

The Seeds of Decline

Judges

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Bible Text: Judges 1:1-2:10

Preached on: Tuesday, February 24, 2015

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Let's return to our study of the Old Testament. It's good to see you all out and I just appreciate your faithfulness. I say that a lot I know but I say it a lot because it's always prominent in my thinking. I love gathering together with you all and the same people week after week. To be a conference speaker, I suppose, would have its allure for some and traveling about and speaking to different groups of people and all of that, that's not my heart about teaching God's word at all. I believe that the real lasting impact of God's word is not in a highly hyped event but in the faithful teaching of the word week after week, month after month, year after year, to the same faithful people who gather together and the measure of our church will be found not in what happens week to week but where things are found in 5, 10, 15, 20 years down the road and to be a part of that with you is very special to me and it's something I'm very grateful to the Lord to be able to devote my life to as we do all of those things together.

Part of what we're doing as a church over these first 3 years, what we've done is we're trying to sweep through very major themes and just kind of establish a bit, to frame out as it were, a doctrinal and a biblical framework which we can then fill in in years to come. Last year early in the year, we did a sweep through a systematic theology teaching what we believe over a very brief course of 11 messages and have taught through other books of the Bible and we're trying to do that on Tuesday evenings here with some of the early books of the Old Testament for those of you that are new here with us this evening. We're doing a broad sweep of the early books of the Old Testament. We realize that we are treating things superficially, that we are bouncing on the surface, that we are ignoring important issues but all designed to frame out like a construction project, to frame something up so that you can fill it in in days to come. We believe that as we do this, we will understand the Bible better over time because we'll have a framework in which to understand the details. And as we see these works of God through the course of history, the Spirit of God is going to take what we are learning together and take that knowledge and sanctify us as we start to understand the sweep of God's work through the course of human history and as he dealt with his people in the Old Testament and I am just grateful to be able to have opportunity to teach things like this.

Now, we have finished the first 6 books of the Bible, Genesis through Joshua, in this little survey and a couple of weeks ago we finished the book of Joshua. It was a book of

conquest as God's man for that hour, Joshua, led Israel as they took possession of the Promised Land. Look at the end of Joshua 24 as we get into the Bible text this evening. Joshua 24:31, at the conclusion of all that was said in those preceding 24 chapters, it says in Joshua 24:31 that, "Israel served the LORD all the days of Joshua and all the days of the elders who survived Joshua, and had known all the deeds of the LORD which He had done for Israel." Joshua ends on this note of conquest and the people have moved into the land. God had delivered them from slavery in Egypt. He had brought them through the Red Sea, through 40 years of wandering in the wilderness and now they were planted in the land and victory was theirs, as it were, victory up to that point, but sadly the victory was temporary. The book of Judges records how they went from that place of conquest into a period of decline and what you have in the book of Judges is the record of Israel's history from the death of Joshua basically, so to speak, leading up to the times of Samuel that we read about in 1 Samuel. So there is a sweep of about 350 years that are covered in the book of Judges and it gives the history of Israel from that victory of Joshua up to the point of Samuel the Prophet who anointed Saul as king and Israel became a monarchy under the leadership of Saul and then subsequently David.

The book of Judges is a very sad book in many ways. It's a difficult book to read for the heart that is tender to the things of God that wants to see the people of God prosper because the book of Judges describes a spiritual cycle of decline as people went from the heights of victory at the end of the days of Joshua into a period of decline and sometimes restoration but a general spiral downward as the people gradually turned away and declined from the position of favor that they had enjoyed with God. And Scripture anticipated this and I'm going to structure tonight's message around 3 primary headings that not all of which have anything directly to do with the book of Judges but, first of all, I just want to take a look at God's word to Israel that kind of lays the groundwork for what we see in the book of Judges, the word to Israel, we might call point number 1. God warned Israel under Moses and under Joshua that he basically set before them a way of blessing and the way of cursing. He told them that they would be blessed if they obeyed his law and that they would be cursed and suffer discipline if they didn't. It was all very clear.

Look at the book of Deuteronomy 7. We're just going to sample a couple of passages here that gives us a bit of a spiritual preview of what we see in the book of Judges. Deuteronomy 7:1, speaks about what will happen when they enter into the land. Now, this is in the time of Moses so we're skipping over Joshua and going back to what Moses said to the nation. In Deuteronomy 7:1, "When the LORD your God brings you into the land where you are entering to possess it, and clears away many nations before you, the Hittites and the Girgashites and the Amorites and the Canaanites and the Perizzites and the Hivites and the Jebusites, seven nations greater and stronger than you, and when the LORD your God delivers them before you and you defeat them, then you shall utterly destroy them. You shall make no covenant with them and show no favor to them." They were told to eradicate the people in the land that they were dispossessing. He goes on and says, verse 3, "Furthermore, you shall not intermarry with them; you shall not give your daughters to their sons, nor shall you take their daughters for your sons. For they will turn

your sons away from following Me to serve other gods; then the anger of the LORD will be kindled against you and He will quickly destroy you."

We spent some time at the early start of our study in the book of Joshua just talking about the idolatry that characterized the nations before Israel went in and conquered the land. They were a nation that was ripe for judgment. They worshiped false gods. They worshiped Baal and believed that he sent rains to give them their crops. They were engaged in temple prostitution. Some of them practiced child sacrifice before their gods and it was a very debased, corrupt religion and the Lord knew and it's the nature of false religion that it will corrupt the people of God if they don't get rid of it and separate themselves from it entirely. So in order to protect Israel from that corrupting influence, God commanded them to go in and eradicate it. It sounds harsh to our modern 21st-century ears but in the eyes of God, this was what was necessary to establish a people separated for his glory who would be protected from gradual spiritual corruption in the days to come once he brought them into the land. So God was very clear. He was very specific to the nation and told them precisely what it was that they were to do.

Now, with that in mind, turn toward the end of Joshua 23 as we just continue to lay the groundwork for our study this evening, looking at what God said to Israel before they set on to their life after the leadership of Joshua. In Joshua 23:11, Joshua speaking under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, delivered the word of God to them and said to them this, this is one of Joshua's final 2 addresses to the nation. He would die soon after these words were spoken and he says, "So take diligent heed to yourselves to love the LORD your God. For if you ever go back and cling to the rest of these nations, these which remain among you, and intermarry with them, so that you associate with them and they with you, know with certainty that the LORD your God will not continue to drive these nations out from before you; but they will be a snare and a trap to you, and a whip on your sides and thorns in your eyes, until you perish from off this good land which the LORD your God has given you." It's a sobering warning, isn't it? It's stark. You would think that that would strike fear in the hearts of the people and motivate them so that they never shrank back from driving out the enemies but we know the story and we know that that wasn't the case. Israel had started well under Joshua but they still had work to do. There were still people to drive out and we asked the question: well, what happened next? One of the things that I like about the study that we are doing is that you always have this sense of what happens next. You know, we introduced Abraham and went through God's dealings with him, well, what happened next in Isaac and Jacob? And what happened next in Moses? And what happened next in Joshua? And you just start to get a feel for the flow of the history of God's dealings with his people. I love that. I like being able to just kind of think through things on a big picture basis.

Well, here we are at the end of Joshua and we're asking the question: well, what happened next? Well, that brings us to our second point this evening which is: the weakness of Israel. The weakness of Israel as you turn to Judges 1. Now, Judges opens up in chapter 1, verse 1, in a similar way to the way that the book of Joshua opened. You remember that Joshua 1:1 opened up that Moses had died and now God was commissioning Joshua into service. Well, in a similar way, Judges opens up by

recapitulating the death of Joshua. Judges 1:1, look at it there with me. It says, "Now it came about after the death of Joshua that the sons of Israel inquired of the LORD, saying, 'Who shall go up first for us against the Canaanites, to fight against them?'" So judges opens up with this banner statement that "Here's what happens after Joshua."

Now, there are some chronological challenges that we're only going to note briefly about these opening 2 chapters of Judges. A superficial reading of Judges 1 and 2 without looking into and taking into account what came before would make you think that what you read in Judges 1 and Judges 2, that everything occurred after Joshua's lifetime about what you're about to read, but a closer look shows that the author is not doing that. He's actually doing a flashback in portions of Judges 1 and Judges 2 and going back to events, although he starts out saying, "After Joshua died," he flashes back to events that occurred during Joshua's lifetime to help set the spiritual context for the message that he has to deliver through the entire book of Judges. To just show you this and just to kind of acquaint you with the issue, look at Judges 1:10. Again, picture yourself as if you're reading Judges for the first time and you would just assume that this is something that happened after the lifetime of Joshua in what is written. Judges 1:10, "So Judah went against the Canaanites who lived in Hebron (now the name of Hebron formerly was Kiriath-arba); and they struck Sheshai and Ahiman and Talmi. Then from there he went against the inhabitants of Debir (now the name of Debir formerly was Kiriath-sepher). And Caleb said, 'The one who attacks Kiriath-sepher and captures it, I will even give him my daughter Achsah for a wife.' Othniel the son of Kenaz, Caleb's younger brother, captured it; so he gave him his daughter Achsah for a wife."

You say, "Okay, that's very interesting," but here's the thing: this is a direct quote practically from Joshua 15 and I just want you to see this because it's one of the things that you have to be aware of as you study Judges in greater depth. Joshua 15:13, you see the exact same story and the exact same names almost in exact quotation that you find in Judges 1. Notice in Joshua 15:13 that Joshua "gave to Caleb the son of Jephunneh a portion among the sons of Judah, according to the command of the LORD to Joshua, namely," here's the cities that we've seen before, "Kiriath-arba, Arba." Verse 14, "Caleb drove out from there the three sons of Anak: Sheshai and Ahiman and Talmi, the children of Anak. Then he went up from there against the inhabitants of Debir; now the name of Debir formerly was Kiriath-sepher. And Caleb said," verse 16, "'The one who attacks this city and captures it, I will give him Achsah my daughter as a wife.' Othniel captured it; so he gave him Achsah his daughter as a wife." So all of that long recitation there simply to give you a sense that there are chronological issues in the book of Judges, that there is a bit of a flashback from saying, "Now Joshua died but let me bring you back to some of the events that happened during Joshua's lifetime so that you will remember and it will set the context for what is to come."

Why would the author of Judges do that? Well, look, let's not get caught up in debates that scholars themselves can't seem to settle on chronologies of certain passages and just focus on the big message that is going on here. Judges 1 is setting a spiritual context. It's setting the stage and helping us to remember that there was spiritual success at the end of the days of Joshua and that there was opportunity to build on that success. For a time, the

conquest was going as planned. Look at Judges 1:4. You can see the people of Israel acting upon God's command to drive the people out that inhabited the land before them. Judges 1:4, "Judah went up, and the LORD gave the Canaanites and the Perizzites into their hands, and they defeated ten thousand men at Bezek." Verse 8, "Then the sons of Judah fought against Jerusalem and captured it and struck it with the edge of the sword and set the city on fire." Verse 17, "Then Judah went with Simeon his brother, and they struck the Canaanites living in Zephath, and utterly destroyed it. So the name of the city was called Hormah." Verse 18, "Judah took Gaza with its territory and Ashkelon with its territory and Ekron with its territory." So the narrative is building up, this success, and at the very beginning you're saying, "Okay, it's going just according to plan." Joshua left the scene. He died. There was still land to be possessed and you get the sense that Israel is doing what they need to be doing in accordance with that word to Israel which we saw earlier from Deuteronomy 7 and Joshua 23. But watch this: as the narrative of Judges unfolds, you start to see cracks in the ceiling. You start to see things happening that are not consistent with what you had been led to expect should happen as you read Deuteronomy, as you read Joshua, as you read that early context in Judges 1. Suddenly there are cracks that start to appear.

Look at chapter 1, verse 21. "But the sons of Benjamin did not drive out the Jebusites who lived in Jerusalem; so the Jebusites have lived with the sons of Benjamin in Jerusalem to this day." "This day" being a reference to when it was written probably early in the monarchy of Saul. "Well, wait a second," you say, "this is not what was commanded. This is not what was supposed to have happened. Why didn't they drive them out? Something's wrong here," you say to yourself. "What about God's promise to drive them out if they would only open a him? What about the warnings of consequences if they were disobedient?" You're saying, "This can't end well. This is a problem." They had been warned again and again and again and you start to see the compromise seeping into the national life.

Then the writer of Judges just expands on it in verse 27 and this is sad because of the consequences that it leads to. Verse 27, "But Manasseh did not take possession of Bethshean and its villages, or Taanach and its villages, or the inhabitants of Dor and its villages, or the inhabitants of Ibleam and its villages, or the inhabitants of Megiddo and its villages; so the Canaanites persisted in living in that land. It came about when Israel became strong, that they put the Canaanites to forced labor, but they did not drive them out completely. Ephraim did not drive out the Canaanites who were living in Gezer; so the Canaanites lived in Gezer among them. Zebulun did not drive out the inhabitants." Verse 31, "Asher did not drive out the inhabitants." Verse 33, "Naphtali did not drive out the inhabitants." And there is this repetition that starts to descend and there is this sense of compromise coming and the prior context of revelation sets into your heart and you say, "This can't come out well. This is a major, major problem. Something is seriously wrong with the people of God."

Look over at Judges 3. Remember specifically that God warned them against intermarriage with those pagans. Judges 3:5, "The sons of Israel lived among the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Amorites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites; and

they took their daughters for themselves as wives, and gave their own daughters to their sons, and served their gods." Oh, the pain of it all looking at it from God's perspective, not that God physically felt pain about it but just from the perspective of aligning our hearts with the purposes of God and the commands of God upon his people, to see them blatantly disobey brings pain to the heart of believing people as they read this story. God should be honored. God should be obeyed and he wasn't. Just from the perspective of what's good for these people, they are disobedient. There can't be a good outcome to this and the book of Judges unfolds this for us. The results of their sin were predictable because they did not drive out the people of the land, the false religion of those people began to corrupt the children of Israel and bad consequences followed as a result and like a parent who disciplines a defiant child, God told them what would happen due to their sin.

Look at Judges 2:1, "Now the angel of the LORD," this is a theophany, this is an appearance of God, "Now the angel of the LORD came up from Gilgal to Bochim. And he said, 'I brought you up out of Egypt.'" Notice the first person singular. This is how you know that the angel of the Lord is God himself. "I brought you up out of Egypt and led you into the land which I have sworn to your fathers; and I said, 'I will never break My covenant with you, and as for you, you shall make no covenant with the inhabitants of this land; you shall tear down their altars.'" But you have not obeyed Me; what is this you have done? Therefore I also said, "I will not drive them out before you; but they will become as thorns in your sides and their gods will be a snare to you." When the angel of the LORD spoke these words to all the sons of Israel, the people lifted up their voices and wept. So they named that place Bochim; and there they sacrificed to the LORD." God says, "I warned you about this and now the consequences are going to come."

Now, the writer of Judges flashes back to the death of Joshua, verse 6, and says, "When Joshua had dismissed the people, the sons of Israel went each to his inheritance to possess the land." And here's the key, here's the clue to the decline that takes place in what follows, "The people served the LORD all the days of Joshua," do you see the flashback technique here? "The people served the LORD all the days of Joshua and all the days of the elders who survived Joshua, who had seen all the great work of the LORD which He had done for Israel. Then Joshua the son of Nun, the servant of the LORD, died at the age of one hundred and ten. And they buried him." Verse 10, "All that generation also were gathered to their fathers; and there arose another generation after them who did not know the LORD, nor yet the work which He had done for Israel." Here's the thing: the generation after Joshua did not know the Lord. They were unregenerate. They were unbelieving. Even though they were the people of God, in a national sense, they collectively did not know the Lord and they were not eyewitnesses to the conquest of Egypt. The spiritual energy dissipated in a downward spiral started in the nation.

Look at chapter 2, verse 10 again. "All that generation also were gathered to their fathers; and there arose another generation after them who did not know the LORD, nor yet the work which He had done for Israel." It kind of reminds you of the opening chapter of Exodus where it said another Pharaoh arose who didn't know Joseph. Well, here it's going a different direction: a generation of the people of Israel arose that didn't know the ways

of God, that didn't remember what he had done and they, as their spiritual knowledge dissipated, they began to drift away and that's what enabled them to compromise with the nations to allow those nations to continue to live. They didn't know the Lord. They had forgotten their heritage. They had moved away from that which gave them birth in the first place and that explains the seeds of decline that followed in the book of Joshua. Commentator Cyril Barber says and I quote, "The Israelites see Joshua's generation of elders slowly diminish in number. One by one they die. The economic, social and spiritual pressures remain but a spirit of religious ignorance and indifference gradually takes over and it begins a cycle of decline."

I had prepared more earlier in the day but I'm just going to leave it there for tonight and we'll look at how that cycle of decline continues next week but I wanted to bring out some points of application for us here tonight just on a spiritual level. If we could consider this a third point and take it this way, the warning to us, we have seen the word to Israel, we have seen the weakness of Israel, that was point number 2 and the reason for their decline and point number 3, I just want to talk briefly about the warning to us and just to try to be, I don't know, pastorally here as we contemplate these things. Especially for those of you born into Christian families, especially for those of you that maybe have grown up into the church, there is a warning here for us that I think that we need to pay attention to. There is a warning that we need to pay attention to as we contemplate the future life of our church over time and I like to talk this way. I don't like to just focus on what makes us feel better or gives us a bump to get us through the week. We need to be strategic about our thinking. We need to contemplate what these things mean for the long-term life of our church and I think one of the warnings that we see in this is that you cannot borrow spiritual success. You can't live off the spiritual energy of what someone else did for the Lord, either a contemporary or someone who went before you. You are born to Christian parents, that doesn't say anything about your future spiritual success. You can't presume on it. The fact that you came from a Christian family or attend a Bible teaching church does not guarantee your own place in the kingdom of God and you young people need to just pay particular heed to that.

As we think about the future of our church and what we're trying to build with having a focus on Scripture, it reminded me of another church that I used to attend in days gone by, whatever the name of that church might be. I had so many conversations with people who boasted in their affiliation with that prominent church and I love the people back there so don't misunderstand why I'm saying it. There are thousands of people that attend there and I'm just talking about isolated conversations with some. But you would hear people say, "You know, I've been at this church since 1978." Or, "I was here when the prior pastor was here." Well, you know, and I taught on this and I preached on this while I was there when I had opportunity to do so and I just want us as a body of believers to understand and to recognize it for ourselves as well as we are trying to establish our own legacy of spiritual faithfulness hopefully: you can't live that way. You know, I'm remembering people that spoke this way as a pattern of life. If you're always talking in the past tense about your spiritual life, something is horribly wrong. If you're trying to impress people with your prior spiritual associations, "Well, I came from Such-and-such a church." Or, "I was friends with this and such pastor back in the day," as if that gave

you some kind of present spiritual imprimatur from God that your present spiritual life is valid, that's all messed up. That's just totally wrong. That is a bad way to think. It's a bad way to boast about people that you've known, about churches that you have attended, to just simply boast in books that you've read without anything more being present. When does it ever get around to actually affecting your day to day godliness and that your day to day life is manifesting a spiritual reality that shows you are actually walking in the Spirit and that you are presently a child of God through faith in our Lord Jesus Christ?

You see, this reliance on a spiritual heritage is a deadly trap that we need to be aware of so that we can avoid it, so that we can help others around us avoid it and not fall into thinking in that terrible awful way. But, you know, what does it matter? What does it matter how long you've been at a church? You know, let's talk about what kind of person you are now. What kind of person you're becoming. What are the present affections that are dominating your heart? That's what matters. That's what gives evidence of the reality of your spiritual life. You cannot borrow spiritual success and Scripture warns us along these lines and I want you to understand the spirit in which I say these things. I believe the best about your spiritual lives, every one of you that is here, I believe the best about your spiritual lives. I love the fact that those of you that particularly are members of our church, I think of you as brothers and sisters in Christ without hesitation and without qualification. I just want you to know the spirit from which I speak, that I am not talking down or being sharp in what I say. That's not the point. But collectively with, you know, a mixture of all kinds of people here, I wouldn't be much of a pastor if I simply took that for granted that the reality of true faith in Christ existed in every one of your hearts. That would not be good, you know, and if we're going to do that, then what's the point of this? What's the point of what we're doing?

So I want to just take you to Hebrews 3 by way of just seeing how the writer of Hebrews talking about a different period in Israel's history, took it and applied it to New Testament readers, readers in the New Testament era. Hebrews 3:12. You know, and before I read this, I say stuff like this but, you know, I'm just conscious, I don't know if this kind of way of thinking filters into your mind or not but I'm just conscious of the fact that one day each one of you is going to stand before the tribunal of God. That there is a day coming for me and for you where all of us individually are going to give an account to God for our lives and the only way that we can survive that judgment is that we have been born again through faith in the Lord Jesus Christ and that we have trusted Christ to save us from sin and ultimately that's the only moment that matters is what happens to us on the day of judgment. What happens to you when you face God in judgment. Does that day go well for you or not? Nothing else ultimately matters. It doesn't matter what happens in your career, your business, with your family. Ultimately none of that matters and let's put it this way: none of it is going to matter at all when you're standing in front of a holy God and he's calling you to give an account of your life. I'm mindful of that. It's rare for me to be in this pulpit and not be thinking something along those lines that your precious face as I behold it now, one day no one else is going to be around and you're going to be there before God on your own either in Christ or outside of Christ. No one is going to be able to help you then and this is my only chance. Opportunities like this are my only opportunity to plead with you to be mindful of your spiritual life, to be mindful

of whether you're in Christ are not and to not take anything for granted. Scripture compels us to think in these terms.

Look at Hebrews 3:12. The writer of Hebrews says, "Take care, brethren." He addresses them with words of affection. "Take care, brethren, that there not be in any one of you an evil, unbelieving heart that falls away from the living God. But encourage one another day after day, as long as it is still called 'Today,' so that none of you will be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin." He says, "Take care lest being associated with the people of God, there would actually prove to be in you an evil, unbelieving heart that God ultimately condemns at the end of time and that God would actually be judging and settling wrath upon you even now because while you associate outwardly with the people of God, inwardly there is in you an evil, unbelieving heart, resistant to the authority of Scripture, resistant to Christ, proud in your self-effort and unwilling to turn to Christ in a childlike humility that says, 'I need a Savior.'" He says, "Take care. Beware of that."

Look over at chapter 4, verse 1. He says, "Therefore, let us fear if, while a promise remains of entering His rest, any one of you may seem to have come short of it. For indeed," verse 2, "we have had good news preached to us." Those of you that attend our church on a regular basis, this verse applies to you. You've had good news preached to you. Christ has been presented to you. Christ has been offered to you. The call to salvation has gone out to you to receive the gift of eternal life through faith in our Lord Jesus Christ. He says in verse 2, "We have had good news preached to us, just as they also; but the word they heard did not profit them, because it was not united by faith in those who heard."

So adult and young people alike, I have to ask you: has your heart been united by faith with the word that has been preached to you? Or are you simply content with an external association that looks pleasing on the outside which can fool me and fool lots of others but isn't a reality in your heart? The Bible warns you against that. The book of Judges would teach you not to rely on your genealogical lineage, not to rely on an outward association with people who truly know God and yet for that not to be an inner reality in your own heart. I fear for that. Things like this keep me up at night. Things like this should motivate us to pray for one another and be mindful of what the passage said earlier in Hebrews 3. Go back to it there in verse 13. We all have a part to play in this. "Encourage one another day after day, as long as it is still called 'Today,' so that none of you will be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin." You know, we talk about our love for Christ openly and we share these things with one another so that there is not room for self-deception, at least we limit as much as possible the room for self-deception amongst those that would be in our midst and a part of the outward association of our spiritual life. Scripture says, "Let's be afraid lest that would happen to us, lest that fate would happen to us."

You know, none of us are exempt from just asking ourselves that question at least from time to time. I ask myself that question sometimes. I say, "Man, what about me? What about me? What about my spiritual coldness of heart that sometimes animates my life? What about me?" And I have to go back and I have to ask myself, "Okay, well, let's take

a look and let's just make sure that, you know, having preached these things I would end up being disqualified myself." Well, you know, I say that just to help you understand that we're all subject to this. We all need to think this way. We all need to take care that we're not taking things for granted that aren't an actual reality in our hearts. I believe the best about you but I am not willing to gamble with the little bit of time that we have together week by week. I'm not willing to gamble that and just not even ask the question.

What about you? Is your heart tender to these warnings from God's word? Have you yourself turned from sin and received Christ for your salvation? Is there a love for Scripture that animates your heart? Do you treasure the word of God, as Jeremiah said, "more than your necessary food? That word was found and I ate it and thy word became for me a joy and the delight of my heart for I have been called by thy name, O Lord God of Hosts." Is there love for the people of God? Is it more than just coming in outward association but to actually be involved with the lives of God's people and to want to encourage them? And do you thrill when you see Christians prospering spiritually or is it just a matter of cold indifference to you as you go about in your own life? Is there a pattern? Is there a desire in your heart to turn away from sin? Are you mindful of episodes that recur in your life where you are grieved over the sin that is in your heart? You mourn over it? You fight against it? You repent? You confess sin and you turn away from it? You see, those are the marks of a truly redeemed life, beloved, and that comes as a package. It's not choose one off the shelf. This isn't cafeteria spirituality where you say, "I like the chocolate pudding of the confession of sin but I don't want the beef of true doctrine." These things come together like the colors of the rainbow are all gathered together in one place. These different marks, these different colors of a true Christian are true in every redeemed life and if you can look at yourself and say, "Do you know what? I know that I fall short but I do see those desires in my heart. I do love Christ. I am trusting him. I do hate my sin," then praise God, there is reason to believe that he is going to see you all the way through and that when you die and enter into his presence, he will welcome you with open arms and say, "This is the reward for which you were appointed before the foundation of the world. Enter into the joy of your Lord."

Oh, it's great. You know, I can't wait for that moment. I can't wait for that moment. I don't know about you but there are times where I just know and I'm just mindful of the fact that I don't fit here in this world. I don't belong here. You know, the things that the world loves, I hate or I don't even have any interest in. You know, and the things that get people all riled up, I'm not even interested in it. And the things that I love, you know, the people in the world couldn't care less about. I can't settle in here. But when that day comes when we enter into the joy of our Lord, beloved, that will be home. When we enter into that, it's not going to seem strange and foreign to us, it's going to be natural. This is going to be where we belong and we're going to know and say, "This is it. This is what I was hoping for. This is what I've been waiting for." And that overwhelming joy is going to be the lot of every one of you that knows Christ and I want you to go out tonight rejoicing and trusting in that and looking forward to that but I'm not willing to just take for granted that it's every one of you that that is true of.

Scripture says, "Take care, brethren, that there not be in any one of you an evil, unbelieving heart that falls away from the living God." 2 Corinthians 13:5 says, "Test yourselves, examine yourselves to see if you be in the faith." So we say these things not because we are skeptical of anyone's testimony but because this is what Scripture calls us to do. We can't borrow spiritual success. We don't want to be deceived by an outward association with the people of God that ultimately proves to be futile and unavailing at the judgment seat of God. Someone once defined preaching in this way, he said, "I preach as if never to preach again, as a dying man to dying men." We don't have tomorrow guaranteed to us and so we treat these things earnestly, urgently, lovingly. Beloved, you can't borrow spiritual success so make sure. Open your heart to the Spirit of God and let him search you in light of these things that you would be refreshed and encouraged and reaffirmed in your walk with Christ or perhaps saying, "Wow, I've been deceived and playing a game all this time but thank God he opened up my eyes in time while I still had breath to respond."

If you have drifted spiritually, let these things be a wake-up call that moves you to repentance. If you join in sympathy with the spirit of what Scripture teaches on these issues and say, "Yes, this is the most important thing," and, "Praise God for his work in my heart and I know it's real and I'm looking forward to heaven, but thank God there is a place where I can come and these things are said and affirmed just like my heart loves," let's not take anything for granted, beloved. Let's pray for one another. Let's pray for the people that one day that haven't yet darkened the doors of our church but one day will come in and they'll need to hear this. Let's not live on externals but feed off the living bread who is Christ himself and manifest through our affections for him the reality that we have truly been born again and that we're a collection, we're an association, we're a community, we're a church of people who share that inner commitment to Christ and are manifesting the reality of the work of the Spirit in our hearts as we go through life together.

Bow with me in prayer.

Our Father, the wonders of your word both written and Incarnate, we thank you that your word is living and active and sharper than any two-edged sword and piercing as far as the division of soul and spirit of both joints and marrow and able to judge the thoughts and the intentions of the heart. Father, I pray that if there be such a one in here with an evil, unbelieving heart, that there would be fear in their hearts and fear that doesn't let go of their thoughts and affections until they flee to Christ in repentance and cry out to him for mercy. Father, show them, enlighten them, open their mind to remember that Christ died for sins according to the Scriptures, that he was raised on the third day and that that death on the cross was a sacrifice for sinners just like them and that they could turn to Christ, this risen Christ and cry out to him for mercy and know that in the appeal to Christ there is an all-sufficient Savior who is able to save them to the uttermost.

Father, for those of us that do know you, forgive us for our lapses into spiritual mediocrity and spiritual indifference. Father, you know our sins, our failures. We confess

them before you this evening and some of us feel the weight of it so much that we know that we can't point to anything recent in our life that would really vindicate our claim to know you but at bottom, Father, there is deep in our heart the cry that Peter made to Christ, "O Lord, you know all things. You know that I love you." Father, meet such a one as that in your mercy and give them the assurance that, "Yes, you are my child. Yes, you belong to me," and let that love and fateful grace that you display to your children be that which would bring them back into a faithful walk in your word and with Christ and with your people.

Father, give us an eternal perspective. Help us to look past the events of this life, the passing nature of this world. The world in its lusts are passing away but the one who abides in the word of God lives forever. O Father, help us to see life rightly. Help us to have our hearts set on our heavenly home. Father, may it never be said, ever, ever, ever, anyone that is a member of this church, keep away from us that proud humanistic mindset that says, "Well yeah, but I'm at Truth Community," as if that were the be all and end all of spiritual existence. Father, let our hope and our boast always be in Christ Jesus our Lord and may the flaming affection of love and affection for Christ be that which animates our existence on a day to day basis, Father, not just when we are gathered together with the people of God but in our homes and in our private interactions. Father, let the reality of true Christianity manifest itself in our daily practical private lives and there where no one sees, where only you are watching, Father, may you find faithfulness to the utter core of who we are.

Father, thank you for these people that come so faithfully Sunday, Tuesday, that love your word. Father, bless them for their faithfulness. Bless them in their service to Christ. Bless them in their daily work and their family situations, Father, knowing that some are estranged. Let us, as I can relate to, that somehow our testimony for Christ has separated us from those that we love, those that we would have close even if they don't know Christ and yet they won't have us. Father, in those situations, bring your comfort and grace and peace and mercy. Yes, Father, we submit ourselves wholly and completely to you. We ask that our lives would be faithful, Father, whether anyone notices or not. Let us just be found living faithfully under the eye of our God and that in itself would be sufficient reward and sufficient motivation for a fidelity to Christ that you will honor in the final day. We pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

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