have free rein out there as well as he has elsewhere. You cannot run away.

Now Paul, when he was converted, went off into the wilderness, and he stayed there, according to Galatians 1, about three years. But, he did not stay there forever. He had to come back to be sent out into the world to do his mission for God.

So, he used the wilderness for what good it could give him, but in the end, the wilderness was not the answer. The wilderness was only a place of education and preparation for him.

We cannot physically hide and run away from this world. So, in a way, we are stuck in the world right where we are—right here, right now.

Some of us live in the big city. I have lived in Charlotte, North Carolina for 16 years; before that, I lived in the megalopolis of San Diego/Los Angeles and all the places in between. I have lived in the city all my life. Chicago, and before that, Columbia, South Carolina. I am an urban guy. I was born in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania.

I do not think that going into a rural area would make me much different, especially now that I am older, calcified and cranky, and set in my ways. I would take the city with me. We are stuck where we are, so we might as well make the most of it.

And it is not just making the most of it; we need to make ourselves more useful to God, and that is the important thing. We are stuck here. We might as well do something good, with the goal in mind to make ourselves more useful to God. Not just spiritually, but even the physical things that we can do to improve ourselves make us more useful—to God, to the church of God, and to each other.

Now, my idea for this sermon resides in a split sermon given by Charles Whitaker at the Feast of Tabernacles in 2006 entitled, "What To Do in

Babylon" (sermon number FT06-11). I also gave a sermon at the Feast in 1999 titled, "How to Survive Exile" (sermon number FT99-09). Both of these sermons are explanations of Jeremiah 29:1-7. I will not take too much time here because I want to go over just the high points.

Jeremiah 29 is a letter written by the prophet under God's inspiration to the captives in Babylon, and he instructs them how they are to live while they are in exile—and not just any exile, but in the very city of Babylon itself. I had taken the exile side in my sermon, and Charles took the Babylon side in his split-sermon. So, we are both speaking about the same thing, while coming at it from different directions.

Jeremiah 29:1-2 Now these are the words of the letter that Jeremiah the prophet sent from Jerusalem to the remainder of the elders who were carried away captive [notice to whom it is addressed]—to the priests, the prophets, and all the people whom Nebuchadnezzar had carried away captive from Jerusalem to Babylon. (This happened after Jeconiah the king, the queen mother, the eunuchs, the princes of Judah and Jerusalem, the craftsmen, and the smiths had departed from Jerusalem.)

Look at who Nebuchadnezzar took! He took the top of society. Not only the educated and wise people—priests and prophets—but also the princes; the eunuchs, who were often very responsible for much of the affairs of government; as well as the craftsmen, smiths, and other artisans. So, this would be like taking the cream of the crop of society—the best and the brightest.

Jeremiah 29:3-7 The letter was sent by the hand of Elasah the son of Shaphan, and Gemariah the son of Hilkiyah, whom Zedekiah king of Judah sent to Babylon, to Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon, saying, "Thus says the LORD of hosts [He is truly the One sending this message], the God of Israel, to all who were carried away captive, whom I have caused to be carried away from Jerusalem to Babylon: Build houses and dwell in them; plant gardens and eat their fruit. Take wives and beget sons and daughters; and take wives for your sons and give your daughters to husbands, so that they may bear sons and daughters—that you may be increased

there, and not diminished. And seek the peace of the city where I have caused you to be carried away captive, and pray to the LORD for it; for in its peace you will have peace.

Of course, looking at it from our end of history, you have to understand this from a spiritual point of view. But, the instruction is clear. And, we should not diminish the physical instruction contained in it. It applies on both levels.

He gives them three major commands:

- 1) Build houses and plant gardens.
- 2) Marry and have children.
- 3) Seek the peace of the city, and pray for it.

Now, we can define them as instructions in economics, family, and community. In modern terms, borrowing from Charles' message, Jeremiah tells us to get a job, get a spouse and have kids, and get involved in community affairs—not by voting, not by becoming actual members of government, but by praying for the community and its peace and safety.

Now, if we would finish the chapter, God tells us that He is working things out, that these people have been sent away to Babylon for their safe-keeping, believe it or not, by going into the heart of the beast. They would be safest there.

So, He wants them to carve out for themselves a life and community, to get involved in the economy by building houses—you have to have money to do that, so that means you must have a job. And, plant gardens. Usually these are symbols of stability—unmoving and fixed in one place.

In marrying and having children, He is saying, "Don't stop producing. You're going to need one another during this time." And He said, "Pray. Stay close to God. Work to make a peaceful community around you." It could get bad.

We see later, at the time of Esther, that even though they were living in the capital city, there in Persia, in Sushan, they were in danger of being totally

wiped out. And, seeking the peace of the city was very important. God was preserving a people for Himself.

These three elements on the physical side of the ledger if nothing else are very important. Make a living, make a family, make peace.

As I was saying, the chapter goes on to reveal that God is working things out, and He had separated these people from Jerusalem and Judea, because back there at home were the "bad figs." Re-read the good fig, bad fig prophecy in chapter 24. The good figs He took away and put them in Babylon. The bad figs were left back in Jerusalem to rot. He was going to send Nebuchadnezzar back to clean them out if they did not repent, which is another lesson altogether.

But, He said, "Seventy years, and I will bring you back." So, while these 70 years are taking place, you have to make a life for yourself in enemy territory.

Now, let us think about us.

We do not know about a new 70 years. He has not given us a timeframe like that. We do not know if it is 70 years, or 7 years, or 7 months. We do not know the day or the hour, anyway. We will see signs of things and try to be prepared for whatever is coming down the road, if we are watching the fig tree, as it were, and seeing the signs of the times. And, Paul tells us that we are not of the darkness, so we should be able to see the Day approaching.

But even so, in the past we have thought it was close. Mr. Herbert W. Armstrong was dead certain that it was going to happen in the 1940s during and after World War Two. And when things began to turn around, then he had to change and repent of that speculation, and say that it is down the road, still somewhere in the future.

Then in the 1950s, he wrote the booklet "1975 in Prophecy," stating that it could be 25 years down the road, and then everybody said Christ would return in 1975. Mr. Armstrong did not mean it necessarily as specifically setting a time and date, but it was his way of saying that it was down the road, off into the future. At the time, I am sure he thought that 1975 was a pretty good estimate because things were so bad. You could see in the 1960s

that people were rioting in the streets, the cities were on fire, hunger in various places, and *The Population Bomb* was written, and everybody thought that the earth would quickly become so overpopulated that we would not be able to feed ourselves. Then, there was the Bay of Pigs incident and nuclear stuff in the news all the time, and foreign nuclear powers trying to make a foothold in the Western Hemisphere, and Krushchev's performance in the United Nations. It seemed like everything was about to go up in flames—but it did not.

I was born in 1966 when those things were happening. I am 42 years old, and it still has not happened. I never thought I would get out of high school. When I was in college, Herbert Armstrong died. I thought that the end must be near now. God would not take His apostle away without things coming together very fast. That is now 22 years ago. That was in 1986, while it is now 2008.

Now, we are beginning to face tough economic times. Gasoline is \$4 per gallon currently, and diesel fuel is about \$5 in most places. And, that is here in cheap ol' South Carolina where gasoline is purportedly the cheapest in the nation.

What did we see this morning on "Headline News"? Milk prices were up 34% this year, while bread was up something similar. This past year, many of our basic foodstuffs are about half or more again more expensive than they were. Inflation seems going out the roof, and banks are beginning to fail here and there.

But the end is not yet.

"How long, O Lord?"

We do not know. We think it will be soon. We hope it will be soon. We want it to be soon. We pray that it will be soon. But, *we do not know*. We can only guess and speculate. We can see a timeline of possible events, but when it comes down to it, we must admit that we do not know.

John Reid calls me up, at least once a week, and asks me, "Have you figured out when we're going to flee yet?" Or, "Have you figured out when the end

is, yet?" And, every time I reply back to him, "No. But when I do, you'll be the first to know!" This is all in fun, of course.

But, that is the thing: We do not know. We look. We try to gauge things, but we do not know.

Christians have been looking for the return of Christ since His ascension into heaven. That has been almost 2,000 years now that Christians have been looking for it to come.

We hope that it will be soon, but it may not be. We have been wrong in the past. Something has always stopped it from going that final step, it seems. The other shoe has not ever dropped, even though we thought it was hanging precariously over our heads.

The bottom line in all this is that we simply cannot stop living because we think that the end is near. The smart thing to do, as Mr. Armstrong often said, is, "Fervently hope and pray that Christ will return tomorrow, while planning as if it will occur in twenty years."

We have got to live and grow and prepare and be ready. That is what the Bride is supposed to do. And, it is not just spiritually, but all those other things too because, as time goes on, another generation comes along, and we have to prepare them too. It would be selfish, as people accuse us of, if we were just trying to prepare ourselves, and then did not care a fig about anybody else. However, we do care for others. We always have cared for and about the people of God. And we want to continue to prepare them and their children and any other person whom God has called and would like to do the same.

This passage, in II Thessalonians 2, is one of the apostle Paul's earliest epistles to the church of God (after Galatians and I Thessalonians), maybe near or shortly after 50 AD. In this passage, Paul is speaking about a problem that had cropped up in the Thessalonian church.

II Thessalonians 2:1-2 Now, brethren, concerning the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and our gathering together to Him, we ask you, not to be soon shaken in mind or troubled, either by spirit or

by word or by letter, as if from us, as though the day of Christ [the Lord] had come.

If you look in the margin, it says, "Day of the Lord." "The Day of the Lord is here" is what some were thinking. Some had been fooled into thinking that the Day of the Lord had begun, and so what were they doing? Through the rest of the chapter, Paul is giving them signs to look for.

There will be a man of sin who sets himself up in the Temple, and he is going to declare himself to be God. And there is going to be all these lying wonders of Satan. Those things, Paul says, have not happened yet. The Day of the Lord has not begun yet. You will know when you see these signs that the Day of the Lord is near. But not until then.

Then, there is verse 11 about there being a strong delusion at that time too. So, all these things have not occurred. It is occurring, yes, but it is not so strong yet that there are not people who "see" certain truths.

He tells them to stand fast and hold on until that time occurs. I should also mention that what happened was that some had jumped the gun, and had done certain things, which also occurred later in Paul's ministry mentioned in II Timothy 2:18 where there were some preaching that the resurrection had already occurred. So, this was a very current problem throughout a good portion of the New Testament period. The people were saying, "The Day of the Lord is here. The resurrection has already past. We've missed the boat." So, Paul instructs them on what things to look for. It is not until Paul gets to chapter 3 that he starts dealing with the practical implications of this, because of what these people who had jumped the gun were doing.

II Thessalonians 3:6 But we command you, brethren, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you withdraw from every brother who walks disorderly and not according to the tradition which he received from us.

Now, one of the things that may have happened was that people may have lost their hope and began to do things that they should not have been doing.

"Walking disorderly" can be a sign for all kinds of things that may have happened. Paul says, "Get away from those people and disfellowship them (verse 14). They're not acting properly."

Then Paul gives an example of what he did:

II Thessalonians 3:7-13 For you yourselves know how you ought to follow us, for we were not disorderly among you; nor did we eat anyone's bread free of charge [an example of what the people were doing—mooching], but worked with labor and toil night and day, that we might not be a burden to any of you, not because we do not have authority, but to make ourselves an example of how you should follow us. For even when we were with you, we commanded you this: If anyone will not work, neither shall he eat. For we hear that there are some who walk among you in a disorderly manner, not working at all, but are busybodies. Now those who are such we command and exhort through our Lord Jesus Christ that they work in quietness and eat their own bread. But as for you, brethren, do not grow weary in doing good.

So, this is the practical side of the problem of jumping the gun regarding the return of Christ. Some, in anticipation of Christ's return, had simply quit their jobs, and they were mooching off the brethren and making a nuisance of themselves in the congregation of God. So, Paul had to strictly admonish them that the brethren, the people of the church of God, people who were able, should be gainfully employed. Then he used himself, Silvanus, and Timothy as examples of hard work among them. They purposefully did that—worked with their own hands, probably leather, as Paul was a tent maker—so that the brethren would see that even their leaders worked hard, even though they had the authority to ask them for tithes and offerings.

It is evident that the Thessalonians had a problem of sorts with this. In many respects this next passage is a New Testament parallel to Jeremiah 29. Paul has to tell these Thessalonians how they are to live in the world. He hits on the very same three things that Jeremiah did. I must add that Paul's admonition is much more ethical than Jeremiah's, because he is talking to a much more moral people—the church of God, and not just to the Jews in general.

I Thessalonians 4:3-4 For this is the will of God, your sanctification [holiness]: that you should abstain from sexual immorality; that each of you should know how to possess his own vessel in sanctification and honor, . . .

"Possess his own vessel" can be taken two ways. The most accepted one is that it means one's own body by self control. The other meaning is like Peter's phrase to mean his wife. It seems better to me to mean one's own body.

I Thessalonians 4:5-12 . . . not in passion of lust, like the Gentiles who do not know God; that no one should take advantage of and defraud his brother in this matter, because the Lord is the avenger of all such, as we also forewarned you and testified. For God did not call us to uncleanness, but in holiness. Therefore he who rejects this does not reject man, but God, who has also given us His Holy Spirit.

But concerning brotherly love you have no need that I should write to you, for you yourselves are taught by God to love one another; and indeed you do so toward all the brethren who are in all Macedonia. But we urge you, brethren, that you increase more and more; that you also aspire to lead a quiet life, to mind your own business, and to work with your own hands, as we commanded you, that you may walk properly toward those who are outside, and that you may lack nothing.

Paul hits those three points. First, he talks about proper marriage, family, and sexual things—meaning that they are to remain chaste, of course, before marriage, and to do everything in the proper order to gain a proper wife, because they do not want to defraud one of the brethren, their sister in the faith. Secondly, he talks about aspiring to lead a quiet life, which is very much praying for the peace of the city, as well as working to make sure that you lead a quiet life, and working with one's own hands—like building houses and planting gardens. And then, thirdly, walking properly among those who are outside.

So, Paul hits a lot of the same areas that Jeremiah did. It is a bit different because he is talking to a community of believers. However, the underlying instruction is the same. You have got to take care of these areas. You have got to take care of your physical life and well-being—your family, home, and good community relationships so that you can live in peace.

We realize, I hope, that most of our trials and opportunities for growth occur in these very same areas—our families, jobs, and communities. That is why he tells us to shore these things up and to make sure that we have a good foundation in these areas, because this is where life is. Your family is your life. Your manner of making a living is your life. And, your community of church and neighborhood contacts is always where you live your life.

So there you have the three big aspects beyond our relationship with God, but very important to our relationship with God. John says that if you do not love your brother, how can you love God? That brother might be a church member or one's spouse or child. All these things affect our spiritual life, and so we have to shore up the physical side of them too. We cannot let them go or our relationships in other parts of our lives will deteriorate. They are symbiotic. They work together. We cannot just work on one of them to the neglect of the others. You have got to do both.

Paul, like Jeremiah, pleads with the people to secure these areas by giving them a moral foundation. Your physical life and your job, and all that it pertains to, has to be founded upon God. Your family and your family life has to be founded on God. Your life in the community, and all your activities has to be founded on God. And so, because of that, you had better work on them, because they are going to affect you in many ways.

Now, at this point, I want to direct my comments to the younger people among us. Most of us older people have set our courses; we have made the beds that we must sleep in, as they say, and we must make the best of it. That does not mean that we cannot improve, that we cannot do things to help ourselves to become more educated; however, it is the teens and young adults that have a great deal more maneuverability right now. Their minds are still fresh and flexible. They can still learn a great deal. They are far more eager to chase after opportunity than us older people are, whose lives have gotten set because of the choices we have made in the past.

Younger people have the time and the wherewithal to set up a good foundation for success in life—physical and spiritual. But, I am concentrating on the physical today.

We have an anonymous quotation in our Church of the Great God database that we pull from time to time, and it reads this way:

Scripture does not prohibit anyone from reaching for the heights. It only specifies that it be done for the glory of God.

So, there is good ambition with the desire to succeed, and there is selfish ambition with greed. One is the pursuit of excellence, while the other is blatant sin. I think that too often we have become satisfied with our circumstances, rather than pressing forward to improve our lot. We make excuses, rather than sacrifices to overcome the obstacles to betterment.

This is not an attitude that comes from Scripture. I want you to notice these Proverbs regarding work, education, and planning.

Proverbs 10:4-5 He who has a slack hand becomes poor, but the hand of the diligent makes rich. He who gathers in summer is a wise son; he who sleeps in harvest is a son who causes shame.

Proverbs 12:11 He who tills his land will be satisfied with bread, but he who follows frivolity is devoid of understanding.

Proverbs 13:22 A good man leaves an inheritance to his children's children, but the wealth of the sinner is stored up for the righteous.

Proverbs 14:1 The wise woman builds her house, but the foolish pulls it down with her hands.

Proverbs 15:14 The heart of him who has understanding seeks knowledge, but the mouth of fools feeds on foolishness.

Proverbs 15:31-32 The ear that hears the rebukes of life will abide among the wise. He who disdains instruction despises his own soul, but he who heeds rebuke gets understanding.

Proverbs 16:9 A man's heart plans his way, but the LORD directs his steps.

Proverbs 18:20 A man's stomach shall be satisfied from the fruit of his mouth, from the produce of his lips he shall be filled.

Proverbs 18:22 He who finds a wife finds a good thing, and obtains favor from the LORD.

Proverbs 19:2 Also it is not good for a soul to be without knowledge, . . .

Proverbs 19:20 Listen to counsel and receive instruction, that you may be wise in your latter days.

Proverbs 20:13 Do not love sleep, lest you come to poverty; open your eyes, and you will be satisfied with bread.

Proverbs 21:5 The plans of the diligent lead surely to plenty, but those of everyone who is hasty, surely to poverty.

Proverbs 21:17 He who loves pleasure will be a poor man; he who loves wine and oil will not be rich.

Proverbs 24:3-4 Through wisdom a house is built, and by understanding it is established; by knowledge the rooms are filled with all precious and pleasant riches.

Proverbs 24:27 Prepare your outside work, make it fit for yourself in the field; and afterward build your house.

And, there are many others. I should not forget Ecclesiastes 9:9,

Ecclesiastes 9:9-10 Live joyfully with the wife whom you love all the days of your vain life which He has given you under the sun, all your days of vanity; for that is your portion in life, and in the labor which you perform under the sun. Whatever your hand finds to do, do it with your might; for there is no work or device or knowledge or wisdom in the grave where you are going.

You only have one life to live, so you had better fill it up with work and the good things you get through diligent hard work.

And there is also Proverbs 31, specifically toward the women, and the things that women can do, and should do.

Now, all these verses, and many more, show that God desires that His people not only live righteously, but also to succeed physically, even in this present evil world. The underlying element is that if we use the principles that God has given us, we will succeed in all areas of life, not just spiritually, but in our physical lives as well.

Of course, this is all subject to God's greater plan. His purpose comes first, but even so, we must strive to do well at all times, and make the most of ourselves so that we can be fitting vessels for God's use.

Do you remember that Jeremiah's letter was written after the priests, and the princes, and such were taken to Babylon? There is another version of this in Daniel 1.

Daniel 1:1-7 In the third year of the reign of Jehoiakim king of Judah, Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon came to Jerusalem and besieged it. And the Lord gave Jehoiakim king of Judah into his hand, with some of the articles of the house of God, which he carried into the land of Shinar to the house of his god; and he brought the articles into the treasure house of his god.

Then the king instructed Ashpenaz, the master of his eunuchs, to bring some of the children of Israel and some of the king's descendants and some of the nobles, young men in whom there was

no blemish, but good-looking, gifted in all wisdom, possessing knowledge and quick to understand, who had ability to serve in the king's palace, and whom they might teach the language and literature of the Chaldeans.

And the king appointed for them a daily provision of the king's delicacies and of the wine which he drank, and three years of training for them, so that at the end of that time they might serve before the king. Now from among those of the sons of Judah were Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah. To them the chief of the eunuchs gave names: He gave Daniel the name Belteshazzar; to Hananiah, Shadrach; to Mishael, Meshach; and to Azariah, Abed-Nego.

And then, in the next few verses is the test of only eating clean things.

Daniel 1:14-21 So he consented with them in this matter, and tested them ten days. And at the end of ten days their features appeared better and fatter in flesh than all the young men who ate the portion of the king's delicacies.

As for these four young men, God gave them knowledge and skill in all literature and wisdom; and Daniel had understanding in all visions and dreams. Now at the end of the days, when the king had said that they should be brought in, the chief of the eunuchs brought them in before Nebuchadnezzar.

Then the king interviewed them, and among them all none was found like Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah; therefore they served before the king. And in all matters of wisdom and understanding about which the king examined them, he found them ten times better than all the magicians and astrologers who were in all his realm. Thus Daniel continued until the first year of King Cyrus.

That was a long time, something like 65 or 70 years. But notice, after Nebuchadnezzar's dream,

Daniel 2:46-49 Then King Nebuchadnezzar fell on his face, prostrate before Daniel, and commanded that they should present an offering and incense to him. The king answered Daniel, and said, "Truly your God is the God of gods, the Lord of kings, and a revealer of secrets, since you could reveal this secret." Then the king promoted Daniel and gave him many great gifts; and he made him ruler over the whole province of Babylon, and chief administrator over all the wise men of Babylon. Also Daniel petitioned the king, and he set Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-Nego over the affairs of the province of Babylon; but Daniel sat in the gate of the king.

Daniel 3:30 Then the king promoted Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-Nego in the province of Babylon.

This was after they stood up to him about bowing down to the image.

This next passage is after Daniel told Belshazzar about the handwriting on the wall.

Daniel 5:29 Then Belshazzar gave the command, and they clothed Daniel with purple and put a chain of gold around his neck, and made a proclamation concerning him that he should be the third ruler in the kingdom.

Daniel 6:28 So this Daniel prospered in the reign of Darius and in the reign of Cyrus the Persian.

My point in all of this is that these fresh young minds were brought into Babylon as captives. They might have been castrated as eunuchs, because they did not want them to foment rebellion within the very house of the king (but we do not know); that is one way that kings controlled them.

And they had strange Hebrew customs that would not allow them to eat the king's dainties—the bad food that the God of Israel said not to eat.

They did not whine and moan, saying, "Oh, I'm a captive, I'm a eunuch, and I've got this strange religion—I can't do anything!"

No! What did they do? They applied themselves. And when they applied themselves, at the end of it, when they came before Nebuchadnezzar, he chose them. And God had access directly to Nebuchadnezzar through these four young men. God used their knowledge and abilities—He tested them severely too—but He used them to make a witness before Nebuchadnezzar, right to the most powerful man in the world at that time. All because these kids sought to better themselves and not make excuses about the bad things that had happened to them.

What about the other luminaries? Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob were successful merchants—very rich men. They controlled trade in southern Canaan. What about Nehemiah right after the time of Daniel? He was the king's cupbearer. Again, right up next to the king. What about Esther? God used her beauty and her wits, and she saved the Jews while being queen.

God called several people in the New Testament while in the house of Herod and in the house of Caesar giving the church access to the very powers that were present at that time.

God does not frown on His people being educated, successful in business, and socially well-placed. In fact, He makes good use of it for His own purposes. All He asks is that we do these things in righteousness—for His glory! It is not an easy thing! But, it is not impossible, either.

For our final scripture:

I Timothy 6:17-19 Command those who are rich in this present age not to be haughty, nor to trust in uncertain riches but in the living God, who gives us richly all things to enjoy. Let them do good, that they be rich in good works, ready to give, willing to share, storing up for themselves a good foundation for the time to come, that they may lay hold on eternal life.

This is right before he says, "Oh Timothy! Guard what was committed into your trust!" This is part of what was committed to us.

Here is the bottom line: It is okay to be successful and to improve ourselves and our fortunes. But, this desire must always be subservient to our first priority, which is to glorify God and to press toward the Kingdom of God. The more we learn and expand our horizons, the more that God can make use of us in His service.