

The Ultimate Gift

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Back in the 1970s as God made His calling obvious to us, Nancy and I started on this long journey we are all on, starting the earliest stages of our wake-up call that God custom makes for each and every one of us.

Sometimes, we keep hitting the snooze button, which often ends up with us running around like chickens with their heads cut off, banging on the wall because we have not carefully thought about things; because we got up late, and missed the alarm clock—we have not thoughtfully started the new day.

In retrospect, unfortunately I think I hit the snooze button enough times that we began our journey like the expectant father who charges around like a lunatic when his wife goes into labor, thoughtlessly leaving his pregnant wife standing on the front porch while he runs down the street. Finally realizing a couple blocks from the house that she is still standing on the porch, he then turns around and goes back, while she is standing there wondering, “Why did I even marry this goofball?”

As we began that most important part of our life's journey, Nancy and I (more me than her) had some other not-so-very carefully thought out events, sometimes more pharisaical than thoughtfully considered with the outgoing concern of the mind of Christ. Of course, there was also quite a bit of straddling the fence when we did not want to make waves.

Hopefully, much of this has changed for the better over the years, becoming more sincerely right than sincerely wrong. Hopefully, by the grace of God, our walk behind Jesus Christ has become more carefully considered, than commanded.

I would like you to keep that in your mind—carefully considered than commanded—and I would also like you to keep in mind Clyde’s sermonette “I Desire Mercy and Not Sacrifice,” because I think it really fit well into what I am going to give you this morning.

God's holy days are time for careful consideration, both backward without regret, and forward with the incredible hope that lies before us, so we can carefully live the Word of God now.

The Feast of Tabernacles is an especially important time for us to do this. God has carefully-prepared messages for us to hear this Feast week, so we can more effectively live lives according to the truth of God's Word in a world that is dumbfounded as Pilate was when he stood and asked, “What is truth?” How ironic he cynically asked the question, while the eyes of the living Truth of God was staring him right in the face. We literally have that today—we have God's truth with us.

Brethren, nothing has changed in this world. The world still asks that question without eyes to see, while God's truth is front and center. God even says this. And we have been given eyes to see and ears to hear clearly by God's Holy Spirit.

I hope we will not only carefully consider what we will be given this week, but that we rejoice together also, knowing by the grace of God we have been given the privilege to have eyes to see, and ears to hear Jesus Christ. I hope it will give us more time to fully appreciate all the work the Great God is doing for all men. We were talking about that this morning, and I hope we get something out of it.

Part of our commanded rejoicing includes physically drawing more closely knit with shared times and stories. With that in mind, what I hope God has given me the honor to prepare for you is close to what we used to call in Spokesman's Club, the speech that was pretty much what all speeches aim towards, “The Heart to Heart.” I said, “close to” because the “Heart to Heart” is not supposed to be about anybody else except you. However, I can only give you this sermon today by telling you about the gifts God gives us through other people.

We need to consider that although we have a uniquely singular opportunity within God's plan, He is working out so many ways to accomplish His great plan through all men, to create all men in His image.

I know you are very familiar with these scriptures. Let us start in II Peter 3.

II Peter 3:1-9 Beloved, I now write to you this second epistle (in both of which I stir up your pure minds by way of reminder), that you may be mindful of the words which were spoken before by the holy prophets, and of the commandment of us, the apostles of the Lord and Savior, knowing this first: that scoffers will come in the last days, walking according to their own lusts, and saying, "Where is the promise of His coming? For since the fathers fell asleep, all things continue as they were from the beginning of creation." For this they willfully forget: that by the word of God the heavens were of old, and the earth standing out of water and in the water, by which the world that then existed perished, being flooded with water. But the heavens and the earth which are now preserved by the same word, are reserved for fire until the day of judgment and perdition of ungodly men. But, beloved, do not forget this one thing, that with the Lord one day is as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day. The Lord is not slack concerning His promise, as some count slackness, but is longsuffering toward us, not willing that any should perish but that all should come to repentance.

Now, turn with me to I Timothy 2.

I Timothy 2:1-6 Therefore I exhort first of all that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and giving of thanks be made for all men, for kings and all who are in authority, that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and reverence. For this is good and acceptable in the sight of God our Savior, who desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth. For there is one God and one Mediator between God and men, the Man Christ Jesus, who gave Himself a ransom for all, to be testified in due time.

Although we have been called out of this world now, and given a singularly incredible privilege, God's work extends way beyond us. Part of our rejoicing at this feast needs to be from an increased understanding of how broadly God's work extends by sharing our stories of lives lived under God's direction, seeing His work and the power of His hand always working towards His ultimate end—Him bringing all men into His Family.

That being said, I would like to read to you the purpose of that spokesman club's speech, because I think it truly fits into what God intends for all of us here during these feast days, while dwelling together, preparing to go back into battle with renewed appreciation for God and one another.

It reads in spokesman Club Manual:

You have been giving speeches before men in your club for a year or more now. They have seen you under many different circumstances. You know, by now, that your fellow members are all for you. You may have already served in one of our offices in the club. Now is the time for you to tear down any remaining barriers that may still exist between you and the rest of the club.

Be completely honest. Bare your chest. Open your heart. Speak on a subject so close to you that will reveal your innermost feelings. Let other men know the real you.

This is not a public listing of your sins, though it may be a good self-examination in front of others, letting them know what makes you tick. It is designed to bring you close to your audience, to do away with pretense, to dissolve your self-centered worry and fear. Place your problems, fears, ambitions, goals, good and bad feelings before your fellow brothers in Christ. Use your own experiences as an example. Explain why you are the way you are. Tell what you think about in your deep inner feelings, about some heartfelt subject, or about [who] your own personality and self are.

It is interesting that God's Feast of Tabernacles is preceded by the Day of Atonement—a day He gives as a gift to carefully consider all the work that

Jesus Christ has done, is doing, and is going to do, not just for us, but with others. But, as He continues to do for us, we were able to think about that as we prepared for this Feast—a Feast that centers on Jesus Christ; we closely develop not only our relationship with Him, but also with one another.

We need to do this carefully because, just as He serves the creation, we need to learn to serve each other as He does—to serve all those who are going to come after us. What a creation!

With this in mind, I would like to tell you about something that has been very compelling to me this year in preparation for the fall holy days.

Early on in the church, my knee jerk approach often ended up sending wrong messages and caused more problems than good to ourselves and those around us.

One of these commanded-but-not-considered things had to do with birthdays. When we first realized that birthdays are self-centered celebrations, and are only mentioned a few times in the Bible with disastrous results, and that most modern birthday celebrations had their origins in self-centered pagan customs, we jumped in whole hog (me, not Nancy) and placed birthdays on the, “Don’t even mention them list,” to be avoided at all costs like the plague (or coronavirus, I guess). We almost treated them like the mark of the beast.

Needless to say, this became quite upsetting to some of our family outside the church, and to this day I have family members that are still afraid to mention a birthday greeting to me (because they are afraid I will jump on them or something) because I had made such an issue out of it without really considering it. Do not get me wrong. We still do not lavishly celebrate birthdays. But after seeking wise counsel and careful thought, we put them in their proper perspective.

As we have written on our website (www.cgg.org), I will quote from the website:

The Bible reveals that celebrating our physical birth is not an issue of primary importance to God. He is far more concerned with the

development of spiritual character within us and our being born into His Kingdom. It is evident that God does not want His people to mimic [the world](#) in a self-serving and greedy approach. This certainly includes what one thinks about and how one treats the anniversary of one's birth.” (*Should a Christian Celebrate Birthdays?*)

This was probably our first learning experience on a large scale for Nancy and me. What we are commanded without any careful consideration of what God expects, can turn a gentle breeze in the sail into a huge storm that will sink the ship. Birthdays are not anathema to our relationship with God, but a time for us to carefully consider the very gift of life that God has given, and what we should do with it. As we began to consider the principles of God's Word more carefully, we began doing things, hopefully, more in line with those principles.

We started to teach our kids a little bit differently. When our kids were little, Nancy used to make them their favorite meal on their birthdays, and I might take them for a bit of ice cream. But the most important thing I did with the kids, and still do to this day as they are adults (I still get calls from them, “Tell us, dad...”) was to recount the day of their births with the vivid burned-into-my-mind-memory of what those days were like, and share with them what a blessing and a gift from God they were to our family; what a gift their precious life is intended to be in service to God and to others.

I was also able to share with them how much appreciation they needed to have for all the gifts God had given them, to grow into what He expected them to become. We tried to help them learn how important it was to take time to consider those gifts, with the focus not on themselves, but with thanksgiving and celebration of the lives and work of those who God had used to help them along the way.

When I began to consider these things myself, I realized my own life was a gift from God through my parents. So every year on my birthday, I gave my mom a dozen roses, and let her know how much I appreciated the gift that had been given me through them.

This world sees birthdays as self-centered celebrations. God sees birthdays as times for celebrations of the gifts He has given, with the special gratitude for those He has used to work in sacrificial service to us.

What I have said to this point is merely an introduction to this sermon, but I wanted you to know where this was coming from. I hope you do not see this as something self-centered, but rather see a bit of insight into how much God needs to be appreciated, and see the sacrificial work others do on our behalf within the responsibilities He has given them. So I am going to share with you some stories myself.

Ten days before the Feast of Trumpets this year, I reached the three score years and ten on September 9th. But leading up to that day, I had done something with myself that I had always done with our kids: I re-lived the circumstances of the day I was born and the weeks that followed through September 20th, 1950.

Of course, I could not do what I had done with the kids as an eyewitness of the joy of the gifts God had given the day that they were born, but I could consider the gifts God had given me from the conversations that I had had with my mom and dad over the years.

You see, when I first began giving flowers to my mom on my birthday, it was more or less as a peace offering because one of those early moments of running around like your chicken with your head cut off had been what caused my mom a great deal of pain—the way I initially handled the birthday issue. Over the years, flowers for my mom on my birthday became a lesson to our children of God's way of give, rather than get. Then a few years later, the flowers became an absolute heartfelt appreciation to Mom for my life, and thanksgiving to God and all that He had given me, and mom and dad.

But this year was different. I think it had to do with the sermon I had intended to give to you this morning, but was sidetracked by this heart to heart. The other sermon that is still being prepared for a later date, focused on the work God is doing to prepare each of us for the ultimate gift that is His desire to give all men.

However, apparently God had something else in mind for us this morning (as we sit in this place of safety—a gift from God in a world in absolute chaos and confusion). We are here to recharge our batteries, so that we can go out from here with renewed vigor to do whatever it takes in self-sacrifice not just for each other, but for all those God is preparing us to serve with our older brother, Jesus Christ, through the Millennium and beyond.

The steps of the ultimate gift in the other sermon actually made me spend more time this year than any other carefully considering what incredible gifts God had given right from the beginning of my life, from others whom He graciously gifted and blessed in ways that they even will not completely see until their own resurrection in their order, as God has determined.

I would like to begin this section of the sermon with a couple of scriptures that hopefully will put what I am about to say in its proper perspective as only God can truly see it. We need to pull a very important principle from them if we are to begin to see things within the perspective God has graciously given to us.

Please turn with me to Romans 11. We will be picking it up in verse 25 during Paul's explanation of God's incredible plan to restore life and hope, when they seemed to be gone:

Romans 11:25-36 For I do not desire, brethren, that you should be ignorant of this mystery, lest you should be wise in your own opinion, that blindness in part has happened to Israel until the fullness of the Gentiles has come in. And so all Israel will be saved, as it is written: "The Deliverer will come out of Zion, and He will turn away ungodliness from Jacob; for this is My covenant with them, when I take away their sins." Concerning the gospel they are enemies for your sake, but concerning the election they are beloved for the sake of the fathers. For the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable. For as you were once disobedient to God, yet have now obtained mercy through their disobedience, even so these also have now been disobedient, that through the mercy shown you they also may obtain mercy. For God has committed them all to disobedience, that He might have mercy on all. Oh, the depth of the

riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are His judgments and His ways past finding out! "For who has known the mind of the LORD? Or who has become His counselor?" "Or who has first given to Him and it shall be repaid to him?" For of Him and through Him and to Him are all things, to whom be glory forever. Amen.

God's planning and purpose is past our ability as human beings to understand without His Holy Spirit leading the way. But even then, we only see through a glass darkly, as the apostle Paul said in I Corinthians 13:12.

We need to have this principle from Romans firmly in our minds as we continue on here, because it is an important point. Here in Romans 11 Paul is specifically referring to his work with Israel. And, as Richard so clearly taught on Atonement about God's work to reconcile His special people (that He has set apart to the work ahead during the Millennium), we need to take this a step further, in principle, as it relates to all the work He is doing with all—those who will eventually be brought to repentance, salvation, and knowledge of the truth in their order. We need to consider this with deep appreciation for everything that God does throughout His creation, because of what happened to Israel for our instruction.

While we prepare for Christ's return, we should also be instructed by the lessons we learn from others who will not have a part in the better first resurrection at Christ's return, but will have their place in the Family of God in their order. Learning from some of their examples is critical for our approach going forward, as we go out of this place of safety in seven days, heading back into a world that gets harder to deal with both personally and nationally.

Brethren, deal with it we must; in a self-sacrificial attitude; in submission to every word of God; in knowing that even our most dire situations and problems are part of the solution that God is meticulously working out. While even knowing this, we must learn to be grateful to God for each and every gift He has given us within the trials of our lives.

I would like to read to you what the apostle Paul wrote in Romans 11:33 and carried into chapter 12. And, I want to read it from *The Message Bible*, because I think it is really dynamic. Paul writes beginning in verse 33:

Romans 11:33 (The Message Bible) Have you ever come on anything quite like this extravagant generosity of God, this deep, deep wisdom? It's way over our heads. We'll never figure it out. Is there anyone around who can explain God? Anyone smart enough to tell him what to do? Anyone who has done him such a huge favor that God has to ask his advice? Everything comes from him; everything happens through him; everything ends up in him. Always glory! Always praise! Yes. Yes. Yes.

Romans 12:1-3 (The Message Bible) So here's what I want you to do, God helping you: Take your everyday, ordinary life—your sleeping, eating, going-to-work, and walking-around life—and place it before God as an offering. Embracing what God does for you is the best thing you can do for him. Don't become so well-adjusted to your culture that you fit into it without even thinking. Instead, fix your attention on God. You'll be changed from the inside out. Readily recognize what he wants from you, and quickly respond to it. Unlike the culture around you, always dragging you down to its level of immaturity, God brings the best out of you, develops well-formed maturity in you. I'm speaking to you out of deep gratitude for all that God has given me, and especially as I have responsibilities in relation to you. Living then, as every one of you does, in pure grace, it's important that you not misinterpret yourselves as people who are bringing this goodness to God. No, God brings it all to you. The only accurate way to understand ourselves is by what God is and by what he does for us, not by what we are and what we do for him.

With this in mind, I thought I would share with you some very personal things. I hope I can help you all to focus on how much we need to thank God for all the gifts, even the ones that almost seem to destroy us. Brethren, we need to keep in mind that nothing God does is aimed at our destruction, but for our benefit, if we gratefully keep our focus on Him. And His promises

are sure, regardless of whether He has called someone into the body of Christ now or at a later time.

We are under a stricter judgment now, because to whom much is given, much is required. So we had better embrace all we can from the lessons we can glean from the work God is doing in His planning and His purpose for our work with Jesus Christ.

Again, please keep in mind—it is vital for us to understand that as we head back into the world, it is undoubtedly going to cause a great deal of pain, which will only be for our good—if we keep ourselves committed to faithfully living by every Word of God in sacrificial service even to those who are our enemies.

As I mentioned a little earlier in the sermon, I did with myself a few weeks ago what I had tried to do with our kids: spending a good deal of time considering the circumstances of my life and the blessings I enjoyed from the gifts from God through others who sacrificed their own lives. I spent time trying to understand the struggles and the pain my parents had endured within the only faith that they knew by the grace of God, in order to endure what must have been the most crushing pain and sacrifice of themselves for others.

It is not about me, but about them and the beneficial gifts God gave them because they used their own God-given faith (as much as they knew it) to march through life, although they, like Israel, were being prepared for another place at another time.

This is not unique to my family, but it is a uniquely personal experience that I hope we can all use as a springboard to consider how much we need to carefully think of the work that God is doing beyond ourselves, and how much more accountable we are because of what God expects from us.

I am the second of seven children who were born to my mom and dad, but my older sister, Cathy was probably the one whose life had the most lasting impact on the rest of us. My mom and dad were married July 17, 1948.

Cathy was born a year later, on July 28, 1949. I came along a year later, September 9, 1950. However, Cathy died on September 20, 1950, only 11 days later.

I am not sharing this with you as a morbid tale of death. But I want to share with you my thoughts over the last few weeks of the great gift of faith, courage, and endurance, and love that two people shared because their faith by the grace of God (as much as they understood it) was so strong they not only weathered the storms of life, but they came out better at the end.

Throughout my life, [the memory of] Cathy was always there, occasionally with sorrow and pain for my mom and dad. I was a part of what made two kids, barely in their early twenties, stronger and more willing to sacrifice for others through the rest of their lifetime.

I have a difficult time relating all that had been on my mind over the last few weeks regarding all the gifts that came from my parents as I tried to fit together the pieces of what I knew from what mom and dad told me—the joys and the sorrows they endured over the months while expecting another child while the first was deathly sick. I tried to picture what it must have been like for the two of them as they rejoiced with the birth of a son, but they endured the next 10 difficult days—mom being home with me, while Dad flew Cathy up to Mayo Clinic, their last hope of saving her life.

Cathy died at Mayo that September day, September 20, 1950. But her life and death were part of the bond that drew my parents and our whole family closer together. It was a gift that they shared as they continued moving forward, giving of themselves to each other and the other six of us they sacrificially nurtured. Cathy has always been a gift from God to our whole family in a way that only God could clearly see. I certainly look forward to seeing her in the resurrection on the last day.

I am not sharing this with you because I spent a great deal of time over those days a few weeks ago considering the incredible blessings that God gave through these two people to me, my siblings, and most everyone that they quietly served and cheerfully served over the years. I am sharing it with you so you can think about these things in your own life in the right perspective.

But before going any further in this, I want to make something perfectly clear: This wonderful gift God chose to give my parents with their zealous faith in Jesus Christ as they knew it, had a side to it that most of us have experienced with a great deal of discomfort because of the way they thought of Jesus Christ.

If we are to walk in Jesus Christ's footsteps, then we also are going to find ourselves in the same similar kind of circumstances that He did and had to endure.

In offering meat in due season, please turn with me to John 7.

John 7:1-8 After these things Jesus walked in Galilee; for He did not want to walk in Judea, because the Jews sought to kill Him. Now the Jews' Feast of Tabernacles was at hand. His brothers therefore said to Him, "Depart from here and go into Judea, that Your disciples also may see the works that You are doing. For no one does anything in secret while he himself seeks to be known openly. If You do these things, show Yourself to the world." For even His brothers did not believe in Him. Then Jesus said to them, "My time has not yet come, but your time is always ready. The world cannot hate you, but it hates Me because I testify of it that its works are evil. You go up to this feast. I am not yet going up to this feast, for My time has not yet fully come."

John 7:10-20 But when His brothers had gone up, then He also went up to the feast, not openly, but as it were in secret. Then the Jews sought Him at the feast, and said, "Where is He?" And there was much complaining among the people concerning Him. Some said, "He is good"; others said, "No, on the contrary, He deceives the people." However, no one spoke openly of Him for fear of the Jews. Now about the middle of the feast Jesus went up into the temple and taught. And the Jews marveled, saying, "How does this Man know letters, having never studied?" Jesus answered them and said, "My doctrine is not Mine, but His who sent Me. If anyone wills to do His will, he shall know concerning the doctrine, whether it is from God or whether I speak on My own authority. He who speaks from himself seeks his own glory; but He who seeks the

glory of the One who sent Him is true, and no unrighteousness is in Him. Did not Moses give you the law, yet none of you keeps the law? Why do you seek to kill Me?" The people answered and said, "You have a demon. Who is seeking to kill You?"

In a short section cited from John Ritenbaugh's Bible study on the book of John:

You could see that very well, any of you who have come out of another church. Maybe before you came out of that church, you had a confrontation with the minister. And you told him you would like to withdraw from the Methodist church or whatever, for example. You did not want to be considered a part of that church. So you had a meeting with the minister. And what did he think? Well, he thought that you were being led away into something that was false, something that was cultish and that you were being taken away from the true religion.

That happened to my wife and me. We were coming out of the Christian Missionary Alliance Church. The assistant pastor came to visit at our house. I am sure that he did that at the behest of several of our relatives who were also members of that church. And here, we were being 'led away by Herbert W. Armstrong.' So Mr. Goodwin shows up at the house and talks to us. He was not really argumentative or anything like that. He talked to us and tries to get us to turn around, to go back to the Christian Missionary Alliance Church. But before he left, he knelt down on the floor and asked God to deliver us from the hands of devils.

That is what the Jews were doing. They thought Jesus was leading them away from the true religion. You can understand why those people reached that verdict. It was what they believed. In a sense, by their standard of judgment, there was an element of truth in everything that they said.

In our own circumstances, it was my mother and father. They called me to their house to explain to me for two hours, how could we possibly be doing such a horrible thing to our children and the family. Unfortunately, because I was less prepared to speak in seeking the glory of the One who had called us,

and was more out of my own self-righteousness, I did a really nice job of giving my dad the impression that I was right, and that he did not understand.

Brethren, times are going to get worse. Even from our own families the problems may be coming. But, quite often, there will be much better ways to handle things that I did without compromising God's Word. There are also going to be times when we will be in positions that have strongest constraints that will come from our own families. However, this too is a gift from God. Your efforts to hold the line must be out of love for them within God's purpose, to bring them to Him in their order.

Although our physical relationship with our family and friends are never going to be quite the same in this life, we must keep in mind that they, too, have a hope that they do not even begin to see, and we must do our job so that we can help them when it is time to help them along the way.

My dad died suddenly of a heart attack in 1996 when we were at the Feast of Tabernacles in San Antonio. But Mom lived another 19 years until she died in 2015. After she died, we found notes almost in the form of a diary that she had written to herself over the years, obviously intended to help us move forward when she expected we would find them.

I would like to share with you part of what she wrote on the day Dad died, because I think it will give you a tiny bit of insight into what was on my mind in gratitude for the work God did through them.

On October 2nd, 1996 she wrote:

Larry died this afternoon. We had a beautiful day—Mass, then breakfast with friends. And we took Dad's cousin, Dorothy, for some shopping and lunch at Lavery's, then took Dorothy back to her house. Arrived home at 3:50. He said, 'Let's just relax and watch TV.' I came down and found him on the floor in the family room bathroom. I knew he was gone. 911—paramedics, hospital—my life is over. He was my life. I feel like I'm living outside myself, just doing the motions of breathing and talking. From the time I was a little girl, I knew he was a special person. By the time I was 15 I knew I would be his partner for life. I was so lucky. I'm

sure you always wondered why, when I had one year left to finish college that we got married. Larry was just out of the Navy, came to see me at U. of I (University of Illinois). He said, 'I know we love each other. We are gonna get married anyway, so why waste another year apart?' You know your dad. Once he made up his mind that was it. I certainly was not about to take a chance that some pretty little girl would come along and nab him, especially since I knew from early on that God intended us to be together. So we got engaged on [the] 22nd of December 1947. Kathy's death was so hard on us—two young people in their early twenties, we clung to each other and prayed a lot. And like always, God stayed with us and led us through our sorrow. Our life wasn't perfect—tubal pregnancy, two miscarriages, and some pretty hefty illnesses with the kids. But we learned to cope with all of it, because we had each other. Did we ever get mad at each other? Of course. Say things we regretted, and disagree? Of course. But again, we had God leading us, and our love to keep us going. Mark, Larry, Mary, Donna, Deedee, John—you were Dad's greatest gifts. He did not always agree with all you said or did, but he never stopped loving or believing in each of you. We always asked God to continue to watch over all of you, and help you all make the right decisions in your life. Always love each other. And remember, the two most important things in your lives are God and family. I love you, Mom.

Brethren what I hope we can take away from this feast is that we have the privilege now to have our citizenship in the Kingdom of God. It is an incredible gift from God to prepare to serve those who will come after us in their order, which God has determined from the beginning.

We are here to rejoice together, apart from this world, with a primary focus on becoming prepared to serve with Jesus Christ, to serve all those yet to be called while knowing that God's hand is not short. His work extends far beyond us; understanding that everything He does is a gift for their good and for the Kingdom of God.

Many times those gifts will be poured out from God to us through others in this world; they will come in ways we do not even understand at times, but we must always be grateful that our Great God is always at work in bringing

all men into His purpose—a family relationship with Him. Certainly for us here today, the most significant part of that preparation is to let Jesus Christ draw us closer in a heart to heart, so we are more completely prepared to carefully consider His Word and apply it correctly under the pressure of a world still driven by that same carnal mind, that same carnal spirit, that drove Christ's own brothers to question His sanity and ideas.

Times are difficult, and they are not going to get any easier. Undoubtedly, they are going to get worse. But remember God's hand in our efforts to have peace with all during these difficult times is God's gift to us and to them, no matter how difficult it may seem.

Please turn with me to Hebrews 12.

Hebrews 12:1-15 Therefore we also, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which so easily ensnares us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking unto Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith, who for the joy that was set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. For consider Him who endured such hostility from sinners against Himself, lest you become weary and discouraged in your souls. You have not yet resisted to bloodshed, striving against sin. And you have forgotten the exhortation which speaks to you as to sons: "My son, do not despise the chastening of the LORD, nor be discouraged when you are rebuked by Him; for whom the LORD loves He chastens, and scourges every son whom He receives."

If you endure chastening, God deals with you as with sons; for what son is there whom a father does not chasten? But if you are without chastening, of which all have become partakers, then you are illegitimate and not sons. Furthermore, we have had human fathers who corrected us, and we paid them respect. Shall we not much more readily be in subjection to the Father of spirits and live? For they indeed for a few days chastened us as seemed best to them, but He for our profit, that we may be partakers of His holiness. Now no chastening seems to be joyful for the present, but painful; nevertheless, afterward it yields the peaceable fruit of righteousness to those

who have been trained by it. Therefore strengthen the hands which hang down, and the feeble knees, and make straight paths for your feet, so that what is lame may not be dislocated, but rather be healed. Pursue peace with all people, and holiness, without which no one will see the Lord: Looking carefully lest anyone fall short of the grace of God; lest any root of bitterness springing up cause trouble, and by this many become defiled.

Brethren, we are among the sinners who Jesus died for, as are the rest of those who are in the world. By the grace of God we have a priceless opportunity that we could never have imagined. We have the awesome privilege right now to know Him and appreciate how expansive His work really is, to have all men in their order the knowledge of God—His mercy—(as Clyde put it in the sermonette.)

In our order, we have the ultimate gift of God's grace and the mind of Christ to pursue peace with all men in a time of incredible enmity, a time unlike anything that I have ever seen. We have the opportunity now to learn to live the mind of Jesus Christ.

Because we need to remind ourselves of a few absolute truths, turn to I Corinthians:

I Corinthians 1:4-10 I thank my God always concerning you for the grace of God which was given to you by Christ Jesus, that you were enriched in everything by Him in all utterance and all knowledge, even as the testimony of Christ was confirmed in you, so that you come short in no gift, eagerly waiting for the revelation of our Lord Jesus Christ, who will also confirm you to the end, that you may be blameless in the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. God is faithful, by whom you were called into the fellowship of His Son, Jesus Christ our Lord. Now I plead with you, brethren, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you all speak the same thing, and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be perfectly joined together in the same mind and in the same judgment.

Now, on down to verse 26:

I Corinthians 1:26-31 For you see your calling, brethren, that not many wise according to the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble, are called. But God has chosen the foolish things of the world to put to shame the wise, and God has chosen the weak things of the world to put to shame the things which are mighty; and the base things of the world and the things which are despised God has chosen, and the things which are not, to bring to nothing the things that are, that no flesh should glory in His presence. But of Him you are in Christ Jesus, who became for us wisdom from God—and righteousness and sanctification and redemption—that, as it is written, "He who glories, let him glory in the LORD."

Brethren, we are the weakest of the men it seems. My parents in so many ways were so much better in their faithfulness than I am. But gifted beyond measure we are, if we remain as close as we can—being perfectly joined together in the same mind and judgment of Jesus Christ.

But why is He doing this with us? He is doing it so even the best and the wisest of men will someday also share with us the absolute joy of an eternal relationship with God in His Family.

Please turn to I Corinthians 15:

I Corinthians 15:1-2 Moreover, brethren, I declare to you the gospel which I preached to you, which also you received and in which you stand, by which also you are saved, if you hold fast that word which I preached to you—unless you believed in vain.

Now, down in verse 19.

I Corinthians 15:19-23 If in this life only we have hope in Christ, we are of all men the most pitiable. But now Christ is risen from the dead, and has become the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep. For since by man came death, by Man also came the resurrection of the dead. For as in Adam all die, even so in Christ

all shall be made alive. But each one in his own order: Christ the firstfruits, afterward those who are Christ's at His coming.

God willing, that will be all of us here in this room and listening and keeping the Feast around the world.

I Corinthians 15:24-26 Then comes the end, when He delivers the kingdom to God the Father, when He puts an end to all rule and all authority and power. For He must reign till He has put all enemies under His feet. The last enemy that will be destroyed is death.

We now have the gospel of God. We should be able to consider how to best navigate through this perilous physical journey, focusing on the ultimate gift of God to all men who He is constantly working on, bringing all men to where He wants them to be.

I would like to turn to Ezekiel 16 which is specifically about God's love and work with Israel, His beloved. But consider God's enduring love and work towards all men He expects to be just like Him.

I am going to read this from the *New Living Translation* because I think it paints a magnificent word picture of God's ultimate feelings for each of us and for His own entire creation, ultimately.

Ezekiel 16:4-8 (NLT) “On the day you were born, no one cared about you. Your umbilical cord was not cut, and you were never washed, rubbed with salt, and wrapped in cloth. No one had the slightest interest in you; no one pitied you or cared for you. On the day you were born, you were unwanted, dumped in a field and left to die. But I came by and saw you there, helplessly kicking about in your own blood. As you lay there, I said, ‘Live!’ And I helped you to thrive like a plant in the field. You grew up and became a beautiful jewel. Your breasts became full, and your body hair grew, but you were still naked. And when I passed by again, I saw that you were old enough for love. So I wrapped my cloak around you to cover your nakedness and declared my marriage vows. I made a covenant with you, says the Sovereign LORD, and you became mine.”

Think of when God does this with everybody.

Ezekiel 16:9-14 (NLT) “Then I bathed you and washed off your blood, and I rubbed fragrant oils into your skin. I gave you expensive clothing of fine linen and silk, beautifully embroidered, and sandals made of fine goatskin leather. I gave you lovely jewelry, bracelets, beautiful necklaces, a ring for your nose, earrings for your ears, and a lovely crown for your head. And so you were adorned with gold and silver. Your clothes were made of fine linen and were beautifully embroidered. You ate the finest foods—choice flour, honey, and olive oil—and became more beautiful than ever. You looked like a queen, and so you were! Your fame soon spread throughout the world because of your beauty. I dressed you in my splendor and perfected your beauty,” says the Sovereign LORD.

I hesitated to read the rest of that chapter because Israel's end was that they squandered God's gifts of love, puffed up by their own beauty. But you will see throughout this week with the mind of God working with you through His Spirit, that He expects much more from us, so that we will not dwell on failure of a people who were not given the heart to succeed. We will go on, now, with the renewed strength to move forward and carry out our royal responsibilities to be holy as God is holy. It is going to be tough moving forward.

Why is each one of you here this week? Because God put us here to seek His will as citizens of His glorious Kingdom; because God is perfecting the beauty of us, His very own beloved in separating us from Satan's system of conspiracies that only produce destruction and death. We are here to carefully consider God's great love for all of His creation, and our responsibilities to become one united body with Jesus Christ with each other as we go our separate ways at the end of this Feast, refreshed, renewed; and much more ready to apply God's Word considered, not commanded, as a way of life in a world of chaos and confusion—because we understand we must love them out there with the same sacrificial love that Jesus Christ had when He gave Himself for everybody.

We are here to learn God's law of outgoing concern so well that we are able to make the right decisions of how to speak and act properly as ambassadors of the Kingdom of God because we are learning to have God's way of life as part of our own DNA. And we shall be living the word of God just like Christ.

I shared with you at the beginning my own incompetence in rightly giving an answer to my mom and dad when I was called before them those two hours that one afternoon when Nancy and I had started on this wonderful journey in the body of Christ. That session finally ended abruptly when Dad pointedly said that family was of the utmost importance; that I could not possibly be pleasing God in doing what we were doing. I agreed with Dad. Family was critical to our relationship with God—it *is* critical to our relationship with God, our family in this room, and our physical family, brethren. But without following what we had proved to be true, worshipping God would be a death sentence. I probably would more carefully consider things these days than back then.

I told Dad he just did not understand what we had come to understand. And if I submitted to his wishes rather than God's wishes in this matter because I loved him and Mom more than God, how would he feel if he came up in the resurrection on the last day, and I was not there to greet him, because I chose to follow him rather than what I had learned to be the truth of God (which God expects from each one of us)?

We are going to be faced with that, brethren. It is going to be tough, but you are going to have to do it. You cannot follow this world no matter what the cost.

Needless to say, a little bit of thoughtless self-righteousness on my part brought a swift end to the conversation I was having with my dad at that time, and probably brought more pain to my family over the years than was really necessary to stay the course following God in spirit and in truth as we must all do.

I also told you earlier that Dad died suddenly 1996 when we were at the Feast of Tabernacles. After I received that horrible call from my brother that

evening, October 2nd, 1996, Nancy and I were with the kids. We struggled—I struggled, Nancy struggled—with the decision whether to fly home from the Feast. And after much desperate prayer, we made the decision to fly home to comfort my mom, who we knew would be devastated. I struggled with that decision, fearing that we are not doing what was pleasing to God. But I think the fruit that was born was good. Dad's funeral was on tomorrow, October 5th, but in 1996. It just happened that year to be the Last Great Day, and I was asked to give the eulogy at my father's funeral Mass.

During my eulogy for Dad, I explained a little bit about the significance of the day and what it meant to all men who would find themselves in the huge resurrection on that day, and that we could look forward to seeing my dad again on the Last Great Day.

I understand from Nancy and the kids that there was some pretty quizzical looks on the faces of the three Catholic priests sitting behind me on the altar as I gave dad's eulogy. But the really quizzical looks I saw that day were on the faces of Nancy and our kids at the last words at the cemetery over Dad's casket from a Catholic priest who only believed in the immediate resurrection of the soul into heaven: "As Larry's son, Mark, said at the church, we look forward to seeing Larry again at the resurrection on the Last Day." God's truth was the last thing said over my dad's casket, as they lowered it into the grave, from someone who did not even realize what he was saying. What a gift that was to Nancy and our children, who knew better as we stood there that day in pain.

Brethren, although this may not seem to be quite suited to meat in due season for the eighth day that we will be celebrating shortly, it should remind us that as we gather here in this place of safety, preparing to return to a chaotic world around us, we have an obligation to be carefully living and learning the truth of God's Word so that we can better walk through this life with the mind of Christ, so that His mind of outgoing concern and His plan to bring all to repentance, salvation, and knowledge of the truth is never too far from our thoughts.

Now, for the two closing scriptures on this second day of God's wonderful gift to us, in order to be shining lights together by learning and living the Word of God, mindful of God's incredible work and His great desire to see

all men come to repentance, salvation, and the knowledge of the truth, turn to Psalm 106 please:

Psalm 106:1-6 Praise the LORD! Oh, give thanks to the LORD, for He is good! For His mercy endures forever. Who can utter the mighty acts of the LORD? Who can declare all His praise? Blessed are those who keep justice, and he who does righteousness at all times! Remember me, O LORD, with the favor You have toward Your people. Oh, visit me with Your salvation, that I may see the benefit of Your chosen ones, that I may rejoice in the gladness of Your nation, that I may glory with Your inheritance. We have sinned with our fathers, we have committed iniquity, we have done wickedly.

Turn to Matthew 5, keeping in mind that God's wonderful gift is to prepare us for our part, and the ultimate gift that He is planning for all men.

Matthew 5:11-16 "Blessed are you when they revile and persecute you, and say all kinds of evil against you falsely for My sake. Rejoice and be exceedingly glad, for great is your reward in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you. You are the salt of the earth; but if the salt loses its flavor, how shall it be seasoned? It is then good for nothing but to be thrown out and trampled underfoot by men? 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."

Brethren, we have been given the opportunity through God's Holy Spirit to have the mind of Jesus Christ; to work through this time of trouble and trial; carefully considered, not commanded, carefully using God's Word as our sword going forward.

So let us stay the course in gratitude for all of God's gifts to learn and live this truth leading to the ultimate gift of life for all men through Jesus Christ.