

Carefully Tending And Keeping God's Extraordinary Blessings

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The message I am about to deliver to you today—the second day of God's sacred Feast—is a topic that has been clearly in my mind since early June. Though not chapter and verse, I already found myself compelled to speak on this subject back then, but as you will see by the end of the sermon, it took a bit of an unusual, unexpected turn within the last several weeks. They both showed me how much more carefully I should have tended and kept God's extraordinary blessings, as well as how carefully patient God is in the work that He is doing to bring each and every one of us where He wants us to be in His plan and purpose.

I want you to know what is the outside of this message; I have struggled with this, because it is not usually a good thing to talk about yourself when you are standing up here before God's people, with the responsibility of delivering a message that must focus on God and give Him the honor and glory—and God alone.

As I prepared this I cringed, thinking of some of the messages I have seen over the years from men who have talked about themselves. So, even though I am going to share with you a couple of very personal things, this must not be about me. As you listen, I am beseeching you to please look beyond me, and picture yourself within these circumstances. And hopefully it will help us all to better appreciate God, His incredible blessings, and the opportunity He has given us each to tend and keep them, and especially during this sacred Feast.

This is holy time, brethren, that God has given us—as a blessing—to be used diligently while set apart from a world that is violently moving to the days of Noah. Let us make sure that we do not have to regret wasting this extraordinary blessing God will be pouring out on us this week, as we go about His business. It is important to remember that this is His business: to

share our lives in a way that pleases Him, and brings unity to a people that must become holy as God is holy.

God has called the "weak of the world" with unlimited access to share in His extraordinary blessings, and this is very pleasing to Him. These blessings will ultimately produce a people in His very image, prepared for the return of Jesus Christ and our work with Him for eternity. But we must thoughtfully use these extraordinary blessings, or we will lose them.

However, before going any farther along, I need to give you a bit of some authority—what I am going to tell you this morning from God's Word—for the way in which I am going to do it as I deliver this message. So please turn with me to James 5, and I am going to be reading it from the Amplified Bible Translation.

James 5:16 (AMP) Confess to one another therefore your faults (your slips, your false steps, your offenses, your sins) and pray [also] for one another, that you may be healed and restored [to a spiritual tone of mind and heart]. The earnest (heartfelt, continued) prayer of a righteous man makes tremendous power available [dynamic in its working].

Brethren, please do not think that I am advocating that you run around in sackcloth and ashes proclaiming to all and every one of your slips, your false steps, your offenses, your sins as the Amplified Bible puts it. But there will be occasions when—in wisdom, mercy, and love for our brethren, and at the appropriate time—we will share those things with one another. I certainly am not trying to encourage you to spend this wonderful week of God's holy feast to be dragging each other down. But certainly it is time to spend talking to each other, and understanding what is going on.

What I am trying to do in this message, is to help us see the extraordinary blessings that God has given in separating us from an increasingly evil world, so we can tend and keep the sacred time toward the purpose that God intended—of unity. We do not want to regret that we may have missed anything along the way because we did not see His blessings. Every day of

this feast is holy time (not just the first and the eighth days). It is all intended by God to be used as a blessing to strengthening the unity of the body of Christ in a very thoughtful way.

As I said, we are going to approach this privileged blessing we have from an angle I hope will help us better use God's holy time this week from a couple of personal examples where I regrettably found myself carelessly not tending to God's precious blessings. In this message, I do not use these words: sacred, holy, blessed, and extraordinary—indiscriminately. I am hoping by the end of this message, you will see we live in a world being driven farther away from God every day. And if we are not extremely careful, we too will be along for the ride.

We must always see our responsibility in the terms of tending and keeping His sacred, holy, blessed, and extraordinary investment in us. You may feel uncomfortable with the true story that I am going to share with you now. But you need to know—and know that you know—the direction this world is heading, and the great responsibility we have been given through the sure Word of God, not to be part of it. (We will come back to this point of “not being part of this world” in a minute because it is really important).

I would like to explain a little bit of something to you that I am not really proud of myself. As Nancy and I have done on rare occasions with close family members outside the church, we have attended weddings either immediately preceding and running into the Sabbath (excusing ourselves immediately following dinner, before all the dancing and the revelry started), or on those Saturday weddings, attending shortly before the end of the Sabbath and extending into the evening after the Sabbath was over with. Either way, it was a rare occasion, but included some part of the wedding ceremony and dinner on the Sabbath. Though not interfering with any of our Sabbath responsibilities, and it was in consideration of close family relationships—and the fact that God Himself considers marriage a very good thing, even marriage outside the church.

Brethren, I am not advocating that you do the same thing, but this is something that Nancy and I have done in the past—with careful thought and respect for our great God, who separated us for His purposes. This is the case, and it was with us most of the time; the key phrase here is “most of the

time.” Because back in late spring, we ended up allowing ourselves to be swept into spending too much of God's holy Sabbath time that we should have spent someplace else, and doing what we *should* have done. We had not made sure what we were doing, but God made sure we knew what was going on.

The wedding was downtown, and because of circumstances we needed to be passengers with my sister and brother-in-law. Originally, it was to be late afternoon/early evening, but because they wanted to go earlier (to be downtown in time for the wedding ceremony), we left for downtown Chicago at 4:30 (about an hour after Sabbath services ended, our time in Chicago). That time of year, there is still quite a bit of God's holy time left, but we were along for the ride, we went along with their plan. We love our family, and are pleased to be with them when we could, because it is not very often. However, right from the get-go, it just did not seem right spending so much of God's holy time someplace—where people did not care about this extraordinary blessing that Nancy and I had.

There were several uncomfortable moments (to say the least), but the afternoon of God's holy Sabbath turned into early evening. But toward the end of the Sabbath, the wedding was over, and we were seated awaiting the main course of the meal to be served. The place where the wedding and the reception took place was in an exclusive restaurant. It was located in about a three block stretch of very trendy restaurants, just west of downtown Chicago. The bride's father had reserved the whole restaurant (on a busy Saturday) for the exclusive use of the ceremony, the reception, and the dinner for about 200 people.

Because it was a restaurant, there were large windows all the way along the north wall, looking out onto the outdoor sidewalk dining area, and the heavily trafficked street beyond that. Because it was such a beautiful late spring evening, there were many people strolling, others riding in open cars, and even horse-drawn carriages. We were seated at a table close to the windows, with some of my siblings talking and awaiting the main course for the dinner to be served. Suddenly (out of the corner of my eye), I saw what appeared to be a naked person on a bicycle, then another, and another. Nancy I turned away, as people, along with their children, flocked to the windows, and on to the street to view the procession of naked men and women.

Over 200 people passed by in this unseemly and distressing 20 minute event, just as God's holy time was ending. Nancy and I were the odd ducks trying to shield our eyes from the abominable event while adults and children alike were laughing, cheering, and taking selfies of the salacious spectacle debauchery within the background of their pictures. It was an incredibly painful experience, as we silently bade God to forgive us for our careless misuse of His holy time. As opposed to what Richard said yesterday, “The Sabbath should produce joy when used properly, when it is not used properly, it produces misery and pain.”—and we were in pain.

Brethren, as I said, I am sharing this most shameful experience with you, because we need to see just how far the chasm between God and the world is getting, and how much we need to be tending and keeping the extraordinary blessings He has given us with thoughtful care—as we remain within the place of safety. The place of safety is His holy time, and how we use it. This is holy time—this week—apart from this world, and how we are going to use it.

Please turn with me to a scripture more often read around Passover, which is the number one most sure promise of God's blessings as we keep this Feast with great care. As I said, we were going to come back to that one point, “of being separated from this world”. So please turn with me to John 17—very important scripture, very important promise. We will be reading all the way from verse 12 through 23.

This is Jesus Christ’s prayer to His Father in the night before He died.

John 17:12-23 “While I was with them in the world, I kept them in Your name. Those whom You gave Me I have kept; and none of them is lost except the son of perdition, that the Scripture might be fulfilled. But now I come to You, and these things I speak in the world, that they may have My joy fulfilled in themselves. 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. I do not pray for this alone. . . .

Brethren, up to that point, He was specifically talking about the apostles, those men that had been with Him for three and a half years, that He had focused this careful instruction with, and now we come into the picture.

John 17:20-23 “I do not pray for this alone, but also for those who will believe in Me through their word; that they all may be one, as You, Father, are in Me, and I in You; that they also may be one in Us, that the world may believe that You sent Me. And the glory which You gave Me I have given them, that they may be one just as We are one: I in them, and You in Me; that they may be made perfect in one, and that the world may know that You have sent Me, and have loved them as You have loved Me.”

Brethren, without a doubt, we must understand first and foremost: that God has separated us from an evil, despicable world to be one with the Father and the Son, and each other. *But* only if we remain safely within the word of truth, tending and keeping the precious blessings He has given us. Especially as we sit here today in this room, and our brethren join us through the electronics—and through God's Holy Spirit—in other places around the world.

So, first and foremost this week, we must have an obligation to carefully listen to the truth that God is giving us through each of these men sent to teach us the word of truth. They will be preached from the sanctuary of this place of safety, where God has placed His name this year. This in itself is the most extraordinary blessing for us, and how well we are going to be ready to tend and keep it each and every day of the sacred Feast—with our minds ready, and willing, and able, and ready to learn.

It is the next scripture though, that is a key to tending to and keeping the Feast, and the assurance that goes hand in hand with it. So please turn with me to Hebrews 10, we will start in verse 14.

Hebrews 10:14 For by one offering He has perfected forever those who are being sanctified.

Jesus Christ is the offering, and we are being sanctified. Down in verse 19.

Hebrews 10:19-25 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 over the house of God, let us draw near with a true heart and 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. And let us consider one another in order to stir up love and good works, not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as is the manner of some, but exhorting one another, and so much the more as you see the Day approaching.

Could there be any greater the blessing than direct access to the Father through Jesus Christ? How well are we tending and keeping our responsibility regarding this one? To stay as close to Him as possible so that we can rightly discern the words of truth? Carefully woven into this are verses 24 and 25: we are here to tend to this extraordinary blessing of assembling together—and not just on the first and on the eighth days, not just each services, but through all the time we have been given this extraordinary blessing to be with brethren of like mind. The Amplified Bible puts it this way:

Hebrews 10:24-25 (AMP) And let us consider and give attentive, continuous care to watching over one another, studying how we may stir up (stimulate and incite) to love and helpful deeds and noble activities, not forsaking or neglecting to assemble together [as believers], as is the habit of some people, but admonishing (warning, urging, and encouraging) one another, and all the more faithfully as you see the day approaching.

Brethren, who else in this world has been so extraordinarily blessed to do this, set apart from a world that grows more divisive every day? Regardless of whether you are in this room, or connected—through the power of God's Holy Spirit—on the Internet (and all the things we have available to us), we are all participating in the extraordinary blessings God gives to His people—to carefully study how we can stir each other to love, and helpful deeds, and noble activities.

Especially, we who are gathered in this room today need to be carefully thinking how we can tend to our brother who cannot be in this room today. There is a way, but you must figure it out. There is a piece of paper on the back table with the addresses of a number of the people who are not here with us. How many of you have picked this up? Even if you are not sending them a card, how much are you praying about this every morning? And not just these people on this list, but you all know people who are not here, and your prayers go before God—ground-firmly-incense of the saints. So you could be praying for these people.

There are all sorts of opportunities we have to tend to this blessing. Let us go down to verse 32 of Hebrews 10,

Hebrews 10:32 But recall the former days in which, after you were illuminated, you endured a great struggle with sufferings.

Hebrews 10:35-39 Therefore do not cast away your confidence, which has great reward. For you have need of endurance, so that after you have done the will of God, you may receive the promise: “For yet a little while, and He who is coming will come and will not tarry. Now the just shall live by faith; but if anyone draws back, My soul has no pleasure in him.” But we are not of those who draw back to perdition, but of those who believe to the saving of the soul [through Jesus Christ].

Some of us have been rehearsing these days for many years, and sometimes at a great cost. But are we becoming world-weary, slipping in how we are tending and keeping the extraordinary blessing God has given to be in this place of safety? Have we become as careless with God's holy time as Nancy and I were that Sabbath—when we separated ourselves from the security of

God's holy time, and suffered through the agony of placing ourselves on the outside of God's blessing?

Please turn with me to a scripture that makes it absolutely clear how we need to see these days, and the extraordinary blessing God has given us to tend and keep. Turn with me to Psalm 133, a memorable scripture for all of you I am sure; very short, easy to remember; but very, very profound.

Psalm 133:1-3 Behold, how good and how pleasant it is for brethren to dwell together in unity! It is like the precious oil upon the head, running down on the beard, the beard of Aaron, running down on the edge of his garments. It is like the dew of Hermon, descending upon the mountain of Zion; for there the Lord commanded the blessing—life forevermore.

This psalm is a direct connection between what we are doing here this week, and the precious anointing by God of Aaron and the priests—His priests, His kings. How important is the unity that we are diligently working at this week, and how much are we going to regret having missed another opportunity to become closer to God's holiness? I am not saying you are not going to have a good week; I am not saying you are going to have a good week to fellowship, and you are going to do things during this week. But do not ever overlook how carefully God is working at getting us in the right place He wants us to be—all the time.

I told you at the beginning of this message, there is another very personal turn of events in my life over the last several weeks that I thought I need to share with you today. Because I felt it was another example of God's careful work in each of us over the course of our lives. To recognize something we do not normally recognize, but He always sees it—He always sees the end from the beginning. He is always moving ahead; we just do not always see we are always moving with Him. So we miss things along the way that we can, but we could have done better.

Probably what I am going to tell you is going to be like when one of your friends invites you over to endure hours on end of their home movies. Each

film is a precious memory attached to it for your friend, but to you it is an endurance battle to keep your eyes from glazing over, and boredom. Everyone has his own story only unto them.

So please bear with me, and try not to fall asleep, and pray that my wife does not bean me for sharing this with you (because she does not have any idea). Even though this really means quite a bit to Nancy and myself, I hope I can at least plant a seed in your mind—of how extraordinarily and singularly tailored His blessings are to each and every one of you out there, each and every one of us. And we should not miss a moment of tending to them.

Before I go any further, I want you to know, I do not believe that everything that happens is a direct result of God's intervention. “Oh, that dollar down there. God meant me to have a dollar. That is great, this is time.” However, (as I have said before and written before) I do firmly believe that you can clearly follow a pattern, and a trail that leads back to God's hand. And if you can see it—which you should be looking for it—you better be willing to take notice.

So there is much more of a backstory to what I am going to tell you right now, which adds into all this pattern, but I am going to share with you a story. I am a practical person who sees the world for what it is, but I am also a bit of a romantic. This is a trait that I inherited from my father, who has spent a lifetime wooing my mother. (Now there is a good word for you Dr. Maas, “woo”).

Last month was the 50th anniversary of our very first date Nancy and I had, when we were in high school. It is easy for me to remember because it happened on my 17th birthday. So in honor of the occasion—and in tribute to her—I surprised her with a 10 minute video (that I had worked on over the course, on and off, for three or four weeks putting it together), pictures in sync with songs (Apple iMovie is a great thing to use).

During the course of going through pictures of our lives together, I came across three pictures in particular that inspired me to realize a blessing that I knew was there. I treated it as a blessing, but had not really appreciated it at the time throughout our lives together as much as I should. One picture was of Nancy and my mom, with their arms around each other. The other was of

Nancy standing at my mom's grave (two days after she was buried, on a snow covered afternoon). And the other was Nancy and myself on the night of our senior prom. In that picture, our arms were around each other, I was looking straight ahead, and she was looking up at me that said I was everything in her life.

As I said, I do not believe everything that happens is orchestrated by God. But along with many things I have not told you, I see a pattern here that definitely showed me God's extraordinary blessings, and how much better I should have tended and kept it—if I saw the blessing with the clarity that I had at that moment. It only took 50 years. It was no accident that our first date was on my 17th birthday. My mom and Nancy always had an extraordinary relationship. As a matter of fact, it was a family joke that the only one that she clearly recognized when my mom was in the throes of Alzheimer's shortly before she died, was Nancy.

One evening a short time before she died, I had been sitting with Mom through the afternoon, and now in the early evening I was waiting for Nancy to come and pick me up. Some of my siblings were there at the time they arrived, and as we talked with Mom, she was calling us by wrong names, not clearly recognizing anyone, even to the point of calling me Donna—Donna, John, John Mark, etc. But as she looked out the window from her chair next to the balcony doors of the third floor condo, she started to loudly proclaim, and announce: “There's Nancy. Here's Nancy.”

My sister Donna turned to me with a look of incredulity, knowing that she could not possibly see Nancy coming in the twilight of the evening, not to mention knowing it was her. I looked out the window, and sure enough there was our car pulling around the front of the condo. Nancy could not find a parking place directly in front of the building that night, so she pulled around the other side, and she found a spot on the other side of a small park that was located right in front of Mom's complex. As soon as Nancy got out of the car and started to walk across the sidewalk that cut through the middle of the park, my mom kept pointing out the window, and proclaiming, “It's Nancy! It's Nancy!” At that time, we all found this quite amusing.

But, as I remembered that night almost three years ago—among a number of other things too numerous to mention—while I looked at those three photos,

something became very clear to me. It was no accident God blessed me with life through my mom on September 9th, 1950, and blessed me with life through Nancy on September 9th, 1967. She was, and has been God's extraordinary blessing to us both—and my mom was doing it. She was pointing to her, “It’s Nancy, it’s Nancy.” I told this story to another dear friend of mine, and he said, “A wife is an incredible blessing from God, and a wife who looks to her husband to lead even though she can do so many things herself, is a double blessing.”

Brethren, I apologize to you for your eyes glazing over, and after being subjected to our personal home movie. But I think there is a very important lesson for us here today, within this extraordinary blessing of God's Feast of Tabernacles. Although I have always considered Nancy a blessing to our lives (to our children, our grandchildren), if I would have appreciated just what an extraordinary gift from God she had been to me, and had done what I should have according to God's truth—His Word—and been the husband I should have been as Jesus Christ leads His church, our lives probably would have been even better.

You have to keep an eye on the blessing, and you have to tend and keep that blessing with a maximum effort. Keep looking for it, finding it, and keeping it.

As we wrap this up, I would like to turn to a set of scriptures that may help you connect our story with yours—and our God-given responsibility—to faithfully recognize, tend, and keep the extraordinary blessings He gives us with maximum effort this week. No matter what they are, we must see those blessings for what they are, because God has given us those blessings, and placed us within His body to be of service to one another. And it is all about being in the place that Jesus Christ is prepared—in the body of Christ.

I want you to turn to Ephesians 5. I want you really to see (I mean with the story I just told you, it has marked significance for husbands and wives) the juxtaposition of the scriptures pointing to family, alongside the work of Jesus Christ—interweaving one with the other so strongly that we need to take notice.

Ephesians 5:1-2 Therefore be imitators of God as dear children. And walk in love, as Christ also has loved us and given Himself for us, an offering and a sacrifice to God for a sweet-smelling aroma.

Ephesians 5:8 For you were once darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Walk as children of light.

Ephesians 5:15-17 See then that you walk circumspectly, not as fools but as wise, redeeming the time, because the days are evil. Therefore do not be unwise, but understand what the will of the Lord is.

Ephesians 5:19-23 Speaking to one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody in your heart to the Lord, giving thanks always for all things to God the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, submitting to one another in the fear of God. Wives, submit to your own husbands as to the Lord. For the husband is head of the wife, as also Christ is head of the church; and He is the Savior of the body.

Remember, I am asking you to see the juxtaposition God has given us here. The most important thing is Christ and the church:

Ephesians 5:24-31 Therefore, just as the church is subject to Christ, so let the wives be to their own husbands in everything. Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ also loved the church and gave Himself for her, that He might sanctify and cleanse her with the washing of the water by the word, that He might present her to Himself a glorious church, not having spot or wrinkle or any such thing, but that she should be holy and without blemish. So husbands ought to love your own wives as their own bodies; he who loves his wife loves himself. For no one ever hated his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it, just as the Lord does the

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church. For we are members of His body, of His flesh and of His bones. “For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh.”

Brethren, we must redeem the time wisely with understanding, tending, and keeping the extraordinary blessings God has given within Christ’s work of sanctifying, and blessing His church.

A line from the fourth song that I used in the video presentation for Nancy, was from a song called “An Ordinary Couple.” The line says “We’ll laugh, we’ll weep together, . . . across the years we’ll ride, our arms around each other, our children by our side.” Brethren, we are all ordinary in the eyes of the world (maybe even worse than that, we are considered goofy), but we have all been given extraordinary blessings to ride across the years together both in laughter and in tears, as Christ sanctifies and cleanses us—the sooner we recognize the blessings of God.

Especially within this very special holy time, He has graciously given the more joyfully productive—as Richard talked about in the Sabbath, “The more joy of production we will receive when these days and every day of our lives are done with Him.”

His blessings are custom made. So please do not waste a moment of your time, when God leads you to recognize His very specific and extraordinary blessings in each of your lives—as Christ prepares us together for the perfection of being holy, as God is holy.