SINCERELY DECEIVED

HOW PROFESSING CHRISTIANS EMBRACE ANOTHER GOSPEL

KRISTA D SMITH

Contributions by

Reverend Bernie Dorsey & Pastor Sylvia P. Laughlin

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How Professing Christians Embrace Another Gospel

Recognizing the Counterfeit Christ in Today's Church

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Commentary by Reverend Bernie Dorsey and Pastor Sylvia P. Laughlin.

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"Freely you have received; freely give" Matthew 10:8

"But I fear, lest somehow, as the serpent deceived Eve by his craftiness, so your minds may be corrupted from the simplicity that is in Christ. For if he who comes preaches another Jesus whom we have not preached, or if you receive a different spirit which you have not received, or a different gospel which you have not accepted — you may well put up with it!"

{2 Corinthians 11:3–4}

What Denomination Is This?

This book is not written from within any single denomination, nor does it advocate for one Christian tradition over another. It is written from a biblical view, grounded in the full counsel of Scripture, the entire Word of God. It reflects a neutral Christian approach, rooted in the historic confession that Jesus Christ is the Son of the living God, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

He is the Word who put on flesh and dwelt among us, sent to reconcile His people to God. He was crucified to pay the penalty for sin as the spotless Lamb of God, perfect in all His ways, our substitute on the cross. On the third day, according to the Scriptures, and according to the witness accounts recorded in both history and Scripture, He rose from the grave.

No one comes to the Father except through the Son. We are justified, made right before God, only and singularly by faith in Jesus Christ as Lord. From there, Scripture commands us to be sanctified by the Word of God, a lifelong process of abiding in Him and allowing Him to change the way we think until it aligns with His Word.

We have no righteousness of our own. We are holy only because of our right standing in Christ, made possible through repentance and through trusting God to be our atonement through Christ alone. And we are called, as in Matthew 28, to make disciples, teaching them to do all that Jesus commanded, reassured that he who remains and endures to the end will be saved.

He who calls us is faithful.

PLEASE SHARE THIS MESSAGE WITH YOUR PASTOR, CHURCH FAMILY, OR SMALL GROUP

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Introduction:

A Letter to the Sincere

"There is a way that seems right to a man, but its end is the way of death." {Proverbs 14:12}

Nobody wakes up one morning and decides to be deceived.

That sounds obvious, but sit with it for a moment. Deception is the one condition you cannot diagnose in yourself by how you feel. If you knew you were deceived, you wouldn't be. A deceived person is, by definition, sincere. They believe what they believe with their whole heart. They sing the songs, they quote the verses, they love the people in their small group, and they are certain that they are standing on solid ground.

That is exactly what makes deception so dangerous, and it is why I have written this book.

In 2018, I published *Don't Die in the Pew*. The "sleeping church" I wrote about has not woken up so much as rolled over. What I see now is not mainly a church that has stopped believing. It is a church that believes passionately in a Jesus the apostles would not recognize.

Paul's fear

The Apostle Paul loved the believers in Corinth. He had planted that church. He had stayed with them a year and a half {Acts 18:11}. He wrote them letters with tears {2 Corinthians 2:4}. And in his second letter he told them plainly what kept him up at night:

"For I am jealous for you with godly jealousy. For I have betrothed you to one husband, that I may present you as a chaste virgin to Christ. But I fear, lest somehow, as the serpent deceived Eve by his craftiness, so your minds may be corrupted from the simplicity that is in Christ. For if he who comes preaches another Jesus whom we have not preached, or if you receive a different spirit which you have not received, or a different gospel which you have not accepted — you may well put up with it!" {2 Corinthians 11:2–4}

Notice who Paul was worried about. He wasn't writing to pagans in the temple of Aphrodite. He was writing to the church. These were people who had heard the true gospel from the lips of an apostle, who had seen signs and wonders {2 Corinthians 12:12}, and who had received the Holy Spirit. Paul was afraid that *these* people, of all people, would accept a counterfeit and not even notice.

And notice what he feared they would accept. Not a different religion. Not atheism. Not Zeus. They would accept *another Jesus*. Same name. Same vocabulary. Different Savior.

Sincerity is not safety

We tend to think that God will grade us on our sincerity. "He knows my heart" has become the most quoted verse that isn't in the Bible. But Scripture never treats sincerity as a substitute for truth.

Eve was sincere when she ate. She genuinely believed the fruit would make her wise {Genesis 3:6}. Saul was sincere when he spared the best of the Amalekite livestock "to sacrifice to the LORD" {1 Samuel 15:15}. The men who will stand before Jesus and say, "Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in Your name, cast out demons in Your name, and done many wonders in Your name?" are completely sincere. They are not lying. They are shocked {Matthew 7:22–23}.

Paul said of his own countrymen, *"I bear them witness that they have a zeal for God, but not according to knowledge"* {Romans 10:2}. Zeal without knowledge is sincerity without truth. Paul knew this from personal experience. Before he met Christ on the Damascus road, he was the most sincere man in Jerusalem. He was so sincere that he was dragging Christians to prison, *"thinking that he was offering God service"* (the very thing Jesus predicted in John 16:2).

So I want to say this up front, gently but clearly: this book is written to sincere people. It is written to people who love Jesus, or who believe they do. If you are reading this, you are probably not a scoffer. Scoffers don't read books like this. You are probably someone who goes to church, who wants to please God, and who has felt a quiet unease that something is off. Maybe something in the sermons. Maybe something in yourself.

That unease is a gift. Please don't silence it.

What this book is, and what it isn't

This is not a book about "those people." It is not a list of celebrity pastors to be angry at, and it is not a license to become the doctrine police in your Sunday school class. Jesus said to take the log out of your own eye first, and THEN you will see clearly {Matthew 7:5}. Every chapter in this book should be read first as a mirror and only second as a window.

This is also not a book that will tell you everything is fine. Paul did not write "I fear" because everything was fine. Jesus did not tell a church that considered itself rich and in need of nothing that He was about to vomit them out of His mouth because everything was fine {Revelation 3:16–17}. A book that only comforts you about deception is, frankly, part of the problem.

Here is what we will do together:

- In **Part One**, we will look closely at what Paul actually meant by "another Jesus, a different spirit, a different gospel," and we will survey everything Paul warned about deception and falling away. There is more than most of us have ever been shown.
- In **Part Two**, we will look at how deception actually happens. It is rarely dramatic. It comes through omission, misunderstanding, and the slow, comfortable work of making the gospel about us.
- In **Part Three**, we will look at the great falling away Paul describes in 2 Thessalonians 2, and we will see that the people who fall away never stopped coming to church. We'll learn from Pharaoh what happens when a heart that keeps saying no is finally given what it insists on.
- In **Part Four**, we will look for the way back: the ancient paths, the voice of the true Shepherd, the Scriptures we have learned to skip, and the conclusion that King Solomon reached at the end of his long and complicated life.

At the end of each chapter, you will find a few questions under the heading *Examine Yourself*. Paul told the Corinthians, *"Examine yourselves as to whether you are in the faith. Test yourselves"* {2 Corinthians 13:5}. Please don't skip them. Take them to the Lord. Write your answers down. Talk about them with a trusted friend.

A word before we begin

I'll be transparent with you: I have walked through my own seasons of drift. It was a slow fade. I never stopped loving the Lord. I just stopped making Him my priority, and I didn't notice until I was a long way from where I had started. So, I do not write as someone standing on a hill pointing down at everyone else. I write as someone who knows how quietly the current can carry you.

The good news is that the God who warns is the same God who welcomes. Every warning in Scripture is an act of love. You don't put a guardrail on a mountain road because you hate drivers. Jesus told the lukewarm church, *"As many as I love, I rebuke and chasten. Therefore be zealous and repent. Behold, I stand at the door and knock"* {Revelation 3:19–20}. The rebuke and the knock come from the same hand. So let's open the Book together, and let's ask the Spirit of truth to do what Jesus promised He would do: *guide us into all truth* {John 16:13}. Let's read like the Bereans, *"who received the word with all readiness, and searched the Scriptures daily to find out whether these things were so"* {Acts 17:11}.

Don't take my word for any of it. Take His.

Lord, I don't want to be sincerely wrong. Open my eyes. Show me anything in me that is counterfeit, and give me the courage to let it go. I want the real Jesus, whatever it costs. Amen.

Part One: The Warning

CHAPTER ONE

Another Jesus, Another Spirit, Another Gospel

"For such are false apostles, deceitful workers, transforming themselves into apostles of Christ. And no wonder! For Satan himself transforms himself into an angel of light."

{2 Corinthians 11:13–14}

If you want to counterfeit something, you don't counterfeit something worthless. Nobody prints fake one-dollar bills. You counterfeit what people value most, and you make your copy look as close to the original as you possibly can.

The Secret Service trains its agents to spot counterfeit money in a surprising way. They don't spend most of their time studying fakes, because there are endless varieties of fakes. Instead, they study the real thing until they know it so well that anything false stands out immediately. That is the approach we are going to take in this book. But before we can study the real thing, we need to understand exactly what Paul was warning against. So let's slow down and walk through 2 Corinthians 11 carefully, verse by verse.

The setting: a church that tolerated the wrong things

By the time Paul wrote 2 Corinthians, a group of traveling teachers had arrived in Corinth. Paul sarcastically calls them "the most eminent apostles," or literally the "super-apostles" {2 Corinthians 11:5; 12:11}. From the clues Paul gives us, we can sketch a picture of them:

- They were Jewish and proud of it. *"Are they Hebrews? So am I. Are they Israelites? So am I. Are they the seed of Abraham? So am I"* {11:22}.
- They carried impressive letters of recommendation {3:1}.
- They were polished speakers. They mocked Paul because his *"bodily presence is weak, and his speech contemptible"* {10:10}.
- They measured themselves by themselves and compared themselves among themselves {10:12}.
- They expected to be paid, and they despised Paul for preaching for free {11:7–12}.
- They boasted about their visions, credentials and spiritual experiences, which is why Paul reluctantly answers with his own {12:1–7}.

In other words, they looked like everything a successful ministry should look like. They had presence, polish, pedigree and power. Paul, on the other hand, had scars, shipwrecks, a thorn in the flesh, and a resume of beatings {11:23–28}.

Now here is the stunning part. Four times in this short section, Paul uses the same Greek verb, *anechō*, which means "to bear with, to put up with, to tolerate":

- *"Oh, that you would* ***bear with*** *me in a little folly"* {11:1}

- *"…or a different gospel which you have not accepted — you may well* ***put up with*** *it!"* {11:4}
- *"For you* ***put up with*** *fools gladly, since you yourselves are wise!"* {11:19}
- *"For you* ***put up with*** *it if one brings you into bondage, if one devours you, if one takes from you, if one exalts himself, if one strikes you on the face"* {11:20}

Do you see what Paul is saying? *You will tolerate anything from them, but you won't tolerate me.* The Corinthians would put up with a different Jesus. They would put up with being enslaved, exploited, used, and even slapped in the face, as long as it came from someone impressive. But they bristled at the apostle who had actually brought them to Christ.

That pattern has not changed. People will often tolerate almost any amount of manipulation from a leader who makes them feel special. What they will not tolerate is someone who tells them the truth.

Verse 2: a jealous love

"For I am jealous for you with godly jealousy. For I have betrothed you to one husband, that I may present you as a chaste virgin to Christ." {11:2}

Before Paul talks about deception, he talks about a wedding. In Jewish custom, betrothal was far more binding than an engagement is today. A betrothed woman was legally bound to her husband, and unfaithfulness during betrothal was treated as adultery. Paul pictures himself as the friend of the bridegroom whose job is to bring the bride to the wedding pure. This matters because it tells us what deception really is. Following another Jesus is not merely an intellectual mistake, like getting a math problem wrong. It is unfaithfulness. It is the bride giving her affection to someone who is wearing her bridegroom's name. God called it adultery when Israel did it

{Jeremiah 3:8–9; Hosea 2}, and Paul uses the same picture for the church. In *Don't Die in the Pew* I spent a whole chapter on God as Israel's husband. It is the same story here. God's jealousy is not insecurity. It is the fierce love of a husband who will not share His bride.

Verse 3: the target is the mind

"But I fear, lest somehow, as the serpent deceived Eve by his craftiness, so your minds may be corrupted from the simplicity that is in Christ." {11:3}

Paul reaches all the way back to the garden. Three words in this verse are worth knowing.

Craftiness is *panourgia*. It literally means "ready to do anything," and it describes a cunning that will use any method to reach its goal. Paul uses the same word in Ephesians 4:14 when he warns about being *"tossed to and fro and carried about with every wind of doctrine, by the trickery of men, in the cunning craftiness of deceitful plotting."* The serpent didn't come to Eve with a pitchfork. He came with a question.

Minds is *noēmata*, which means thoughts, ways of thinking, or mental patterns. Paul uses the same word in 2 Corinthians 2:11, *"lest Satan should take advantage of us; for we are not ignorant of his devices"* (literally, his *thoughts* or schemes), and in 10:5, *"bringing every thought into captivity to the obedience of Christ."* The battle Paul is describing is fought in the way we think. Deception doesn't start with our behavior. It starts with our assumptions.

Simplicity is *haplotēs*. It means singleness, sincerity, undivided devotion. It is the opposite of being double-minded. It's not the same thing as being simplistic. It is the posture of a bride whose heart belongs to one husband. Some ancient manuscripts add "and purity,"

which fits the wedding picture perfectly. So here is the danger: the enemy works on our thinking until our single-hearted devotion to Christ becomes divided, diluted, or redirected. We don't stop being religious. We just start being devoted to something slightly different.

Verse 4: three counterfeits

"For if he who comes preaches another Jesus whom we have not preached, or if you receive a different spirit which you have not received, or a different gospel which you have not accepted — you may well put up with it!" {11:4}

Paul names three counterfeits, and they come as a set. A different Jesus always comes with a different spirit and a different gospel.

In Greek, Paul says *allon Iēsoun* ("another Jesus"), *pneuma heteron* ("a different spirit"), and *euangelion heteron* ("a different gospel"). Many scholars point out that *heteros* often carries the sense of "different in kind." Paul uses the same word in Galatians 1:6–7: *"I marvel that you are turning away so soon from Him who called you in the grace of Christ, to a different [heteron] gospel, which is not another [allo]; but there are some who trouble you and want to pervert the gospel of Christ."* In other words, it calls itself the gospel, but it's a different kind of thing altogether. It isn't a second version of the good news. It isn't good news at all.

We shouldn't push that word distinction too far, because Greek writers didn't always keep the two words separate. But Paul's meaning is clear either way. These teachers used the same name, *Jesus*. They talked about the Spirit. They called their message the gospel. And all three were counterfeit.

So, what did their "other Jesus" look like? Paul doesn't give us a doctrinal statement from the super-apostles, but the whole letter

gives us the contrast. Over and over, Paul defends a ministry shaped by the cross: weakness, suffering, humility, and dependence on God.

- *"We have this treasure in earthen vessels, that the excellence of the power may be of God and not of us"* {4:7}.
- *"Always carrying about in the body the dying of the Lord Jesus, that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our body"* {4:10}.
- *"My grace is sufficient for you, for My strength is made perfect in weakness"* {12:9}.
- *"For though He was crucified in weakness, yet He lives by the power of God. For we also are weak in Him"* {13:4}.

The Jesus of the super-apostles seems to have been a Jesus of glory without the cross, power without weakness, and success without suffering. He was a Jesus who made His followers impressive. In his first letter, Paul had already scolded the Corinthians for exactly this attitude: *"You are already full! You are already rich! You have reigned as kings without us"* {1 Corinthians 4:8}. They wanted the crown without the cross.

Does that sound familiar?

The most dangerous counterfeit Jesus is not the one who looks evil. It's the one who looks like a better deal than the real one.

Verses 13–15: an angel of light

"For such are false apostles, deceitful workers, transforming themselves into apostles of Christ. And no wonder! For Satan himself transforms himself into an angel of light. Therefore it is no great thing if his ministers also transform themselves into ministers of righteousness, whose end will be according to their works." {11:13–15}

The word Paul uses three times here, *metaschēmatizō*, means to change the outward form or appearance, to disguise. The root is *schēma*, the outward shape of a thing. In other words, what changes is the costume, not the creature underneath. And look at the costume Satan chooses: an angel of light. Not a monster. Not a horned figure in red. Light is the symbol of truth, holiness and the presence of God {1 John 1:5}. The enemy doesn't usually tempt the church by looking like darkness. He tempts us by looking like a brighter, warmer, more attractive kind of light.

Then Paul says something we often miss. Satan's servants disguise themselves as *"ministers of righteousness."* They don't present themselves as enemies of righteousness. They talk about righteousness. They may talk about it constantly. Paul isn't describing the obvious sinner in the back row. He's describing people in the pulpit, on the podcast and at the conference, who use all the right words.

Priscilla Shirer put it so well: the enemy *"makes the lie so close to the truth that unless you have an authenticating light… you'll never be able to tell with your physical eyes what the truth is."* And Charles Spurgeon is often credited with the saying, "Discernment is not knowing the difference between right and wrong. It is knowing the difference between right and almost right."

Almost right is the angel of light's specialty.

The Jesus of Scripture

If the Secret Service studies real money, then we need to study the real Jesus. Here is the danger: most of us have built our picture of Jesus from bits of sermons, worship songs, paintings and social media posts more than from the four Gospels. And whatever we haven't learned from Scripture, our culture is happy to fill in.

Let me give you some of the counterfeit Jesuses I see most often today. See if any of them sound familiar:

- **Jesus the Life Coach.** He exists to help you reach your potential, achieve your dreams and become your best self. He never asks you to die to yourself, only to improve yourself.
- **Jesus the Genie.** He exists to give you what you ask for. Faith is the lamp you rub. If you don't get the house, the healing or the promotion, you didn't believe hard enough.
- **Jesus the Affirmer.** He accepts you exactly as you are and would never ask you to change. Any talk of sin, repentance or judgment is "religious" and unloving.
- **Jesus the Mascot.** He is the patron of your political tribe, your nation or your cause. He agrees with you about everything that matters to you.
- **Jesus the Ticket.** He was a transaction you completed once, years ago, at an altar call. You're covered, so how you live doesn't really matter now.
- **Jesus the Boyfriend.** He is all feeling and no lordship. He makes you feel loved, but He never tells you what to do.

Each of these contains a piece of truth. That's what makes them convincing. Jesus *does* care about your life. He *does* answer prayer. He *does* welcome sinners. He *is* Lord over the nations. He *did* pay for your sins once for all. He *does* love you. But a piece of the truth, separated from the rest, becomes a lie.

Now compare those to the Jesus the apostles preached:

- He is Lord. *"God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Christ"* {Acts 2:36}. The first Christian

confession was not "Jesus is my helper," but *"Jesus is Lord"* {Romans 10:9}.

- He calls for repentance. *"Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand"* were His first public words {Matthew 4:17}.
- He bought us, and so we belong to Him. *"You are not your own. For you were bought at a price"* {1 Corinthians 6:19–20}.
- He is the Judge. *"For the Father judges no one, but has committed all judgment to the Son"* {John 5:22}.
- He divides. *"Do not think that I came to bring peace on earth. I did not come to bring peace but a sword"* {Matthew 10:34}.
- He is fearsome in His holiness. When John, the disciple who had leaned on His chest at the Last Supper, saw the risen Christ, *"I fell at His feet as dead"* {Revelation 1:17}.
- And He is unspeakably kind. *"Come to Me, all you who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest"* {Matthew 11:28}. He receives sinners and eats with them {Luke 15:2}. He is the Lamb who was slain {Revelation 5:6}.

The real Jesus is both the Lion and the Lamb {Revelation 5:5–6}. Every counterfeit keeps one and drops the other. The religious counterfeit keeps the Lion and loses the Lamb, and you get harshness without grace. The modern counterfeit keeps the Lamb and loses the Lion, and you get grace without holiness. Paul preached the whole Christ.

Three questions to ask of every message

Paul gives us a simple grid. Whenever you hear a sermon, read a book, listen to a podcast, or sing a song, you can ask:

1. **Which Jesus?** Is this the Jesus of the Gospels, who is Lord, Savior and Judge, who calls me to repent and follow Him? Or is it a Jesus who exists for me?

2. **Which spirit?** What is the fruit of this message in me? The Holy Spirit convicts of sin, righteousness and judgment {John 16:8}, glorifies Christ {John 16:14}, and produces love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control {Galatians 5:22–23}. A different spirit produces pride, entitlement, fear, confusion, or an appetite for more experiences.

3. **Which gospel?** Does this message tell me that Christ died for my sins according to the Scriptures, was buried, and rose again {1 Corinthians 15:3–4}, and does it call me to turn from my sin and trust and follow Him? Or does it offer me the benefits of the cross without the cross?

We'll keep coming back to those three questions throughout this book.

Examine Yourself

1. If you had to describe Jesus using only what you've read for yourself in the Gospels, how would your description differ from what you've absorbed from sermons, songs and social media?
2. Which of the counterfeit Jesuses listed in this chapter are you most drawn to? Why do you think that is?
3. The Corinthians tolerated leaders who used them but resented the one who told them the truth. Whose voices do you find easiest to receive? Whose do you resist?

4. Read 2 Corinthians 11:1–15 slowly this week. Ask the Lord to show you anything in your thinking that has drifted from "the simplicity that is in Christ."

CHAPTER TWO

Paul's Tears

"For I know this, that after my departure savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock. Also from among yourselves men will rise up, speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after themselves. Therefore watch, and remember that for three years I did not cease to warn everyone night and day with tears."

{Acts 20:29–31}

Paul is standing on a beach at Miletus, saying goodbye to the elders of the church at Ephesus. He knows he will never see them again {Acts 20:25}. When you know it's the last time you'll speak to people you love, you don't waste words on small things. You tell them what matters most.

And what did Paul choose to tell them? He told them to watch out for wolves.

He also reminded them that this wasn't a new subject. For three years, night and day, he had warned every one of them, and he had done it with tears. This was not a man who enjoyed controversy. This was a spiritual father who was heartbroken at what he knew was coming.

In my experience, most Christians have heard very little of what Paul actually said about deception and falling away. We know his great statements about grace, and we should. But Paul's letters are also full of warnings, and those warnings are almost never preached. So in this chapter, I want to lay them out together. It's a lot of Scripture. Please don't skim it. Read it slowly, and let the weight of it settle on you.

1. The wolves come from inside

We like to imagine that the danger is "out there," in the culture, in the media, in other religions. Paul certainly knew about those dangers. But notice where he said the most serious threat would come from:

"Also from among yourselves men will rise up, speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after themselves." {Acts 20:30}

From among yourselves. From the eldership of a church Paul had personally planted and taught for three years. These would not be atheists. They would be church leaders.

The word *perverse* is *diastrephō*, which means to twist or distort. They wouldn't throw out the truth. They would bend it. And their goal was *"to draw away the disciples after themselves."* Not after Christ, after themselves. That is the signature of a false teacher: the movement ends up being about the messenger.

Paul said the same thing to the Romans:

"Now I urge you, brethren, note those who cause divisions and offenses, contrary to the doctrine which you learned, and avoid them. For those who are such do not serve our Lord Jesus Christ, but

their own belly, and by smooth words and flattering speech deceive the hearts of the simple." {Romans 16:17–18}

The "simple" here is *akakos*, which means innocent or unsuspecting. These are people without guile, who assume everyone means well. Paul says they are the most vulnerable. Their weapon is *"smooth words and flattering speech."* The Greek for "flattering speech" is *eulogia*, the same word we get "eulogy" from. It means fine-sounding words. Deceivers speak beautifully, and they tell you wonderful things about yourself. And what do they really serve? *"Their own belly."* Their appetites. Paul said the same thing about the "enemies of the cross" in Philippians 3:19: *"whose god is their belly."* False teaching and self-indulgence are almost always found together.

2. Believers can be moved

One of the most striking things about Paul's warnings is who they are addressed to. Over and over, Paul warns people he considers genuine believers that they are in danger of being moved away from Christ.

To the Galatians:

- *"I marvel that you are turning away so soon from Him who called you in the grace of Christ, to a different gospel"* {Galatians 1:6}.
- *"O foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you that you should not obey the truth, before whose eyes Jesus Christ was clearly portrayed among you as crucified?"* {Galatians 3:1}
- *"I am afraid for you, lest I have labored for you in vain"* {Galatians 4:11}.
- *"You have become estranged from Christ, you who attempt to be justified by law; you have fallen from grace"* {Galatians 5:4}.

- *"You ran well. Who hindered you from obeying the truth?"* {Galatians 5:7}

To the Colossians:

- *"...to present you holy, and blameless, and above reproach in His sight — if indeed you continue in the faith, grounded and steadfast, and are not moved away from the hope of the gospel"* {Colossians 1:22–23}.
- *"Now this I say lest anyone should deceive you with persuasive words"* {Colossians 2:4}.
- *"Beware lest anyone cheat you through philosophy and empty deceit, according to the tradition of men, according to the basic principles of the world, and not according to Christ"* {Colossians 2:8}.

That word "cheat" in Colossians 2:8 is *sulagōgeō*. It is a vivid word that means to carry off as plunder, to take someone captive. Some translators render it "take you captive." Paul pictures false teaching as a kidnapper who leads believers away as spoils of war.

To the Corinthians:

- *"Now all these things happened to them as examples, and they were written for our admonition, upon whom the ends of the ages have come. Therefore let him who thinks he stands take heed lest he fall"* {1 Corinthians 10:11–12}.
- *"...by which also you are saved, if you hold fast that word which I preached to you — unless you believed in vain"* {1 Corinthians 15:2}.
- *"But I discipline my body and bring it into subjection, lest, when I have preached to others, I myself should become disqualified"* {1 Corinthians 9:27}.

To the Thessalonians:

- *"For this reason, when I could no longer endure it, I sent to know your faith, lest by some means the tempter had tempted you, and our labor might be in vain"* {1 Thessalonians 3:5}.

I know that sincere, Bible-loving Christians read these warnings in different ways. Some believe they describe people who were never truly saved in the first place. I don't believe that reading does justice to the text. But whatever your view, here is what no one can do with these verses: treat them as hypothetical. Paul was not writing theoretical exercises. He was afraid. He wept. He sent Timothy across the sea to check on people because he could not stand the thought that they might be lost. If the apostle took these warnings that seriously, so should we.

3. Paul named names

Paul didn't only speak in general terms. He named people who had already been shipwrecked.

- *"…having faith and a good conscience, which some having rejected, concerning the faith have suffered shipwreck, of whom are Hymenaeus and Alexander"* {1 Timothy 1:19–20}.
- *"But shun profane and idle babblings, for they will increase to more ungodliness. And their message will spread like cancer. Hymenaeus and Philetus are of this sort, who have strayed concerning the truth, saying that the resurrection is already past; and they overthrow the faith of some"* {2 Timothy 2:16–18}.
- *"For some have already turned aside after Satan"* {1 Timothy 5:15}.

- *"This you know, that all those in Asia have turned away from me, among whom are Phygellus and Hermogenes"* {2 Timothy 1:15}.
- *"For Demas has forsaken me, having loved this present world"* {2 Timothy 4:10}.

Demas breaks my heart. He's mentioned three times in the New Testament. In Philemon 24, he is one of Paul's *"fellow laborers."* In Colossians 4:14, he is listed simply as "Demas," with no description. And in Paul's last letter, he is the man who left, *"having loved this present world."* Fellow laborer. Just a name. Gone.

Demas didn't leave because he was persuaded by a philosopher. Nobody bewitched him with a heresy. He just loved this world more. That's how most people drift.

It's also worth noticing the image Paul uses for Hymenaeus and Alexander: shipwreck. A ship doesn't wreck because it never had a captain or a cargo. Shipwreck happens to real ships that set out on a real voyage. And the cause, Paul says, was that they rejected *"faith and a good conscience."* They pushed their conscience away. We'll come back to that in the chapter on Pharaoh.

4. "Do not be deceived"

Here is something I didn't notice until I started tracing the phrase through Paul's letters. When Paul says "do not be deceived" (*mē planasthe*), he is almost never talking about an obscure point of theology. He is almost always talking about the lie that you can keep living in sin and still inherit the kingdom of God.

- *"Do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God?* ***Do not be deceived.*** *Neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor homosexuals, nor sodomites, nor thieves, nor covetous, nor drunkards,*

nor revilers, nor extortioners will inherit the kingdom of God. And such were some of you. But you were washed" {1 Corinthians 6:9–11}.

- *"**Do not be deceived:** 'Evil company corrupts good habits.' Awake to righteousness, and do not sin"* {1 Corinthians 15:33–34}.
- *"**Do not be deceived,** God is not mocked; for whatever a man sows, that he will also reap. For he who sows to his flesh will of the flesh reap corruption, but he who sows to the Spirit will of the Spirit reap everlasting life"* {Galatians 6:7–8}.
- *"For this you know, that no fornicator, unclean person, nor covetous man, who is an idolater, has any inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and God. **Let no one deceive you with empty words,** for because of these things the wrath of God comes upon the sons of disobedience"* {Ephesians 5:5–6}.

The apostle John says the very same thing: *"Little children, let no one deceive you. He who practices righteousness is righteous, just as He is righteous. He who sins is of the devil"* {1 John 3:7–8}.

Do you see the pattern? The deception the apostles feared most was not that Christians would stop believing in God. It was that Christians would believe God doesn't mind. The "empty words" Paul warns about in Ephesians are words that empty sin of its seriousness. They sound like grace. They feel like freedom. But they lead people to sow to the flesh while expecting to reap eternal life.

Please notice also what Paul says to the Corinthians: *"And such were some of you. But you were washed."* The gospel doesn't leave people where it found them. That's not a threat. It's the most hopeful sentence in the paragraph.

5. The forecast for the last days

Paul didn't only warn about his own time. He looked ahead and described a coming season when deception would intensify.

- *"Now the Spirit expressly says that in latter times some will depart from the faith, giving heed to deceiving spirits and doctrines of demons, speaking lies in hypocrisy, having their own conscience seared with a hot iron"* {1 Timothy 4:1–2}.
- *"But know this, that in the last days perilous times will come: For men will be lovers of themselves, lovers of money, boasters, proud, blasphemers, disobedient to parents, unthankful, unholy, unloving, unforgiving, slanderers, without self-control, brutal, despisers of good, traitors, headstrong, haughty, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God, having a form of godliness but denying its power. And from such people turn away!"* {2 Timothy 3:1–5}
- *"But evil men and impostors will grow worse and worse, deceiving and being deceived"* {2 Timothy 3:13}.
- *"For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine, but according to their own desires, because they have itching ears, they will heap up for themselves teachers; and they will turn their ears away from the truth, and be turned aside to fables"* {2 Timothy 4:3–4}.
- *"Let no one deceive you by any means; for that Day will not come unless the falling away comes first"* {2 Thessalonians 2:3}.

Look closely at 2 Timothy 3. That list doesn't describe people outside the church. Read the last line again: *"having a form of godliness."* These people look religious. They have the shape of faith, the outward form. What they deny is its *power*, the power that actually changes a

life. And notice what heads the list: *"lovers of themselves."* Then, near the end, *"lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God."* Self-love at the beginning, pleasure-love at the end, and religion wrapped around both.

And 2 Timothy 3:13 has a chilling phrase: *"deceiving and being deceived."* The people who spread deception are themselves deceived. Most false teachers are not con artists who know they are lying. They are sincere. They believe what they're selling. That's part of what makes them so persuasive. We will spend whole chapters on 1 Timothy 4 and 2 Thessalonians 2, because they are central to this book.

6. Paul's remedy

Paul never gave a warning without also giving a way of escape. Here is what he told the Ephesian elders, right after he warned them about wolves:

"So now, brethren, I commend you to God and to the word of His grace, which is able to build you up and give you an inheritance among all those who are sanctified." {Acts 20:32}

Two things: God Himself, and His word. Not a program. Not a personality. Not even Paul. Paul knew he was leaving, and he handed them over to the only two things that would never leave. Throughout his letters, Paul gives the same remedies again and again:

- **Hold to the Word.** *"But you must continue in the things which you have learned and been assured of… All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness"* {2 Timothy 3:14–16}.
- **Watch yourself as well as your doctrine.** *"Take heed to yourself and to the doctrine. Continue in them, for in doing*

this you will save both yourself and those who hear you" {1 Timothy 4:16}.

- **Test everything.** *"Test all things; hold fast what is good. Abstain from every form of evil"* {1 Thessalonians 5:21–22}.
- **Grow in discerning love.** *"And this I pray, that your love may abound still more and more in knowledge and all discernment, that you may approve the things that are excellent, that you may be sincere and without offense till the day of Christ"* {Philippians 1:9–10}.
- **Stay innocent about evil and wise about good.** *"I want you to be wise in what is good, and simple concerning evil"* {Romans 16:19}.
- **Put on the belt of truth.** *"Stand therefore, having girded your waist with truth"* {Ephesians 6:14}.

Notice what Paul does in Philippians 1:10. He prays that they would be *"sincere."* The Greek word is *eilikrinēs*, and it may come from a picture of something held up to the sunlight and found pure. True sincerity isn't just feeling strongly. It is being able to stand being held up to the light. Paul wanted the Philippians to be sincere *and* right, and he believed that only love growing *"in knowledge and all discernment"* could get them there.

That is the sincerity this book is after. Not the sincerity of a feeling, but the sincerity of a heart held up to the light of God's Word and found true.

Examine Yourself

1. Paul warned "night and day with tears." When was the last time a warning in Scripture moved you emotionally rather than just intellectually?

2. Reread the four “do not be deceived” passages. Is there any area of your life where you have quietly assumed that God doesn’t really mind?
3. Demas didn’t fall to a heresy; he “loved this present world.” What parts of this present world have the strongest pull on your heart right now?
4. Paul commended the Ephesians “to God and to the word of His grace.” If your pastor, favorite teacher or Christian friends were taken away tomorrow, how firmly would you be standing on those two things alone?

CHAPTER THREE

Deceiving Spirits and Doctrines of Demons

"Now the Spirit expressly says that in latter times some will depart from the faith, giving heed to deceiving spirits and doctrines of demons, speaking lies in hypocrisy, having their own conscience seared with a hot iron."

{1 Timothy 4:1–2}

When most of us hear the phrase "doctrines of demons," we picture something dark and obvious: séances, occult rituals, a cult compound in the desert. But that's not what Paul was describing to Timothy. As we'll see, the doctrines of demons in Ephesus sounded *more* spiritual than the truth, not less.

Let's look at this passage closely, because every phrase in it matters.

"The Spirit expressly says"

Paul opens with unusual emphasis. The word *expressly* is *rhētōs*, meaning clearly, explicitly, in so many words. This isn't a vague impression or a hint. The Holy Spirit has spoken plainly. Paul wants

Timothy to know that this warning is not his own pessimism. It is revelation.

"In latter times" (*hysterois kairois*) points to the season leading up to Christ's return. The New Testament writers believed they were already living in the last days {Hebrews 1:2; 1 John 2:18}, and that the characteristics of those days would intensify as the end drew near. If those conditions were present in Timothy's day, how much more in ours?

"Some will depart from the faith"

The verb is *aphistēmi*, to stand off from, to withdraw, to fall away. It's the root of our word *apostasy*. Notice the precision of the phrase. It doesn't say some will never come to the faith. It says some will *depart from* it. You can't depart from a place you were never in.

And notice the article: *the* faith. Paul isn't talking about someone's personal feelings of trust. He is talking about the body of truth that was *"once for all delivered to the saints"* {Jude 3}. The people Paul is describing walk away from the content of apostolic truth. And as we'll see, they usually think they are walking toward something better.

"Giving heed to deceiving spirits"

The phrase "giving heed" is *prosechō*. It means to turn your mind toward, to pay attention to, to attach yourself to. It's the same word used for devoting yourself to something {1 Timothy 4:13, "give attention to reading"}. The point is that deception is something we *give our attention to*. It doesn't simply happen to us. We lean in.

"Deceiving spirits" is *pneumasin planois*. The word *planos* is related to our word "planet," which comes from the Greek for "wanderer," because the ancients saw the planets wandering across

the sky. A deceiving spirit is a spirit that makes people wander. It leads them off the path, often very slowly, one small step at a time.

Paul is telling us something sobering here. Behind false teaching there are real spiritual beings. *"For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this age, against spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places"* {Ephesians 6:12}. False doctrine isn't only a matter of bad scholarship. It has an author.

"Doctrines of demons"

Here is something that surprises people: demons are theologians.

"You believe that there is one God. You do well. Even the demons believe — and tremble!" {James 2:19}

Demons know who Jesus is. In the Gospels, they recognized Him before the disciples did. *"I know who You are — the Holy One of God!"* {Mark 1:24}. Satan knows Scripture well enough to quote it, as he did when he tempted Jesus in the wilderness {Matthew 4:6}. The enemy is not ignorant of the Bible. He is an expert in it. And he uses it, carefully edited.

So a "doctrine of demons" is not necessarily a teaching that sounds demonic. It is a teaching that *originates* with demons, and it may be full of Bible verses.

"Speaking lies in hypocrisy"

How do these doctrines reach the church? Through people. Paul says the deceiving spirits work through those who are *"speaking lies in hypocrisy"* (*en hypokrisei pseudologōn*). The word *hypokrisis* originally described an actor on a stage, someone speaking from behind a mask. These teachers wear the mask of godliness. They perform holiness.

Then Paul adds the most frightening phrase in the passage: *"having their own conscience seared with a hot iron."* The Greek is *kekaustēriasmenōn*, from which we get the word "cauterize." In the ancient world, a hot iron was used both to cauterize wounds and to brand slaves and criminals. Either way, the result is the same. The flesh that's been burned loses its feeling.

A seared conscience doesn't feel guilty anymore. It can teach error without a twinge. That is why sincerity is not a reliable guide. A person with a cauterized conscience can be perfectly sincere and perfectly wrong. We'll look at how a conscience gets seared when we come to Pharaoh's story in Chapter 10.

The surprise: these doctrines were strict

Now look at what the doctrines of demons actually taught in Ephesus:

"...forbidding to marry, and commanding to abstain from foods which God created to be received with thanksgiving by those who believe and know the truth. For every creature of God is good, and nothing is to be refused if it is received with thanksgiving; for it is sanctified by the word of God and prayer." {1 Timothy 4:3–5}

These demonic doctrines weren't about indulgence. They were about *asceticism*. Don't marry. Don't eat this. Deny the body. They sounded more holy, more disciplined and more spiritual than ordinary Christianity. If you were a sincere believer who wanted to please God, they would have been very attractive.

A note on clean and unclean foods

Before we go any further, I need to address how this passage is commonly used. Many Christians quote 1 Timothy 4:3–5 as proof that God no longer cares what we eat, and that the clean and unclean food laws in Leviticus 11 and Deuteronomy 14 have been done away with. I believe that reading pulls the verse out of its context, and it's worth slowing down to see what Paul is actually saying.

First, look at who Paul is describing. These are teachers who *forbid marriage*. God's law never forbade marriage. God Himself instituted marriage in the garden {Genesis 2:24}, and the law protected and honored it. So whatever these teachers were promoting, it wasn't the law of Moses. It was something else entirely: a man-made asceticism that treated the physical world as evil. Paul describes the same kind of teaching in Colossians: *"'Do not touch, do not taste, do not handle,' which all concern things which perish with the using — according to the commandments and doctrines of men"* {Colossians 2:21–22}. Notice whose commandments these were. Not God's. *Men's*. In the early centuries of the church, there were movements that taught that the body and the material world were corrupt, that marriage was unspiritual, and that holy people should abstain from meat and wine altogether. That's the kind of teaching Paul is confronting. He isn't arguing against Leviticus. He's arguing against people who were adding prohibitions God never gave.

Second, look at how Paul defines the foods. He says these are *"foods which God created to be received with thanksgiving by those who believe and know the truth"* {4:3}. Those who know the truth know what God has said. Then in verse 5 he explains why these foods may be received: *"for it is sanctified by the word of God and prayer."* To *sanctify* means to set apart as holy. And what sets food apart? *The word of God*. At the time Paul wrote these words, the only written "word of God" Timothy had was what we call the Old Testament, and it is the Word of God that tells us plainly which creatures are given for food {Leviticus 11; Deuteronomy 14}. So the very passage people use to throw out God's food laws actually points right back to them. The foods that are "sanctified by the word of God" are the foods God's Word has already set apart as food.

Third, "every creature of God is good" doesn't mean every creature is food. This is an echo of Genesis 1:31, where God looked at everything He had made and said it was very good. Paul is pushing back against teachers who called God's creation evil. But a

creature can be good without being food. A vulture is a good creature of God. So is a snake. That doesn't put either one on the dinner table. The same God who called all of creation good is the God who distinguished between clean and unclean, long before Moses, when He told Noah to bring the clean animals onto the ark by sevens and the unclean by twos {Genesis 7:2}.

Fourth, God does not change. *"For I am the LORD, I do not change"* {Malachi 3:6}. *"Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever"* {Hebrews 13:8}. And Jesus said He did not come to destroy the law, and that *"till heaven and earth pass away, one jot or one tittle will by no means pass from the law till all is fulfilled"* {Matthew 5:17–18}. Heaven and earth are still here. If God's definition of what is food and what is not has changed, we would expect Him to say so clearly, not leave us to infer it from a verse that's about something else.

Fifth, the prophets connect eating unclean things with the end. Isaiah's final chapter describes the coming of the Lord in fire and judgment at the end of the age, the same chapter that speaks of the new heavens and the new earth {Isaiah 66:15–16, 22}. And right in the middle of that end-time scene, God says: *"Those who sanctify themselves and purify themselves, to go to the gardens after an idol in the midst, eating swine's flesh and the abomination and the mouse, shall be consumed together," says the LORD* {Isaiah 66:17}. Notice that these people *"sanctify themselves and purify themselves."* They think they are holy. They are religious people, sincere in their own eyes, who have decided for themselves what is clean. That's a sobering picture of sincere deception, and God doesn't treat it lightly.

What about the other passages people point to? Briefly: in Mark 7, the question on the table was not pork or shellfish. It was whether eating with *unwashed hands* made food defiling, a tradition of the elders, not a command of God {Mark 7:1–5}. Jesus was rebuking

human tradition, not overturning Leviticus. And in Acts 10, when Peter saw the sheet full of unclean animals, his immediate answer was, *"Not so, Lord! For I have never eaten anything common or unclean"* {Acts 10:14}. That was years after the resurrection. Peter, who had walked with Jesus and heard everything He taught, had never been told the food laws were gone. And Peter himself tells us what the vision meant: *"God has shown me that I should not call any* ***man*** *common or unclean"* {Acts 10:28}. The vision was about people, about the Gentiles being welcomed into God's family, not about the menu.

Some readers will point to Mark 7:19, which in many modern Bibles includes the words *"In saying this, Jesus declared all foods clean."* It's worth knowing that those exact words are not in the Greek text. Mark wrote only a short phrase, *katharizon panta ta brōmata*, "purifying all foods" (the NKJV) or "purging all meats" (the KJV). Jesus had just explained that what goes into a man's mouth *"does not enter his heart but his stomach, and is eliminated"* {Mark 7:19}. Read in context, the phrase describes the body's own process of digestion and elimination. The words "Jesus declared" were supplied by translators to express their interpretation. And remember the question Jesus was answering: whether food eaten with ceremonially unwashed hands was defiled. To the Jewish listeners in that room, *brōmata*, "foods," meant the things God had given as food. No one at that table was asking about pork.

Others will point to Romans 14. There Paul writes, *"I know and am convinced by the Lord Jesus that there is nothing unclean of itself"* {Romans 14:14}. But look at the setting. Paul introduces the chapter as a discussion of *"doubtful things"* or disputable matters {14:1}, and he describes one believer who *"eats only vegetables"* {14:2}. The question was not whether to eat pork. It was whether to eat meat at all, in a city where much of the meat in the market had passed through pagan temples (the same issue Paul addresses at length in 1 Corinthians 8 and 10). And here's a detail most English

readers miss. The word Paul uses for "unclean" in Romans 14:14 is *koinos*, which means "common," something that has become defiled by contact or association. It is not *akathartos*, the word used for the unclean animals of Leviticus 11. Those are two different categories, and the New Testament keeps them distinct. When Peter refused the sheet in Acts 10:14, he used both words: *"I have never eaten anything common [koinos] or unclean [akathartos]."* Paul's point in Romans 14 is that clean food doesn't become "common" because of where it has been or whose hands it has passed through, and that believers shouldn't judge one another over such matters. He was not erasing the line God drew between clean and unclean.

I know this is a different conclusion than many of us were taught, and sincere believers have come to different convictions on it. But that's exactly why I raise it here. This is one more place where a single verse, lifted out of its context, has been used to say something the author never meant. Read it for yourself, in context, like a Berean, and ask the Lord what He has said.

Now, back to the bigger lesson of this passage.

This is a crucial lesson. The enemy doesn't care which ditch you land in, as long as you get off the road. In one generation he offers license: *God doesn't mind*. In another he offers legalism: *God will only love you if you do more*. Both are counterfeits. Both reject the goodness of what God has said. And both end up making *us* the center: either our freedom or our performance.

The answer to both is the Word of God received with faith and obedience. Look at verse 5 again: *"It is sanctified by the word of God and prayer."*

The oldest doctrine of demons

If you want to understand every doctrine of demons, go back to the very first one. It's found in Genesis 3, and Paul himself points us there: *"as the serpent deceived Eve by his craftiness"* {2 Corinthians 11:3}.

The serpent's speech is short, only a few sentences, but it contains the pattern for nearly every deception that has followed. It has three moves.

Move one: Question the Word.
"Has God indeed said, 'You shall not eat of every tree of the garden'?" {Genesis 3:1}

The first doctrine of demons is a question. It doesn't deny God's Word outright. It just raises a little doubt. *Did God really say that? Are you sure that's what He meant?*

Notice also that the serpent misquotes God. God had said, *"Of every tree of the garden you may freely eat"* except one {Genesis 2:16–17}. The serpent turned God's lavish generosity into a restriction: *Has God said you can't eat from every tree?* He made God sound stingy.

And look at how Eve responds: *"We may eat the fruit of the trees of the garden; but of the fruit of the tree which is in the midst of the garden, God has said, 'You shall not eat it, nor shall you touch it, lest you die'"* {Genesis 3:2–3}. She left out the word "freely," and she added "nor shall you touch it." In one sentence, Eve both subtracted from and added to the Word of God. She diminished His generosity and exaggerated His strictness. She was already halfway into the serpent's picture of God before she ever touched the fruit.

That is how deception begins: not with a rejection of God's Word, but with a fuzzy, secondhand, slightly distorted version of it.

Move two: Deny the consequence.

"Then the serpent said to the woman, 'You will not surely die.'" {Genesis 3:4}

Now the serpent goes further. He flatly contradicts what God said. And notice which part he contradicts: the warning of judgment. *You will not surely die. There's no real consequence. God doesn't mean it.*

This is still the most effective lie in the enemy's arsenal. A gospel without judgment, a God without wrath, a Christianity in which nothing you do really matters because "you will not surely die"—that's not a new idea. It is literally the oldest lie in the Bible.

Move three: Exalt the self.

"For God knows that in the day you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil." {Genesis 3:5}

Finally the serpent attacks God's motives and offers Eve a new identity. *God is holding out on you. He doesn't want you to reach your potential. If you step outside His word, you'll become like Him. You'll decide for yourself what is good and what is evil.*

This is the root of every form of humanism, which we will look at closely in Chapter 6. The essence of the first temptation was not "Worship Satan." It was "Be your own god." Decide for yourself what is right. Trust your own judgment above God's Word. Then Eve looked at the tree, and the Bible tells us exactly what she saw: *"the tree was good for food, that it was pleasant to the eyes, and a tree desirable to make one wise"* {Genesis 3:6}. The Apostle John would later describe the same three things: *"the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life"* {1 John 2:16}. Appetite, appearance, and ambition. Every temptation since has come through one of those three doors.

The pattern today

Once you see the serpent's three moves, you start to recognize them everywhere. Here are just a few examples I hear regularly, sometimes from pulpits:

"Did God really say?"

- "That verse was cultural. It doesn't apply to us."
- "Paul was just giving his opinion."
- "Jesus never said anything about that." (As though the Son of God didn't inspire the rest of Scripture.)
- "The Bible is a beautiful library of human experiences with God, but it isn't really the Word of God."

"You will not surely die."

- "A loving God would never send anyone to hell."
- "God just wants you to be happy."
- "Once you've prayed the prayer, nothing you do can affect your eternity."
- "Everybody's going to the same place in the end."

"You will be like God."

- "Speak your truth."
- "Follow your heart."
- "You have the power within you to create your own reality."
- "Your words have creative power, so declare what you want into existence."
- "No one can tell you what's right for you."

Some of these sound harmless. Some sound inspirational. Some even contain a grain of truth. But put them next to Genesis 3, and you'll recognize the voice.

Testing the spirits

If deceiving spirits are real, how do we protect ourselves? John gives us the answer:

"Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits, whether they are of God; because many false prophets have gone out into the world." {1 John 4:1}

Notice that John assumes that not every spiritual experience comes from God. He doesn't say *believe every spirit that feels good*. He says *test* them. We'll talk about how to test them in Chapter 11, but here are three biblical principles to hold onto now:

1. A supernatural experience is not proof of truth. Moses warned Israel that a prophet might give a sign or wonder *that actually comes to pass*, and then say, "Let us go after other gods." And the Lord said, *"You shall not listen to the words of that prophet or that dreamer of dreams, for the LORD your God is testing you to know whether you love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul"* {Deuteronomy 13:1–3}. Even a fulfilled sign can be a test.

2. Not even an angel outranks the Word. *"But even if we, or an angel from heaven, preach any other gospel to you than what we have preached to you, let him be accursed"* {Galatians 1:8}. Paul included himself in that warning! If Paul could be wrong, so can any modern teacher, prophet, or experience. Scripture is the standard everything else is measured by.

3. The test is Jesus. *"Every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is of God"* {1 John 4:2}. In John's day the false teachers denied that Jesus truly had a human body. Today the question is broader: which Jesus does this spirit confess? The Jesus of Scripture who is Lord, who died for sin, who calls us to repent, who is coming to judge? Or another Jesus?

Nourished in good doctrine

Paul doesn't leave Timothy with a warning only. Right after describing the doctrines of demons, he says:

"If you instruct the brethren in these things, you will be a good minister of Jesus Christ, nourished in the words of faith and of the good doctrine which you have carefully followed. But reject profane and old wives' fables, and exercise yourself toward godliness." {1 Timothy 4:6–7}

The word *nourished* is *entrephō*, to be trained up, fed continually. You don't overcome deception by studying deception. You overcome it the way the Secret Service learns to spot counterfeits: by being so well fed on the real thing that the counterfeit tastes wrong.

And *exercise* is *gymnazō*, the root of our word "gymnasium." Godliness takes training. It doesn't happen by accident, and it doesn't happen by attending an event once a week. It happens by daily, deliberate practice of hearing and obeying God's Word.

The serpent's first question was "Has God indeed said?" The best defense is to know what God has said, firsthand, and to love it.

Examine Yourself

1. Think about your own understanding of God's Word. Where might you have added to it (making God stricter than He is) or subtracted from it (making Him more permissive than He is)?
2. Which of the serpent's three moves do you find most persuasive in your own life: questioning the Word, denying the consequence, or exalting the self?

3. Have you ever assumed that a powerful spiritual experience must have come from God? How would Deuteronomy 13:1–3 change the way you evaluate such experiences?
4. Paul says to "exercise yourself toward godliness." What would a realistic, daily spiritual training plan look like for you?

Part Two: How Deception Happens

CHAPTER FOUR

It Doesn't Come Packaged Like Hell

"Therefore we must give the more earnest heed to the things we have heard, lest we drift away."
{Hebrews 2:1}

If you've ever spent a day at the beach, you may have had this experience. You wade out into the water, you float on your back for a while, you talk with your friends, and you feel completely relaxed. Then you look up toward the shore, and your umbrella is a long way down the beach. You never felt yourself moving. You didn't swim anywhere. The current simply carried you while you were enjoying the water.

That is how most deception works. It is not dramatic. It doesn't come with a warning label or smell like sulfur. If deception came packaged like hell, nobody would buy it. It comes packaged like Sunday morning. It comes in a warm voice, with good lighting, great music and a verse on the screen. The writer of Hebrews understood this. The word he uses for "drift away" is *pararheō*. It means to flow past, to slip away, and it was used of a ship that slips past the harbor because no one secured it. Nobody has to do anything to drift. That's the point. Drifting is what happens when you do nothing. You stay put only by holding on.

In this chapter, I want to show you three of the quiet currents that carry sincere believers away from the real Jesus: **omission**, **lack of understanding**, and **making the Word all about us**.

Lot's slow move

Before we look at those three currents, consider one man's story. When Abraham and his nephew Lot separated, Lot looked toward the well-watered plain of the Jordan, and the Bible tells us that he *"pitched his tent even as far as Sodom"* {Genesis 13:12}. He didn't move *into* Sodom. He just faced that direction.

One chapter later, Lot *"dwelt in Sodom"* {Genesis 14:12}. And by Genesis 19, Lot was *"sitting in the gate of Sodom"* {Genesis 19:1}, which is where the city's leaders and judges sat. Lot had become a respected member of Sodom's establishment.

Toward. In. Leading. No one decision took him there. He just kept moving a little closer to what attracted him. Peter tells us that Lot was a righteous man, *"oppressed by the filthy conduct of the wicked"* and tormented in his soul by what he saw {2 Peter 2:7–8}. He knew it was wrong. He just couldn't seem to leave. When the angels finally came to rescue him, Lot "lingered," and the angels had to physically take him by the hand and drag him out {Genesis 19:16}. His sons-in-law thought he was joking. His wife looked back.

The first Psalm describes the same progression: *"Blessed is the man who walks not in the counsel of the ungodly, nor stands in the path of sinners, nor sits in the seat of the scornful"* {Psalm 1:1}. Walk, stand, sit. Each step is a little more comfortable than the one before. I know this from experience. There was a season when I was very close to the Lord, and then, without even noticing, I wasn't. I never stopped loving Him. I still went to church sometimes. I still loved a good sermon on the radio. I was kind to people. But pursuing Him was no longer my priority. I was building my own kingdom. It was a

slow fade, and it took years for me to look up and realize how far down the beach I'd been carried.

Now let's look at the currents.

Current one: omission

The most effective lies are not made of false statements. They are made of true statements with something missing. Watch how Satan tempted Jesus in the wilderness. After two failed attempts, the devil took Jesus to the pinnacle of the temple and quoted Scripture:

"If You are the Son of God, throw Yourself down. For it is written: 'He shall give His angels charge over you,' and, 'In their hands they shall bear you up, lest you dash your foot against a stone.'" {Matthew 4:6}

Satan was quoting Psalm 91:11–12. But compare it to the original: *"For He shall give His angels charge over you,* ***to keep you in all your ways****. In their hands they shall bear you up, lest you dash your foot against a stone."* Satan left out the phrase *"to keep you in all your ways."* The promise of protection was given to someone walking in God's ways, not to someone testing God by jumping off a building.

The devil didn't add a single false word. He just took one out. And notice how Jesus answered him: *"It is written again"* {Matthew 4:7}. Jesus didn't argue with the devil's verse. He set it beside another verse. Scripture interprets Scripture. One of the surest signs of a counterfeit gospel is that it builds everything on a few favorite verses and never puts them next to the rest.

"And you shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free." It's quoted in sermons, graduation speeches, and even carved into the walls of government buildings. But the sentence actually

begins in verse 31: *"If you abide in My word, you are My disciples indeed. And you shall know the truth…"* Leave out the first half, and the promise loses its condition. The freedom Jesus offered belongs to those who abide in His word.

Once you start looking, you'll find omissions everywhere:

- **Jeremiah 29:11.** *"For I know the thoughts that I think toward you, says the LORD, thoughts of peace and not of evil, to give you a future and a hope."* It's on coffee mugs and graduation cards. But it was written to exiles who had just been told they would remain in Babylon for seventy years {29:10}, and two verses later the Lord says, *"And you will seek Me and find Me, when you search for Me with all your heart"* {29:13}. It's a beautiful promise, but it isn't a guarantee that your plans will succeed. It's God's promise to bring His disciplined people home when they seek Him with their whole heart.
- **Philippians 4:13.** *"I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me."* Athletes write it on their shoes. But in context, Paul is talking about being content whether he is full or hungry, in plenty or in need {4:11–12}. The "all things" include going hungry for Christ's sake.
- **Romans 8:28.** *"All things work together for good"… "to those who love God, to those who are the called according to His purpose."*
- **2 Chronicles 7:14.** We love to claim "heal their land." But the verse says *"if My people… will humble themselves, and pray and seek My face,* ***and turn from their wicked ways****."*
- **Matthew 7:1.** *"Judge not, that you be not judged."* This may be the most quoted verse in our culture. But four verses later Jesus says, *"First remove the plank from your own eye, and* ***then*** *you will see clearly to remove the speck from your brother's eye"* {7:5}. Ten verses later He tells us to

recognize false prophets *"by their fruits"* {7:16}. And elsewhere He says, *"Do not judge according to appearance, but judge with righteous judgment"* {John 7:24}. Jesus forbade hypocritical judgment. He commanded discernment.

- **John 3:16.** We all know it, and rightly so. But how many of us know John 3:36? *"He who believes in the Son has everlasting life; and he who does not believe the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God abides on him."* The word translated "does not believe" in the NKJV is *apeitheō*, which literally means "does not obey," and many translations render it that way. In the Gospel of John, believing and obeying are two sides of the same coin.

None of these favorite verses is false. But when we only ever hear the comforting half, we end up with a Jesus who makes promises and never makes demands. That's another Jesus.

It's worth noticing what Paul said to the Ephesian elders when he left them: *"For I have not shunned to declare to you the whole counsel of God"* {Acts 20:27}. The fact that Paul had to say this tells us that it's possible to shun parts of God's counsel. A preacher can go years without lying once, and still deceive a congregation by what he never says. When was the last time you heard a sermon on hell? On the fear of the Lord? On the judgment seat of Christ? On the warning passages in Hebrews? On self-denial?

And let me be fair: this isn't only the pulpit's fault. We, the listeners, choose the churches and podcasts we go back to. Paul said that in the last days people would *"heap up for themselves teachers"* who would tell them what they wanted to hear {2 Timothy 4:3}. Pastors who preach the whole counsel of God often find their pews emptying. We get the preaching we reward.

Current two: lack of understanding

"My people are destroyed for lack of knowledge. Because you have rejected knowledge, I also will reject you from being priest for Me; because you have forgotten the law of your God, I also will forget your children." {Hosea 4:6}

This verse is often quoted, but the second half is usually left off. (There's that current again!) Israel's lack of knowledge wasn't a matter of chance. It wasn't that nobody told them. God says they *rejected* knowledge and *forgot* His law. Their ignorance was a choice. The same is true for us. Most Western Christians own several Bibles. We can listen to the whole thing for free on our phones. We have commentaries, concordances and study tools that previous generations could only dream of. If we don't know what God has said, it isn't because we can't find out. It's because we've decided we have more important things to do.

Jesus told the religious leaders of His day, *"You are mistaken, not knowing the Scriptures nor the power of God"* {Matthew 22:29}. These were people who knew the Scriptures better than almost anyone alive. They had memorized huge portions of the Old Testament. But they didn't *know* the Scriptures, because they read them through the lens of their own tradition and expectations.

In the parable of the sower, Jesus explained what happens when understanding is missing: *"When anyone hears the word of the kingdom, and does not understand it, then the wicked one comes and snatches away what was sown in his heart"* {Matthew 13:19}. A word heard but not understood is a seed left lying on the surface. The birds get it. And Peter warned that Paul's letters contain *"some things hard to understand, which untaught and unstable people twist to their own destruction, as they do also the rest of the Scriptures"* {2 Peter 3:16}. Notice the two words: *untaught* and *unstable*. Ignorance and instability go together. A believer who doesn't know the Word well can be blown around by whatever sounds good this week.

The writer of Hebrews rebuked his readers because they had become *"dull of hearing"* {Hebrews 5:11}. By this time, he said, they should have been teachers, but they still needed milk. And then he explains what spiritual maturity actually produces: *"But solid food belongs to those who are of full age, that is, those who by reason of use have their senses exercised to discern both good and evil"* {Hebrews 5:14}. Discernment isn't a special gift for a few. It's the normal result of years of feeding on solid food. And a Christian who never moves past milk will never be able to tell the difference between right and almost right.

When I read the New Testament through for the first time on my thirtieth birthday, what shocked me most wasn't that I'd been lied to. It was how much I had simply never been shown. I'd been living on what other people chewed for me. I loved the Lord, but I didn't know His Word for myself. And that left me exposed.

Current three: making it all about us

The third current is the strongest, because it flatters us. It's the habit of reading the whole Bible as though it were a book about *me*: my potential, my dreams, my breakthrough, my destiny. Here's a classic example. You've probably heard a sermon on David and Goliath that goes something like this: *What's the Goliath in your life? Maybe it's debt, or a health problem, or a difficult boss. You need to pick up your five smooth stones and face your giant with faith!*

There's something to be encouraged by there, but notice what's happened. In that sermon, *you* are David. But in the story, Israel's army doesn't defeat Goliath. They hide in their tents, terrified {1 Samuel 17:11, 24}. One anointed man from Bethlehem goes out alone, defeats the enemy they couldn't defeat, and then the people share in his victory {17:52}. If we're in this story at all, we're the frightened soldiers. The story points us to another anointed Son of David from

Bethlehem who would defeat the enemy we could never defeat, and share His victory with us. When we make ourselves David, we accidentally take Jesus out of the story.

This happens all the time. Jericho becomes "your walls that need to come down." Joseph's dream becomes "the dream God has for your life." Abraham's blessing becomes "God wants you to be blessed financially." The prayer of Jabez becomes a formula for expanding your territory. Psalm 23 becomes a promise that you will never lack anything you want. I'm not saying God doesn't care about our struggles, or that there's no personal application in the Bible. Of course there is. *"For whatever things were written before were written for our learning, that we through the patience and comfort of the Scriptures might have hope"* {Romans 15:4}. But there's a difference between finding ourselves in God's story and turning God into a supporting character in ours.

You can hear this shift even in our worship. Read through the Psalms and notice how much of them simply describes God: who He is, what He's done, how great He is. *"Great is the LORD, and greatly to be praised"* {Psalm 48:1}. Then listen to some of our modern songs and count how many lines are actually about how *we* feel, what *we* want, and what God will do for *us*. Not every song needs to be a theology lecture, but our worship reveals where our attention is.

This is the current Paul warned Timothy about: *"For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine, but* ***according to their own desires****... they will heap up for themselves teachers"* {2 Timothy 4:3}. When our desires become the filter, the Bible becomes a mirror that only shows us ourselves, and the real Jesus slowly fades from the picture.

How to stop drifting

If drifting is what happens when you do nothing, then staying put requires something. Hebrews tells us what:

Give more earnest heed. *"Therefore we must give the more earnest heed to the things we have heard, lest we drift away"* {Hebrews 2:1}. The cure for drift is attention. Pay closer attention to what you've already heard. Read it again. Think about it. Talk about it.

Drop an anchor. *"This hope we have as an anchor of the soul, both sure and steadfast, and which enters the Presence behind the veil, where the forerunner has entered for us, even Jesus"* {Hebrews 6:19–20}. An anchor isn't a feeling. It's fixed to something outside the boat. Our hope is anchored in Jesus Himself, not in our experiences of Him.

Get help from your brothers and sisters. *"Beware, brethren, lest there be in any of you an evil heart of unbelief in departing from the living God; but exhort one another daily, while it is called 'Today,' lest any of you be hardened through the deceitfulness of sin"* {Hebrews 3:12–13}. Notice the word *daily*. Notice the word *deceitfulness*. Sin deceives. And one of God's chosen remedies is other believers who love us enough to tell us when we're drifting. My friend Teresa once told me, "We're all just walking each other home." That's what this verse is describing.

Look up. Every so often, the swimmer has to raise her head and find her umbrella on the shore. Take a moment right now. Compare where you are today with where you were when you first loved the Lord. Compare what you believe with what you've read in Scripture for yourself. If you've drifted, there's no shame in swimming back. The shame would be in pretending you haven't moved.

Examine Yourself

1. Think of Lot's progression: toward, in, leading. Is there any "Sodom" in your life that you have been slowly moving toward?
2. Which of the omitted verses in this chapter surprised you? Are there other favorite verses you've only ever heard half of?
3. Hosea says God's people "rejected knowledge." Be honest: is your lack of biblical knowledge more a matter of opportunity or of priority?
4. Look at your favorite Bible passages. Do they mainly tell you about God, or mainly tell you about you?

CHAPTER FIVE

When Faith Feels Right but Isn't

"All the ways of a man are pure in his own eyes, but the LORD weighs the spirits." {Proverbs 16:2}

I want to tell you about a worship service.

The people had been through a hard season. Their leader had been gone a long time, and they were anxious and uncertain. So they gathered together, they gave generously (some of them gave their jewelry), and a respected spiritual leader helped them build something beautiful to focus their worship. When it was finished, he made an announcement: *"Tomorrow is a feast to the LORD."* The next morning they rose early. They offered sacrifices. They ate and drank together. There was music and dancing. The energy was electric. And the God of heaven was so angry that He told Moses He was ready to destroy them all {Exodus 32:10}.

You probably recognized the story by now. It's the golden calf. But have you ever noticed what Aaron actually said? He didn't introduce the calf as a foreign god. He said, *"This is your god, O Israel, that brought you out of the land of Egypt!"* And then: *"Tomorrow is a feast to the LORD"* {Exodus 32:4–5}. In Hebrew, "the LORD" there is *YHWH*, God's own covenant name.

Israel didn't think they had abandoned the God of the Exodus. They thought they were worshiping Him. They gave the calf His name, credited it with His deeds, and threw it a party in His honor. It felt like revival. It was idolatry.

That is the most precise Old Testament picture I know of what Paul meant by *another Jesus*. Same name. Different god.

The heart is a poor witness

We live in a culture that tells us to trust our feelings above everything else. "Follow your heart." "If it feels right, it is right." "You have to be true to yourself." Unfortunately, the church has absorbed a lot of this. We measure the health of our faith by how we feel in worship, how much peace we sense about a decision, or how close we feel to God this week.

But listen to what God says about the human heart:

"The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked; who can know it? I, the LORD, search the heart, I test the mind, even to give every man according to his ways, according to the fruit of his doings." {Jeremiah 17:9–10}

The heart is *deceitful*, and the first person it deceives is its owner. Proverbs says it again and again:

- *"There is a way that seems right to a man, but its end is the way of death"* {Proverbs 14:12; repeated word for word in 16:25}.
- *"All the ways of a man are pure in his own eyes, but the LORD weighs the spirits"* {Proverbs 16:2}.
- *"Every way of a man is right in his own eyes, but the LORD weighs the hearts"* {Proverbs 21:2}.
- *"He who trusts in his own heart is a fool"* {Proverbs 28:26}.

Even the Apostle Paul refused to trust his own clear conscience as the final word: *"For I know of nothing against myself, yet I am not justified by this; but He who judges me is the Lord"* {1 Corinthians 4:4}. If Paul's sense of being right with God wasn't proof that he was, then neither is mine, and neither is yours. This doesn't mean feelings are bad. God gave us emotions, and true faith involves the whole heart. But feelings are meant to follow truth, not to define it. When they become the measure of our faith, we become easy targets for the angel of light.

Let's look at some of the ways faith can feel right when it isn't. First in Scripture, and then in our own day.

Partial obedience that feels like full obedience

God gave King Saul a clear command about the Amalekites. Saul obeyed most of it. He won the battle. But he spared the king and kept the best of the livestock. When the prophet Samuel arrived, Saul greeted him cheerfully: *"Blessed are you of the LORD! I have performed the commandment of the LORD"* {1 Samuel 15:13}.

Saul wasn't lying, at least not consciously. He genuinely felt that he had obeyed. Samuel's response is one of the most piercing questions in the Bible: *"What then is this bleating of the sheep in my ears?"* {15:14}

Saul had an explanation, of course. The people had saved the best animals *"to sacrifice to the LORD your God"* {15:15}. It was for worship! And Samuel answered with words that should be engraved on every church wall:

"Has the LORD as great delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices, as in obeying the voice of the LORD? Behold, to obey is better than sacrifice, and to heed than the fat of rams. For rebellion is as the sin

of witchcraft, and stubbornness is as iniquity and idolatry." {1 Samuel 15:22–23}

Partial obedience is disobedience with a religious explanation. And very often, what we keep back from God is exactly what we tell ourselves we're keeping *for* Him.

Church attendance that feels like safety

In Jeremiah's day, the people of Judah had a slogan. Whenever a prophet warned them of judgment, they pointed to the beautiful temple in Jerusalem. *God would never let anything happen to His own house*. So God sent Jeremiah to stand right at the temple gate and say this:

"Do not trust in these lying words, saying, 'The temple of the LORD, the temple of the LORD, the temple of the LORD are these.'... Will you steal, murder, commit adultery, swear falsely, burn incense to Baal, and walk after other gods whom you do not know, and then come and stand before Me in this house which is called by My name, and say, 'We are delivered to do all these abominations'? Has this house, which is called by My name, become a den of thieves in your eyes?" {Jeremiah 7:4, 9–11}

Notice what they said when they arrived at the temple: *"We are delivered!"* ("We are safe!" in many translations). They lived however they wanted all week, then came to God's house and felt secure. The temple had become a good-luck charm.

Centuries later Jesus quoted this very passage when He drove the money changers out of the temple: *"It is written, 'My house shall be called a house of prayer,' but you have made it a 'den of thieves'"* {Matthew 21:13}. A den is where robbers go to hide between robberies. It's not where they repent. It's where they feel safe.

Is it possible that for many people, Sunday morning has become a den? A place to feel safe between the other six days, rather than the place where we are confronted, cleansed and changed?

Religious emotion that feels like obedience

The prophet Ezekiel was popular for a while. People actually enjoyed listening to him. So God told him something sobering:

"So they come to you as people do, they sit before you as My people, and they hear your words, but they do not do them; for with their mouth they show much love, but their hearts pursue their own gain. Indeed you are to them as a very lovely song of one who has a pleasant voice and can play well on an instrument; for they hear your words, but they do not do them." {Ezekiel 33:31–32}

They loved the sermons. They told the preacher how much he blessed them. They were moved. And none of it made a difference to how they lived. God said His prophet was like a great concert to them: wonderful while it lasted, forgotten in the parking lot.

Isaiah described people who *"seek Me daily, and delight to know My ways, as a nation that did righteousness"* {Isaiah 58:2}. They fasted and prayed and asked God for just decisions. And yet on their fast days they exploited their workers and quarreled with each other {58:3–4}. They had all the emotions of devotion, and none of its fruit.

James puts it simply: *"But be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves"* {James 1:22}. According to James, the person who hears and doesn't do is *self-deceived*. The good feeling of hearing truth tricks us into thinking we've obeyed it.

Love for Jesus that is actually opposing Him

This next example shocks me every time I read it. Right after Peter's great confession, *"You are the Christ, the Son of the living God,"*

Jesus began to explain that He must go to Jerusalem, suffer, be killed, and be raised on the third day. And Peter, out of genuine love, took Him aside and rebuked Him: *"Far be it from You, Lord; this shall not happen to You!"* {Matthew 16:22}

From Peter's point of view, this was devotion. He loved Jesus. He didn't want Him to suffer. But Jesus turned and said to him, *"Get behind Me, Satan! You are an offense to Me, for you are not mindful of the things of God, but the things of men"* {16:23}.

Peter's warm, loving, sincere sentiment was satanic. Why? Because it offered Jesus a path without the cross. And then Jesus immediately turned to all the disciples and said, *"If anyone desires to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow Me"* {16:24}.

Do you see? The "another Jesus" of 2 Corinthians 11 shows up here, coming out of the mouth of an apostle, with tears of love in his eyes. A Jesus without a cross, and followers without crosses. It felt right. It was the voice of the enemy.

Worship on our own terms

Nadab and Abihu were sons of Aaron, newly ordained priests. On one of the first days of Israel's priesthood, they *"offered profane fire before the LORD, which He had not commanded them"* {Leviticus 10:1}. Fire came out from the Lord and consumed them.

We aren't told everything about what they did wrong. But the phrase that stands out is *"which He had not commanded them."* They brought God worship that they had designed. It may have been beautiful. It was certainly sincere. But it was on their terms, not His. And God said, *"By those who come near Me I must be regarded as holy"* {10:3}.

Spectacular ministry that Jesus never knew

And then there are the words that I believe are among the most frightening in the Bible:

"Not everyone who says to Me, 'Lord, Lord,' shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father in heaven. Many will say to Me in that day, 'Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in Your name, cast out demons in Your name, and done many wonders in Your name?' And then I will declare to them, 'I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness!'" {Matthew 7:21–23}

Look at who these people are. They call Jesus "Lord," twice, with great emotion. They have ministries. They prophesied. They cast out demons. They did miracles. They did it all "in Your name." By every outward measure, they were spiritual success stories. And Jesus says He never knew them. Why? *"You who practice lawlessness."* The word is *anomia*, lawlessness, living without regard for God's law. Their ministry was real enough to impress people. But their lives were not surrendered to the will of the Father. And notice the first word Jesus uses about them: *many*. Not a few. Many.

There is a parallel in Luke: *"Then you will begin to say, 'We ate and drank in Your presence, and You taught in our streets.' But He will say, 'I tell you I do not know you, where you are from. Depart from Me, all you workers of iniquity'"* {Luke 13:26–27}. These people were near Jesus. They were at the meals. They heard the teaching. Proximity is not the same as relationship.

What it looks like today

Now let me bring this closer to home. Here are some of the ways I see faith feeling right when it isn't, in my own heart and in the church around me:

"God told me." I have heard people say that God told them to leave their spouse, or that God brought someone else's husband or wife into their life because they were "meant to be together." They are sincere. They have prayed. They feel peace. But God will never tell you to do what His Word forbids. A voice that contradicts Scripture is not the Holy Spirit, no matter how warm it feels. We'll explore this at length in Chapter 11.

"I just have such peace about it." Peace is a real and precious gift of the Spirit. But peace is not a test that works alone. In my own notes on hearing God's voice, I wrote that God's peace is one of three witnesses: the Word of God, His peace in our hearts, and confirmation through circumstances and godly counsel. When the peace contradicts the Word, it's not God's peace. It's the absence of conviction.

"The worship was amazing." Emotion in worship is not the same as the presence of God. Israel danced around the calf. Music can move us whether or not our hearts are surrendered. The question isn't how we felt on Sunday morning. It's whether we obeyed on Monday.

"I serve all the time." Busyness in ministry can feel like closeness to God. Martha was serving Jesus in her own home, and Jesus gently told her that her sister, who was sitting at His feet listening, had chosen the better part {Luke 10:38–42}. You can work for Jesus and barely know Him.

"I was raised in church." Family faith can feel like personal faith. John the Baptist told the religious people of his day, *"Do not think to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father'"* {Matthew 3:9}. God has children, but He has no grandchildren.

"I'm against all the right things." It's easy to feel righteous when we're angry about other people's sins. Many professing

Christians are passionate about sins they aren't tempted by and remarkably comfortable with the ones they are: gossip, greed, gluttony, bitterness, pride, lust in private. The Pharisee in Jesus' parable thanked God that he was *"not like other men—extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even as this tax collector"* {Luke 18:11}. He went home unjustified.

"God just wants me to be a good person and be happy." In 2005, sociologists Christian Smith and Melinda Lundquist Denton studied the beliefs of American teenagers, including church-going ones. They found that the religion most of them actually held was not historic Christianity, but something they called *Moralistic Therapeutic Deism*: God exists, He wants people to be nice, the central goal of life is to be happy and feel good about yourself, God doesn't need to be involved in your life except when you need Him to fix a problem, and good people go to heaven. Twenty years later, many of those teenagers are now leading our churches and raising our grandchildren. It's not hard to see that faith all around us. It uses Christian words, but it is another gospel.

How can we know?

If our feelings can't be trusted, how can we have any confidence at all? Here's the good news: Scripture doesn't leave us to guess. John wrote an entire letter *"that you may know that you have eternal life"* {1 John 5:13}. Real assurance is possible. But notice where John tells us to look for it:

- *"Now by this we know that we know Him, if we keep His commandments. He who says, 'I know Him,' and does not keep His commandments, is a liar, and the truth is not in him"* {1 John 2:3–4}.
- *"He who says he abides in Him ought himself also to walk just as He walked"* {1 John 2:6}.

- *"We know that we have passed from death to life, because we love the brethren"* {1 John 3:14}.
- *"My little children, let us not love in word or in tongue, but in deed and in truth. And by this we know that we are of the truth, and shall assure our hearts before Him"* {1 John 3:18–19}.

John's tests are not feelings. They are fruit. Obedience. Walking as Jesus walked. Love that shows up in actions. These don't earn salvation. But they are the evidence of a life the Holy Spirit is actually living in. And the Spirit Himself *"bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God"* {Romans 8:16}: the same Spirit who leads us, as Paul says two verses earlier, to *"put to death the deeds of the body"* {Romans 8:13–14}.

Jesus said, *"You will know them by their fruits"* {Matthew 7:16}. That's true of false prophets, and it's true of us. So here's the question I want you to sit with: if you set aside how you *feel* about your relationship with God, what does the *fruit* say?

Examine Yourself

1. Israel called the golden calf by God's name. Is there anything in your life you've been calling "God's will" or "God's blessing" that might actually be an idol?
2. Saul kept back the best "for the Lord." Is there any area where you've obeyed most of what God said and explained away the rest?
3. Which of the modern examples in this chapter hit closest to home?
4. Read 1 John 2:3–6 and 3:18–19. Measured by those tests rather than by your feelings, how would you describe the health of your relationship with God?

CHAPTER SIX

Ten Shekels and a Shirt

"Then Micah said, 'Now I know that the LORD will be good to me, since I have a Levite as priest!'" {Judges 17:13}

In 1965, a former missionary named Paris Reidhead preached a sermon that has since been listened to by millions of people. It's called "Ten Shekels and a Shirt," and it's built on one of the strangest stories in the Bible. I've listened to it many times, and I believe its message is even more urgent now than it was then. In this chapter I want to walk you through that story and the points Reidhead drew from it, because I believe it exposes the most widespread counterfeit gospel of our time.

A story from a lawless time

The last chapters of the book of Judges aren't really part of the chronological history of the judges. They're more like a set of snapshots showing what life in Israel had become. And the writer frames the whole section with a refrain:

"In those days there was no king in Israel; everyone did what was right in his own eyes." {Judges 17:6; 21:25}

Keep that sentence in mind. It's the key to everything that follows. The story begins with a man named Micah from the hill country of Ephraim. He had stolen eleven hundred shekels of silver from his

own mother. When she discovered the theft, she pronounced a curse on the thief. Micah, apparently frightened by the curse, confessed and gave the money back {17:1–2}.

Now watch what his mother does. She says, *"May you be blessed by the LORD, my son!"* And then: *"I had wholly dedicated the silver from my hand to the LORD for my son, to make a carved image and a molded image"* {17:2–3}.

Read that again. She dedicated the silver *to the LORD* (to Yahweh) in order to make an idol. In a single sentence she uses God's covenant name and breaks His second commandment. She took two hundred of the shekels to a silversmith, and the idol was set up in Micah's house {17:4}.

Micah then went further. He built a shrine, a "house of gods." He made an ephod, which was a priestly garment used in seeking God's guidance, and teraphim, which were household idols. He even consecrated one of his own sons to be his priest {17:5}. Micah had built himself a homemade worship center, a little bit of what God had commanded mixed with a little bit of what God had forbidden.

Reidhead pointed out that Micah's tribe had been crowded by enemies, and getting to the true place of worship had become inconvenient. So Micah did what seemed reasonable. He brought religion closer to home and arranged it to suit himself.

Hiring a priest

Then a young man came wandering through: a Levite from Bethlehem in Judah. The Bible tells us exactly why he was on the road: he had left Bethlehem *"to stay wherever he could find a place"* {17:8}. The Levites had been given their provision by God through the tithes and offerings of Israel. But this young man was looking for something better. He was a religious professional in search of an

opportunity. Micah saw his chance. Here was a real Levite, from the tribe God had chosen for priestly service! He made him an offer:

"Dwell with me, and be a father and a priest to me, and I will give you ten shekels of silver per year, a suit of clothes, and your sustenance." {17:10}

Ten shekels a year, a set of clothes, and room and board. The Levite was *"content to dwell with the man"* {17:11}. And Micah was thrilled:

"Now I know that the LORD will be good to me, since I have a Levite as priest!" {17:13}

There it is. That is the heart of this whole story. Micah had a shrine, an ephod, idols, and a hired priest, and he was sure that God would now bless him. Religion had become a tool for getting good things from God. And the Levite was willing to serve God for whatever he could get out of it.

The better offer

The story continues in chapter 18. The tribe of Dan was looking for land. They sent five spies out to explore, and they happened to stop at Micah's house. They recognized the Levite's voice (perhaps his accent) and asked what he was doing there. He told them: *"Thus and so Micah did for me. He has hired me, and I have become his priest"* {18:4}.

The spies asked him to inquire of God whether their journey would succeed. And without, as far as we're told, actually seeking God at all, the priest gave them exactly what they wanted to hear: *"Go in peace. The presence of the LORD be with you on your way"* {18:6}.

The Danites found a peaceful, unprotected town called Laish, and they returned with six hundred armed men to take it. On the way, they stopped at Micah's house again. This time they walked into his shrine and took the carved image, the ephod, the teraphim and the molded image. When the Levite protested, they made him an offer:

"Be quiet, put your hand over your mouth, and come with us; be a father and a priest to us. Is it better for you to be a priest to the household of one man, or that you be a priest to a tribe and a family in Israel?" {18:19}

And the Bible says: *"So the priest's heart was glad; and he took the ephod, the household idols, and the carved image, and took his place among the people"* {18:20}.

Reidhead made a wry observation here. The young Levite was remarkably flexible. With very little rationalization, he could see the wisdom of the move. Surely serving a whole tribe was a bigger ministry than serving one family! And with no apparent struggle of conscience, he packed up Micah's idols and walked away. Notice, too, where he positioned himself: *"in the midst of the people"* {18:20}, surrounded by six hundred armed men, in case Micah came after him.

When Micah caught up with them, his cry was pitiful: *"You have taken away my gods which I made, and the priest, and you have gone away. Now what more do I have?"* {18:24}

Think about that sentence. *My gods which I made*. Gods that can be made can be stolen. And when they were gone, Micah had nothing left.

There's one more detail, and it's devastating. At the end of the story we learn the Levite's name: *"Jonathan the son of Gershom, the son of Manasseh"* {18:30}. But in the Hebrew text, the name

"Manasseh" is written in an unusual way, with a raised letter *nun* inserted above the line. Without that letter, the name reads "Moses." Many translations, including the NIV and the ESV, render it "the son of Moses." It appears that ancient scribes, ashamed of what they were copying, tried to shield Moses' name. The hireling priest who led an entire tribe into organized idolatry for generations was very likely the grandson of Moses himself.

One generation from the man who spoke with God face to face, and his grandson was serving idols for a salary and a better title.

What Reidhead saw in the story

Reidhead asked a simple question about this story: *What is God to you? Is He your end, or is He your means?*

Micah used God as a means to get blessing. The Levite used God as a means to get a living, a position, and a bigger platform. Neither of them was an atheist. Both of them were very religious. But neither of them served God for God's sake. God was a tool for getting what they actually wanted.

Reidhead traced how this way of thinking had invaded the church. He described the rise of humanism, the philosophy that dominated the West from the nineteenth century onward, and he defined it in a way I've never forgotten. Humanism, he said, is the belief that **the chief end of all being is the happiness of man**. Everything exists to make human beings happy. Compare that to the first question of the Westminster Shorter Catechism, written in the 1640s: *"What is the chief end of man?"* The answer: *"Man's chief end is to glorify God, and to enjoy Him forever."* The catechism puts God at the center. Humanism puts us there.

Reidhead then made a startling observation. He said that when humanism swept through the culture, the church split into two

camps. The *liberals* openly accepted humanism. They said, in effect, *We don't know about heaven or hell, but if you come to church we'll help you live a happier, more meaningful life now*. The *fundamentalists* rejected liberalism and held on to the great doctrines: the inspiration of Scripture, the deity of Christ, His death and resurrection, heaven and hell. But humanism was in the air, Reidhead said, like a fog rising out of a pit. It got into everything. And over time, many conservative churches began preaching the right doctrines for the wrong reason.

Here is how he summarized it: the liberal said the purpose of religion is to make people happy while they're alive. The fundamentalist said the purpose of religion is to make people happy when they die. But in both cases, the ultimate goal was still the happiness of man. And so evangelism turned into an appeal to self-interest: *You don't want to go to that terrible place. Wouldn't you rather go to heaven? Then come to Jesus*. Reidhead said that kind of invitation could sound like two men in a coffee shop planning to get something for nothing. Salvation became a good deal. Jesus became a ticket.

Reidhead's own confession

What makes the sermon so powerful is that Reidhead didn't exempt himself. He confessed that he went to Africa as a missionary motivated by humanism. He didn't think it was fair for people to go to hell without hearing the gospel, so he went to give them a chance at heaven. In his own words, he went to "improve on the justice of God."

When he got there, he discovered that the people he'd imagined as innocent, waiting to be told about heaven, knew far more than he'd assumed. They lived in deliberate rebellion against the light of conscience and creation that God had given them {Romans 1:18–20; 2:14–15}. They didn't want what he was offering. He was devastated

and angry. He felt that he'd been sold a bill of goods, and he wanted to go home.

Alone in his room, he poured out his frustration to God. And he said that God spoke to his heart in words he never forgot. In essence: *I didn't send you to Africa for their sake. I sent you for Mine. They deserve judgment, but I love them, and I endured the agony of the cross for them. Don't I deserve the reward of My suffering?*

That changed everything for him. He was no longer serving for ten shekels and a shirt. He was serving the living God because God is worthy.

Why did you repent?

Reidhead then asked his listeners a question that has stayed with me for years: *Why did you repent?*

If the only reason you turned to Christ was to escape hell, he said, then you were still trying to make a deal with God. You were serving Him because He would do you good. You were Micah, hiring a priest. The biblical reason to repent is that God is God, and He deserves the worship, love, obedience and trust that we have withheld from Him. Sin is not first of all a danger to us. It's an offense against Him. *"Against You, You only, have I sinned, and done this evil in Your sight"* {Psalm 51:4}. Biblical repentance is the response of a heart that has seen God's holiness and its own rebellion and says, *Lord, You are worthy, and I have robbed You of what You deserve.*

Now, I want to be careful here. The Bible does use the danger of hell as a warning. Jesus Himself spoke of it more than anyone else in Scripture, and He told us to *"fear Him who is able to destroy both soul and body in hell"* {Matthew 10:28}. Fear can be the first thing that wakes us up. It woke me up more than once. But fear of punishment is meant to drive us to the God who is worthy, not to a

transaction that keeps God at arm's length. Reidhead put it this way: the fear of hell can prepare us for grace, but the Holy Spirit doesn't stop there.

The gospel of humanism today

At the beginning of this book I asked whether you might be following another Jesus. Here is where many of us will find it. The gospel of humanism uses every word of the true gospel, but it rearranges the center. God exists for our happiness. Jesus came for our fulfillment. The Holy Spirit is power for our goals. The church is a service provider for our needs.

Here are some of the forms it takes. See whether you recognize any of them:

- **The prosperity gospel.** Give to God so that He will give more back to you. Faith is a means of getting health and wealth. God is the ultimate investment.
- **The therapeutic gospel.** Jesus came to heal your hurts, build your self-esteem and help you love yourself. Sin is mainly something done *to* you, not something you've done. The goal is to feel whole.
- **The self-fulfillment gospel.** God has a big dream for your life, and your destiny is greatness. The Bible is a manual for success.
- **The fire-insurance gospel.** Pray this prayer so you don't go to hell. Then go back to your life.
- **The consumer church.** Choose a church the way you'd choose a restaurant: by the menu, the atmosphere and the service. If it stops meeting your needs, move on.
- **Pragmatic ministry.** If it draws a crowd, it must be of God. The question "Does it work?" replaces the question "Is it true?"

- **The comfortable gospel.** Anything that makes you uncomfortable must not be from God, because God wants you to be happy.

That last one deserves a special mention. Reidhead spoke about pragmatism, the philosophy that judges everything by the question, *Does it work?* By that standard, he pointed out, Noah was a failure: he preached for years and saw only his own family saved. Jeremiah was a failure: he lost the people, the kings and the other prophets, and he was thrown into a pit. And Jesus Himself, by every worldly measure, was a failure: He built no institution, wrote no book, and at the end of His ministry His disciples abandoned Him. If success is the measure of truth, the cross is the greatest defeat in history.

Serving God to feed ourselves

There's a quieter form of the Levite's bargain that I want to name, because it often lives in the most committed believers, and in ministry leaders most of all. It's serving God in a way that is really about us: our image, our importance, our special relationship with Him.

The Levite didn't only want ten shekels. He wanted a title. He wanted to be *"a father and a priest"* {Judges 17:10}. And when a bigger platform came along, he took it, because *"a priest to a tribe"* sounded more important than a priest to one household {18:19}. His ministry had become a mirror.

It can happen to any of us. We start out serving because we love the Lord. Then people notice. They thank us. They call us anointed. And without realizing it, we begin to need the attention. We start telling every story so that we're at the center of it. We serve where we'll be seen. We feel hurt when no one acknowledges what we've done.

“Let him who glories, glory in the Lord”

Paul wrote, *“He who glories, let him glory in the LORD”* {1 Corinthians 1:31; 2 Corinthians 10:17}. Some people use that verse as a license to talk about themselves, as long as God is mentioned in the story. *God used me to… God gave me a word for her… God told me I’m called to the nations… God has anointed me to…* But turning everything into a “how God used me” story isn’t boasting in the Lord. It’s boasting in our special status with the Lord. God gets a mention, but we get the spotlight.

Paul was quoting Jeremiah, and the original makes the meaning unmistakable: *“Let not the wise man glory in his wisdom, let not the mighty man glory in his might, nor let the rich man glory in his riches; but let him who glories glory in this, that he understands and knows Me, that I am the LORD, exercising lovingkindness, judgment, and righteousness in the earth. For in these I delight”* {Jeremiah 9:23–24}.

To glory in the Lord is to boast about *who He is*: His lovingkindness, His justice, His righteousness. Not about how close we are to Him, how much He uses us, or how often He speaks to us. In the very next breath, Paul tells the Corinthians why God works this way: *“that no flesh should glory in His presence”* {1 Corinthians 1:29}. And he asks a question that ought to silence every spiritual brag: *“For who makes you differ from another? And what do you have that you did not receive? Now if you did indeed receive it, why do you boast as if you had not received it?”* {1 Corinthians 4:7}

What boasting in the Lord sounds like

Testimony is a good thing. Jesus told the man He delivered from demons, *“Go home to your friends, and tell them what great things the Lord has done for you, and how He has had compassion on you”* {Mark 5:19}. When Paul and Barnabas returned from their missionary journey, *“they reported all that God had done with them”*

{Acts 14:27}. Notice who's doing the acting in both verses: the Lord. The question isn't whether we tell what God has done. It's who the hero of the story is.

Here's an example. Imagine two people telling the same story about praying with a stranger in a grocery store.

The first says: *"I was in the checkout line, and the Holy Spirit told me to turn around and speak to the woman behind me. I've learned to always obey when He speaks to me like that. I gave her a word from the Lord, and she broke down crying. She said no one had ever spoken into her life the way I did. God uses me like that all the time. I'm just so sensitive to His voice."*

The second says: *"Isn't God kind? A woman in the grocery store was carrying something so heavy, and the Lord knew all about it. I almost didn't say anything. But He used a few simple words to remind her that He sees her and hasn't forgotten her. I keep thinking about how much He loves people we'd walk right past."*

Both stories are about the same event. But in the first, the speaker is the hero: their obedience, their sensitivity, their anointing. In the second, God is the hero: His kindness, His knowledge, His love. The first leaves you impressed with the person. The second leaves you amazed at God. That's what boasting in the Lord looks like. It keeps the testimony about what God did, not about what we did for Him or how special we must be to Him. It's John the Baptist saying, *"He must increase, but I must decrease"* {John 3:30}, and calling himself nothing more than *"a voice"* {John 1:23}.

It's Peter, right after God healed a man who had been lame from birth, turning to a crowd that was staring at him in amazement: *"Why do you marvel at this? Or why look so intently at us, as though by our own power or godliness we had made this man walk?"* {Acts

3:12}. Peter could have built a ministry on that moment. Instead, he pointed every eye to Jesus.

It's Paul and Barnabas tearing their clothes when the people of Lystra tried to worship them: *"Men, why are you doing these things? We also are men with the same nature as you"* {Acts 14:14–15}. And it's Paul, who had more spiritual experiences than almost anyone, telling of his vision of the third heaven in the third person, *"I know a man in Christ"* {2 Corinthians 12:2}, and then boasting instead in his weaknesses, *"that the power of Christ may rest upon me"* {12:9}. Even when Paul said he had labored more than all the other apostles, he immediately added, *"yet not I, but the grace of God which was with me"* {1 Corinthians 15:10}.

"Not unto us, O LORD, not unto us, but to Your name give glory, because of Your mercy, because of Your truth" {Psalm 115:1}.

Don't let your left hand know

Jesus spoke directly to the temptation to serve for an audience:

"Take heed that you do not do your charitable deeds before men, to be seen by them. Otherwise you have no reward from your Father in heaven. Therefore, when you do a charitable deed, do not sound a trumpet before you as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, that they may have glory from men. Assuredly, I say to you, they have their reward. But when you do a charitable deed, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, that your charitable deed may be in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will Himself reward you openly." {Matthew 6:1–4}

The phrase *"they have their reward"* uses the Greek word *apechō*, a term merchants wrote on receipts. It means "paid in full." If we serve to be seen, Jesus says, we get exactly what we were after: people saw. The account is settled. There's nothing left to collect from

heaven. And notice how far Jesus takes it. Not only should others not see; *your own left hand* shouldn't know. Don't keep a running tally of your own good works. Don't admire your own generosity. Serve and forget it, and let God remember.

In our day of social media, this has never been more countercultural. We photograph the mission trip, post the volunteer shift, and announce the fast. Not every post is pride, and God can use what we share. But it's worth asking, honestly and often: *Would I still have done this if no one would ever know?*

Unprofitable servants

Jesus told a short parable that cuts right through spiritual self-importance:

"And which of you, having a servant plowing or tending sheep, will say to him when he has come in from the field, 'Come at once and sit down to eat'? But will he not rather say to him, 'Prepare something for my supper, and gird yourself and serve me till I have eaten and drunk, and afterward you will eat and drink'? Does he thank that servant because he did the things that were commanded him? I think not. So likewise you, when you have done all those things which you are commanded, say, 'We are unprofitable servants. We have done what was our duty to do.'" {Luke 17:7–10}

The servant does a full day's work in the field, comes in, and keeps serving. And he doesn't expect a thank-you, because he's done nothing more than what was his duty. Jesus says that's how we should see ourselves, even *"when you have done all those things."* Not when we've done half of them. All of them.

That isn't because God is a harsh master. Elsewhere Jesus promises that the faithful servant will hear *"Well done"* {Matthew 25:21}, and that the Master Himself will one day serve His servants at the table {Luke 12:37}. The point is about *our* attitude. We don't

serve God as if we were doing Him a favor. We don't serve because we're so important to His plans. Paul calls offering our whole selves to God our *"reasonable service"* {Romans 12:1}, the only sensible response to mercy this great. Whatever we do for Him, we owe Him far more.

So here are a few honest questions to ask ourselves:

- When I tell what God has done, who ends up looking impressive?
- Do I feel hurt or resentful when my service goes unnoticed?
- Am I as glad when God uses someone else as when He uses me?
- Would I serve just as gladly in a role no one would ever see?
- Do I talk more about my relationship with God than about God Himself?

"Let nothing be done through selfish ambition or conceit, but in lowliness of mind let each esteem others better than himself" {Philippians 2:3}. *"Let another man praise you, and not your own mouth"* {Proverbs 27:2}. *"Humble yourselves under the mighty hand of God, that He may exalt you in due time"* {1 Peter 5:6}.

Wanting the handkerchief instead of the Healer

When leaders make ministry about themselves, the people who follow them learn to do the same. I believe the church has done a poor job of exalting Jesus and turning people back to Him. And so many believers look at a gifted, anointed man or woman and say, *I want what they have*. They want the person's anointing. They don't go looking for the Christ who gives it.

This isn't new. In Ephesus, *"God worked unusual miracles by the hands of Paul, so that even handkerchiefs or aprons were brought from his body to the sick, and the diseases left them and the evil spirits went out of them"* {Acts 19:11–12}. In Jerusalem, people *"brought the sick out into the streets and laid them on beds and couches, that at least the shadow of Peter passing by might fall on some of them"* {Acts 5:15}. God was truly at work. But notice what the crowds reached for: Paul's handkerchief and Peter's shadow. The Healer was available to every one of them, and they were reaching for the cloth.

That same chapter in Acts shows where this leads. Seven sons of a Jewish chief priest named Sceva tried to cast out demons by borrowing Paul's formula: *"We exorcise you by the Jesus whom Paul preaches."* The evil spirit answered, *"Jesus I know, and Paul I know; but who are you?"* {Acts 19:13–15}. They had Paul's words without Paul's Lord. And earlier, a man named Simon, who had been a sorcerer, saw the Spirit given through the apostles' hands and offered them money: *"Give me this power also."* Peter's answer was severe: *"Your money perish with you, because you thought that the gift of God could be purchased with money!... your heart is not right in the sight of God"* {Acts 8:18–21}. Simon wanted the anointing. He didn't want the One who anoints.

People will still travel around the world to sit under a famous ministry, to be prayed over by a certain person, to catch what they believe someone else is carrying. They'll stand in long lines for a touch from a man, and won't spend ten quiet minutes alone with the Lord. But Jesus never told us to seek a man's anointing. He told us to ask the Father: *"If you then, being evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask Him!"* {Luke 11:13}. And John reminded ordinary believers, *"But you have an anointing from the Holy One... the anointing which you have received from Him abides in you"* {1 John 2:20, 27}. The fullness of the Spirit doesn't come from standing

close to a celebrity. It comes from Christ, to whom *"God does not give the Spirit by measure"* {John 3:34}.

Faithful servants of God refuse to be the destination. When Cornelius fell at Peter's feet to worship him, Peter lifted him up: *"Stand up; I myself am also a man"* {Acts 10:25–26}. When the Corinthians began lining up behind their favorite teachers, Paul was horrified: *"Is Christ divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Or were you baptized in the name of Paul?"* {1 Corinthians 1:13}. *"Who then is Paul, and who is Apollos, but ministers through whom you believed?... I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the increase"* {1 Corinthians 3:5–6}. And when two of John the Baptist's own disciples heard him say, *"Behold the Lamb of God!"*, they left John and followed Jesus {John 1:35–37}. That was exactly what John wanted.

Disciples or carbon copies?

Here is the deeper problem. When ministry is about us, we don't make disciples of Jesus. We make carbon copies of ourselves: people who talk like us, dress like us, quote us, depend on us, and defend us. Jesus warned the religious leaders of His day about exactly this: *"For you travel land and sea to win one proselyte, and when he is won, you make him twice as much a son of hell as yourselves"* {Matthew 23:15}. They reproduced themselves, and their converts turned out worse than they were.

Then He told His own disciples, *"But you, do not be called 'Rabbi'; for One is your Teacher, the Christ, and you are all brethren"* {Matthew 23:8}. Every true disciple-maker points away from themselves. Even Paul, who could have attracted a following like no one else, said, *"Imitate me, just as I also imitate Christ"* {1 Corinthians 11:1}. Follow me only as far as I'm following Him. And *"we do not preach ourselves, but Christ Jesus the Lord, and ourselves your bondservants for Jesus' sake"* {2 Corinthians 4:5}.

The test of a ministry isn't how many people admire the minister. It's how many people have been brought to Jesus Himself, and are learning to hear His voice, love His Word, and follow Him even if the minister disappeared tomorrow. *"Cursed is the man who trusts in man and makes flesh his strength, whose heart departs from the LORD"* {Jeremiah 17:5}.

So if you are a leader, point people past yourself. And if you're hungry for more of God, don't chase someone's handkerchief. Go to the Healer.

The Levite served for what he could get, whether money, a title or a bigger platform. Real servants of God serve because He is worthy, and they're content for Him to get all the glory.

What Jesus actually offers

As the gospel of humanism keeps asking what we get out of God, the real gospel answers with a better question: *What does God deserve from us?*

- *"Everyone who is called by My name, whom I have created for My glory"* {Isaiah 43:7}.
- *"For of Him and through Him and to Him are all things, to whom be glory forever"* {Romans 11:36}.
- *"All things were created through Him and for Him"* {Colossians 1:16}.
- *"You are worthy, O Lord, to receive glory and honor and power; for You created all things, and by Your will they exist and were created"* {Revelation 4:11}.
- *"Therefore, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God"* {1 Corinthians 10:31}.

Does this mean God doesn't care about our joy? Not at all. *"In Your presence is fullness of joy; at Your right hand are pleasures forevermore"* {Psalm 16:11}. *"No good thing will He withhold from those who walk uprightly"* {Psalm 84:11}. Reidhead was clear on this point: happiness is a byproduct, not the product. When we seek God for His own sake, joy follows. When we seek joy and use God to get it, we end up with neither.

God's answer to Abraham says it all: *"Do not be afraid, Abram. I am your shield, your exceedingly great reward"* {Genesis 15:1}. The reward isn't what God gives. The reward is God.

Reidhead ended his sermon with a story about two young Moravian missionaries in the 1730s. They had heard of a Caribbean island where enslaved Africans were living and dying without the gospel, and where the owner would not allow any preacher. The story is told that the two young men were willing to sell themselves into slavery if that was what it would take to reach them. As their ship pulled away from the dock, and their families wept on the shore knowing they would likely never see them again, one of the young men lifted his hand and called back across the widening water:

"May the Lamb that was slain receive the reward of His suffering!"

That became the rallying cry of the Moravian missionary movement. And it's the opposite of ten shekels and a shirt.

So let me ask you what Reidhead asked his listeners: Are you serving God for what He'll give you? Or are you serving Him because He is worthy? Let's tell Micah we're through. Let's tell the tribe of Dan we're not for hire. Let's come to the feet of the nail-pierced Son of God and tell Him we'll love Him and obey Him as long as we live, simply because He deserves it.

Examine Yourself

1. Micah said, “Now I know that the LORD will be good to me.” In what ways have you treated your religious practices as a way to secure God’s blessing?
2. Why did you first come to Christ? Why do you follow Him today? Be honest about the role that self-interest plays.
3. Which of the forms of the “gospel of humanism” have you been most influenced by?
4. Would you still follow Jesus if He gave you nothing in this life but Himself? Take that question to Him in prayer.

CHAPTER SEVEN

The Cross You Were Never Told to Carry

"And whoever does not bear his cross and come after Me cannot be My disciple." {Luke 14:27}

Have you ever heard someone say, "Well, that's just my cross to bear"? Usually they're talking about a bad knee, a difficult mother-in-law, or a job they don't like. Somewhere along the way, the cross became a word for life's inconveniences.

But when Jesus said *"take up his cross,"* nobody in the crowd thought He was talking about inconveniences. They knew exactly what a cross was for.

Christianity isn't a gospel all about us and what Jesus can give us or do for us. It's quite the opposite. This chapter is where that truth meets real life. If the gospel of humanism is Micah's hired priest, then the cross is how the real Jesus answers it. And I'm convinced that it's the most neglected command in the modern church.

When the crowd got big

Luke sets the scene carefully: *"Now great multitudes went with Him. And He turned and said to them…"* {Luke 14:25}.

This was the moment every church growth strategist dreams of. Crowds were following Jesus. Momentum was building. And Jesus turned around and preached what may be the least seeker-friendly sermon ever recorded:

"If anyone comes to Me and does not hate his father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and his own life also, he cannot be My disciple. And whoever does not bear his cross and come after Me cannot be My disciple. For which of you, intending to build a tower, does not sit down first and count the cost, whether he has enough to finish it — lest, after he has laid the foundation, and is not able to finish, all who see it begin to mock him, saying, 'This man began to build and was not able to finish'?... So likewise, whoever of you does not forsake all that he has cannot be My disciple." {Luke 14:26–30, 33}

Three times in eight verses, Jesus says the same phrase: *"cannot be My disciple."* Not "will be a less committed disciple." Not "will miss out on some blessings." *Cannot be.*

Let's take the three conditions one at a time.

"Hate" his family and his own life. This is a Hebrew way of expressing preference by contrast. Matthew's parallel makes the meaning clear: *"He who loves father or mother more than Me is not worthy of Me"* {Matthew 10:37}. Jesus isn't telling us to despise our families. The same Bible commands us to honor our parents and love our spouses. He's saying that our love for Him must be so supreme that every other love looks like hatred by comparison. And notice the last item on the list: *"his own life also."* The biggest rival to Jesus is usually not our family. It's ourselves.

Bear his cross. We'll spend most of this chapter on that one.

Forsake all that he has. The word is *apotassō*. It means to say goodbye to, to take leave of, to renounce. It doesn't necessarily mean selling everything you own (though for the rich young ruler it did). It means signing over the title deed of everything you have to Jesus. You may still hold it, but it's His now. You're a steward, not an owner.

In between, Jesus tells two short parables: a man building a tower, and a king going to war {14:28–32}. Both make the same point. *Count the cost before you begin*. Jesus never tricked anyone into following Him. He never offered a free sample and hid the price. He put the cost on the table from the start. How different that is from much of modern evangelism! We often tell people how much they'll gain by coming to Jesus and say nothing about what it will cost. Then we're surprised when so many "converts" start building and don't finish.

What a cross meant

To understand what Jesus meant, we need to see a cross the way His hearers saw it.

Crucifixion was Rome's most terrible form of execution. It was reserved for slaves, rebels and the worst criminals. It was designed to be slow, public and humiliating. And it was common. After the slave revolt led by Spartacus in 71 B.C., the Romans crucified about six thousand men along the Appian Way, the road into Rome. In Judea, crucifixion was a familiar sight. Many of the people listening to Jesus had seen it with their own eyes.

And they knew the procedure. A condemned man was usually forced to carry the crossbeam of his own cross through the streets to the place of execution. Everyone watching knew what it meant. That man was not coming back. He had no more rights, no more plans, no more future of his own. His life, as far as he was concerned, was over.

So when Jesus said, *"Take up your cross and follow Me,"* the picture was unmistakable. *Pick up the instrument of your own execution, and walk behind Me*. A man carrying a cross isn't going to his job interview. He isn't planning his retirement. He has one destination. That's why the cross was never about life's annoyances. It's about death. Specifically, it's about the death of our right to run our own lives.

"Let him deny himself"

In Luke 9:23 Jesus puts it this way: *"If anyone desires to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross daily, and follow Me."*

The word for "deny" is *aparneomai*. It's a strong word. It's the very same word the Gospels use for Peter's denial of Jesus in the courtyard: *"Before the rooster crows, you will deny Me three times"* {Matthew 26:34}. And what did Peter's denial sound like? *"I do not know the Man!"* {Matthew 26:72}

That is what it means to deny yourself. It means to look at your own selfish desires, your demands, your agenda, and say about them what Peter said about Jesus: *"I do not know this man."* It means disowning the self that wants to sit on the throne. And notice the word *daily* in Luke's version. This is not a one-time decision at an altar. Every morning, the old self wakes up and asks for its throne back. And every morning, the disciple picks up the cross again.

The cross has two sides

Now I need to be very clear about something, because a counterfeit can come from this direction too.

The cross of Jesus is unique. He bore our sins in His own body on the tree {1 Peter 2:24}. He died *"once for all, the just for the unjust, that He might bring us to God"* {1 Peter 3:18}. Nothing we suffer adds a single thing to what He accomplished. We don't pay for our sins by

carrying our crosses. When Jesus said, *"It is finished"* {John 19:30}, He meant it. If you hear anyone suggest that your suffering earns your salvation, that's a different gospel.

But the cross is not only something Christ did *for* us. It's also something He does *in* us. Paul says both, often in the same breath:

- *"I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself for me"* {Galatians 2:20}.
- *"Knowing this, that our old man was crucified with Him, that the body of sin might be done away with, that we should no longer be slaves of sin"* {Romans 6:6}.
- *"And those who are Christ's have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires"* {Galatians 5:24}.
- *"But God forbid that I should boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by whom the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world"* {Galatians 6:14}.
- *"I die daily"* {1 Corinthians 15:31}.

Do you see the two sides? Christ died *for* me, so I'm forgiven. And I died *with* Christ, so I'm free from the old life. A gospel that only has the first side gives you forgiveness without transformation. That's a gospel of accommodation: all the benefits of the cross with none of its power. Jesus didn't die only to get you out of hell. He died to get you out of yourself.

The German pastor Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote in *The Cost of Discipleship*: "When Christ calls a man, he bids him come and die." Bonhoeffer used a phrase for the counterfeit: "cheap grace," which he described as grace without discipleship, grace without the cross. He didn't just write about it. He lived it. He stood against the Nazi regime when most of the German church went along with it, and he was

executed at the Flossenbürg concentration camp in April 1945, only weeks before the camp was liberated.

What carrying the cross looks like on Monday

This is the part where the question in my heart becomes very practical: *What does that even mean for me?* I'm not likely to be crucified this week. So what does it look like to take up my cross *daily*?

Here are some of the places the cross shows up in ordinary life:

My right to be right. When I'm wronged, the flesh wants to defend itself, prove its point and get the last word. The cross lays that down. *"Repay no one evil for evil… Beloved, do not avenge yourselves"* {Romans 12:17–19}. Jesus, when He was reviled, *"did not revile in return"* {1 Peter 2:23}.

My plans. *"Come now, you who say, 'Today or tomorrow we will go to such and such a city, spend a year there, buy and sell, and make a profit'… Instead you ought to say, 'If the Lord wills, we shall live and do this or that'"* {James 4:13–15}. In my last book I described the night God asked me a question that pierced my heart: *"Whose kingdom are you building?"* I went home and resigned from my job. I'm not saying the Lord asks everyone to quit their job. But I am saying that at some point, He will ask every disciple to hand over the plan.

My possessions. *"Whoever of you does not forsake all that he has cannot be My disciple"* {Luke 14:33}. If Jesus asked for it, would you give it? If you can't honestly say yes, then you don't own it. It owns you.

My relationships. Some relationships will pull you away from Christ. Some will have to be put in their proper place. Jesus warned

that following Him would sometimes set family members against each other {Matthew 10:34–36}. Loving Jesus more doesn't mean loving people less. But it does mean that no one else gets the final word.

My reputation. *"Therefore let us go forth to Him, outside the camp, bearing His reproach"* {Hebrews 13:13}. There will be times when following Jesus will make you look foolish, narrow-minded or out of step. The cross was the most shameful thing in the Roman world. Carrying it meant giving up your good name.

My body. *"Or do you not know that your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit who is in you, whom you have from God, and you are not your own? For you were bought at a price; therefore glorify God in your body"* {1 Corinthians 6:19–20}. That includes what I watch, what I eat and drink, and what I do with my sexuality.

My comfort. Sometimes the cross is as simple as getting up earlier to pray, turning off the television, giving when it hurts, or having the conversation you've been avoiding.

My time. "We can give without loving, but we cannot love without giving." Time is the one thing we can never get back. A cross-carrying life gives it away.

What the cross is not

I want to warn against one more counterfeit. Carrying your cross does not mean hating yourself, punishing yourself, or looking for suffering for its own sake. Paul warned the Colossians about religious rules that have *"an appearance of wisdom in self-imposed religion, false humility, and neglect of the body, but are of no value against the indulgence of the flesh"* {Colossians 2:23}. Self-inflicted misery is just another way of keeping the self at the center.

The cross isn't something we design. It's what happens when we follow Jesus wherever He goes. Notice the order in His command: *deny yourself, take up your cross,* and *follow Me*. The cross is always on the road behind Him.

The paradox

And here's the wonderful thing. The road that begins with a cross doesn't end there.

"For whoever desires to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake and the gospel's will save it. For what will it profit a man if he gains the whole world, and loses his own soul?" {Mark 8:35–36}

"Most assuredly, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the ground and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it produces much grain" {John 12:24}.

The cross leads to resurrection. Death to self leads to real life. Jesus Himself *"for the joy that was set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame"* {Hebrews 12:2}. There was joy on the other side of His cross, and there is joy on the other side of ours. That's why Jesus could say both *"take up your cross"* and *"My yoke is easy and My burden is light"* {Matthew 11:30} without contradicting Himself. The heaviest burden in the world is the burden of running your own life. The cross takes that burden off your shoulders. Once you've died, there's nothing left to defend.

Jesus ended His sermon to the crowd in Luke 14 with an image about salt: *"Salt is good; but if the salt has lost its flavor, how shall it be seasoned? It is neither fit for the land nor for the dunghill, but men throw it out. He who has ears to hear, let him hear!"* {Luke 14:34–35}. A Christianity without the cross is salt that has lost its flavor. It looks like salt. It's in the salt shaker. But it does nothing.

Everyone wants a Savior. But do you want a Lord?

Examine Yourself

1. Before reading this chapter, what did you think "carrying your cross" meant? How has your understanding changed?
2. Jesus told the crowd to count the cost. Did anyone ever tell you the cost before you started following Him? Have you counted it since?
3. Which of the "Monday" areas (your right to be right, plans, possessions, relationships, reputation, body, comfort, time) is the hardest for you to lay down?
4. Bonhoeffer called grace without the cross "cheap grace." Is there any way you've been treating God's grace as cheap?

CHAPTER EIGHT

Laodicea: Pleasure with a Little Jesus on Sunday

"I know your works, that you are neither cold nor hot. I could wish you were cold or hot. So then, because you are lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I will vomit you out of My mouth."
{Revelation 3:15–16}

Of the seven letters Jesus dictated to the churches in Revelation, the letter to Laodicea is the only one in which He has nothing good to say. Ephesus had lost its first love, but Jesus still praised its hard work and its discernment. Pergamos and Thyatira tolerated false teaching, but Jesus commended their faithfulness and love. Even Sardis, the dead church, had *"a few names… who have not defiled their garments"* {Revelation 3:4}.

But to Laodicea, not one word of praise. And the reason may surprise you. Laodicea wasn't a church full of heresy or scandal. It was a church full of comfortable, successful, self-satisfied people. It was a church that had everything, except Jesus.

I believe Laodicea is the clearest picture in the Bible of the church in the prosperous West today.

A city that needed nothing

To understand this letter, it helps to know something about the city. Laodicea sat in the Lycus River valley in what is now western Turkey. It was one of the wealthiest cities in the region, a center of banking and commerce. In A.D. 60 a severe earthquake devastated the area. Other cities accepted financial help from Rome to rebuild, but the Roman historian Tacitus records that Laodicea rebuilt *"from its own resources, without any help from us."* Laodicea didn't need anybody.

The city was also famous for its textile industry, especially garments made from a soft, glossy black wool produced by local sheep. And it was associated with a well-known medical school; historians connect the region with an eye ointment called "Phrygian powder."

With that in mind, listen to what Jesus said:

"Because you say, 'I am rich, have become wealthy, and have need of nothing' — and do not know that you are wretched, miserable, poor, blind, and naked — I counsel you to buy from Me gold refined in the fire, that you may be rich; and white garments, that you may be clothed, that the shame of your nakedness may not be revealed; and anoint your eyes with eye salve, that you may see." {Revelation 3:17–18}

The bankers were poor. The clothiers were naked. The city with the famous eye medicine was blind. Every point of the city's pride became a point of Jesus' rebuke. Whatever they thought made them rich was exactly where they were most destitute. And the most important phrase in the whole letter is easy to miss: *"and do not know."* They didn't know. Laodicea wasn't rebellious. It was *deceived*. The church looked in the mirror and saw a thriving, blessed congregation. Jesus looked at the same church and saw a beggar with no clothes on.

That is sincere deception.

Hot, cold, and lukewarm

We usually interpret "hot" and "cold" as "on fire for God" versus "completely against God." Then it seems strange that Jesus would rather we be cold, against Him, than lukewarm. But the geography of Laodicea suggests another way of understanding it, one that many scholars find convincing. Laodicea had no good water supply of its own. Its water was piped in by aqueduct from springs several miles away, and by the time it arrived it was tepid and full of minerals. Archaeologists have found the city's water pipes heavily encrusted with calcium deposits. Visitors were known to gag on it.

Meanwhile, the neighboring city of Hierapolis, visible across the valley, was famous for its hot springs. People traveled there for the healing properties of the hot mineral water. Ten miles or so up the valley, the city of Colossae had cold, fresh, refreshing water. Hot water heals. Cold water refreshes. Both are useful. Lukewarm water does neither. It just makes you sick.

So Jesus may have been saying to the Laodicean church: *You are not like the healing springs of Hierapolis, and you are not like the refreshing streams of Colossae. You're like your own water supply. You're useless to Me, and you make Me sick.*

The word He uses is strong. *Emeō* means to vomit, to spit out with disgust. Jesus is not mildly disappointed with the lukewarm church. He finds it nauseating.

The church outside its door

Then comes one of the most familiar verses in the Bible, and one of the most misunderstood:

"Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears My voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and dine with him, and he with Me." {Revelation 3:20}

We usually use this verse in evangelism, to invite unbelievers to open the door of their hearts to Jesus. And God has certainly used it that way. But look at the context. Jesus is speaking to a *church*. He is standing outside the door of a congregation that bears His name, knocking to be let in. Think about that picture. A church with services, budgets, programs and probably a very nice building. And the Lord of the church standing outside.

Notice, too, how tender He is. The verse just before says, *"As many as I love, I rebuke and chasten. Therefore be zealous and repent"* {Revelation 3:19}. Even His harshest words are love. He hasn't given up on them. He's knocking. And the invitation is personal: *"If anyone…"* Even if the whole church stays comfortable, one person can open the door.

"Hate" and the Nicolaitans

The word "hate" doesn't appear in the letter to Laodicea, but Jesus does use it in two other letters, and it's worth looking at here because it describes the same disease.

To Ephesus He said, *"But this you have, that you hate the deeds of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate"* {Revelation 2:6}. And to Pergamos He said, *"Thus you also have those who hold the doctrine of the Nicolaitans, which thing I hate"* {Revelation 2:15}.

In *Don't Die in the Pew* I spent some time on the Nicolaitans. We don't know a great deal about them. Early church writers like Irenaeus connected them with a man named Nicolas and described them as people who indulged in immorality. In the letter to Pergamos, Jesus places them right beside those who hold *"the*

doctrine of Balaam," who taught God's people *"to eat things sacrificed to idols, and to commit sexual immorality"* {2:14}. The common thread seems to be compromise: the teaching that you can belong to Christ and still live comfortably in step with the world around you. You can go to the feast at the pagan temple on Saturday and to church on Sunday, and it's all fine.

Jesus hates that doctrine. Not the people; He calls them to repent. But He hates the teaching that tells His bride she can keep her other lovers. And I believe that's exactly what had happened in Laodicea. Laodicea didn't need a false teacher to tell them it was fine to love the world. Their prosperity had already done it.

Lovers of pleasure

Paul told Timothy that in the last days people would be *"lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God, having a form of godliness but denying its power"* {2 Timothy 3:4–5}. The Greek is a play on words: *philēdonoi* (pleasure-lovers) rather than *philotheoi* (God-lovers). The word *hēdonē*, pleasure, is where we get the word *hedonism*.

In the parable of the sower, Jesus described seed that fell among thorns: *"Now the ones that fell among thorns are those who, when they have heard, go out and are choked with cares, riches, and pleasures of life, and bring no fruit to maturity"* {Luke 8:14}. Notice that these people heard the word. They received it. Something even began to grow. But it was slowly strangled by three ordinary things: worries, money and pleasure. Not by persecution. Not by heresy. By the good life.

This is the Laodicean trap. It's not a life of obvious wickedness. It's a life of comfort and pleasure with a little bit of Jesus on Sunday. It looks like this:

- Our calendars are full of work, sports, entertainment and vacations, and God gets what's left over.
- We spend hours on our phones and streaming services and minutes in the Word.
- We give God an hour on Sunday morning, as long as it doesn't interfere with the game.
- We pray when we need something.
- We think of ourselves as Christians because we believe the right things and attend the right church.
- Our spending, our entertainment, our ambitions and our conversations look almost exactly like our unbelieving neighbors'.
- And we feel fine about it, because our lives are blessed.

That's not cold. We'd never deny Jesus. But it isn't hot either. It's lukewarm.

The prophet Amos saw the same thing in Israel during a time of great prosperity: *"Woe to you who are at ease in Zion… who lie on beds of ivory, stretch out on your couches, eat lambs from the flock… who sing idly to the sound of stringed instruments… who drink wine from bowls, and anoint yourselves with the best ointments, but are not grieved for the affliction of Joseph"* {Amos 6:1, 4–6}. They weren't worshiping idols in that passage. They were just enjoying themselves too much to care.

And Zephaniah describes people who *"worship and swear oaths by the LORD, but who also swear by Milcom"* {Zephaniah 1:5}, a little Yahweh, a little Molech, and then God says He will *"punish the men who are settled in complacency, who say in their heart, 'The LORD will not do good, nor will He do evil'"* {1:12}. The King James Version has a vivid phrase here: they were *"settled on their lees,"* like wine left too long on its sediment until it turns thick and stale. That's

a lukewarm soul. It doesn't think God will do anything either way. It's just settled.

You cannot serve two masters

Jesus was blunt about this: *"No one can serve two masters; for either he will hate the one and love the other, or else he will be loyal to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and mammon"* {Matthew 6:24}.

James puts it even more bluntly: *"Adulterers and adulteresses! Do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God? Whoever therefore wants to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God"* {James 4:4}. And John adds: *"Do not love the world or the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him"* {1 John 2:15}.

Elijah stood on Mount Carmel and asked Israel a question that still rings: *"How long will you falter between two opinions? If the LORD is God, follow Him; but if Baal, follow him"* {1 Kings 18:21}. The word "falter" literally means to limp, or to hop back and forth. Laodicea was limping. One foot in the kingdom, one foot in the world.

The way out of Laodicea

Jesus didn't just diagnose Laodicea. He prescribed the cure. And every part of it points to Him:

Buy from Me gold refined in the fire. True riches come from Jesus, and they're refined by trials. Peter wrote about *"the genuineness of your faith, being much more precious than gold that perishes, though it is tested by fire"* {1 Peter 1:7}. A faith that has never been tested by fire is a faith you can't be sure of.

Buy from Me white garments. Not black wool, but white linen. Later in Revelation, the bride of Christ is clothed in *"fine linen,*

clean and bright, for the fine linen is the righteous acts of the saints" {Revelation 19:8}. The Laodiceans needed to stop dressing themselves and let Jesus clothe them.

Anoint your eyes with eye salve. Their greatest need was to *see*. To see themselves as Jesus saw them, and to see Him as He really is. Only He can give that sight.

Be zealous and repent. The cure for lukewarmness is not a better program. It's repentance. The word *zealous* is zēleuō in Greek, a word related to zeō, which means to boil. Jesus is saying, *Get hot!* And the only way to do that is to turn back to Him.

Open the door. He's still knocking. He still wants to sit down at the table with you.

And for those who overcome, He gives the most extravagant promise in all seven letters: *"To him who overcomes I will grant to sit with Me on My throne, as I also overcame and sat down with My Father on His throne"* {Revelation 3:21}. The church that thought it was rich was offered a share in His throne. That's what they were trading away for their comfort.

If you're settled on your lees, if you've been limping between two opinions, if you've been giving Jesus an hour on Sunday and your life the rest of the week, please hear His knock. He's not knocking to condemn you. He's knocking because He loves you, and He wants all of you.

Examine Yourself

1. The Laodiceans said, "We have need of nothing," and didn't know their true condition. In what areas of your life might you be blind to your real need?

2. Track your time this week. How much of it goes to pleasure, entertainment and comfort, and how much to the Lord? What does that tell you about what you love?
3. Is Jesus inside your life, or knocking on the outside? How would you know the difference?
4. Read Revelation 3:14–22 aloud. Which part of Jesus' counsel (gold, garments, eye salve, zeal, opening the door) do you most need right now?

Part Three: The Great Falling Away

CHAPTER NINE

They Never Stopped Coming to Church

"Let no one deceive you by any means; for that Day will not come unless the falling away comes first, and the man of sin is revealed, the son of perdition." {2 Thessalonians 2:3}

When most people imagine the great falling away, they picture empty churches. They picture believers renouncing their faith, burning their Bibles, and walking away from God. And certainly some people do leave the faith openly. But that's not the main picture the New Testament paints. As we read what Scripture actually says about the falling away, something startling emerges. The people who fall away never stop being religious. They don't stop wanting teachers. They don't stop gathering. In fact, they collect *more* teachers than ever. What they stop doing is loving the truth.

The great falling away is not mainly an exodus from the church. It's an exodus from the truth that happens *inside* the church.

"The" falling away

The believers in Thessalonica had been shaken. Someone had told them, perhaps even with a forged letter claiming to be from Paul, that the Day of the Lord had already come {2 Thessalonians 2:1–2}. Paul

wrote to calm them, and he told them that two things must happen first: *"the falling away"* and the revealing of *"the man of sin."*

The Greek word for "falling away" is *apostasia*, from which we get "apostasy." Some have suggested it means a physical departure, such as the rapture of the church. But everywhere else this word is used, in the New Testament and in the Greek Old Testament, it describes rebellion or defection from God. In Acts 21:21, Paul is accused of teaching Jews *apostasia* from Moses: to forsake the law. In Joshua 22:22 (in the Greek translation of the Old Testament), it describes a rebellion against the LORD. It's a turning away from what you once held.

And notice the definite article: *the* falling away. Paul isn't describing the ordinary drifting of individuals that happens in every generation. He's describing a specific, large-scale defection that the Thessalonians had already been taught about {2:5}, a falling away so significant that it would be one of the signs of the end.

Why they fell

Then Paul tells us exactly how this deception will work, and why people will be vulnerable to it:

"The coming of the lawless one is according to the working of Satan, with all power, signs, and lying wonders, and with all unrighteous deception among those who perish, because they did not receive the love of the truth, that they might be saved. And for this reason God will send them strong delusion, that they should believe the lie, that they all may be condemned who did not believe the truth but had pleasure in unrighteousness." {2 Thessalonians 2:9–12}

Read those words slowly. I believe they're among the most important in the Bible for understanding deception.

First, notice that the deception will be supernatural: *"power, signs, and lying wonders."* That word *lying* may attach to all three. Real power, used to support a lie. People who decide what's true based on signs and experiences will be the most exposed.

Second, notice the reason people will be deceived. It isn't that they never heard the truth. It isn't that the truth was too complicated. It's this: *"they did not receive* ***the love of*** *the truth."*

Not "they did not receive the truth." They did not receive the *love* of it. Many of these people may have heard the truth all their lives. They may have known it. They may even have been able to explain it. But they didn't love it. They didn't treasure it, welcome it, or want it more than they wanted their own way. Third, look at what they loved instead: *"had pleasure in unrighteousness."* The word is *eudokeō*, to take delight in, to be well pleased with. The problem wasn't ignorance. It was appetite. They preferred sin to truth.

And fourth, look at the result: *"For this reason God will send them strong delusion, that they should believe the lie."* The phrase "strong delusion" is *energeian planēs*, literally "a working of error," an active power of deception. And it's God who sends it. That's a hard sentence. Why would God send delusion? We'll spend all of the next chapter on that question, because it's at the heart of Pharaoh's story. But for now, notice the order. People first refused to love the truth. Then they took pleasure in unrighteousness. *Then* God gave them over to what they had chosen. The delusion was God's judgment on people who had already decided they didn't want the truth.

That should sober every one of us. The ultimate danger is not that we'll be fooled by a clever false teacher. It's that we'll stop wanting the truth, and God will let us have what we want.

Heaping up teachers

Now put 2 Thessalonians 2 beside the passage Paul wrote to Timothy just before he died:

"For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine, but according to their own desires, because they have itching ears, they will heap up for themselves teachers; and they will turn their ears away from the truth, and be turned aside to fables." {2 Timothy 4:3–4}

Look closely at what these people do. They don't stop going to church. They don't stop listening to sermons. They don't stop wanting spiritual input. They *heap up* teachers. The word is *episōreuō*, to pile up, to accumulate in heaps. They have more teachers than ever. What they won't *"endure"* is sound doctrine. The verb there is *anechō*: the very same word Paul used four times in 2 Corinthians 11 when he said the Corinthians would "put up with" a different Jesus. Here's the tragedy in two verses: they will put up with another gospel, but they will not put up with sound doctrine.

The word *sound* is *hugiainō*, from which we get "hygiene." It means healthy, whole. Sound doctrine is healthy teaching, teaching that makes you spiritually well. And like healthy food, it isn't always what we crave. Why do they heap up teachers? *"According to their own desires."* They choose teachers the way you'd choose a menu, based on what they're hungry for. *"Because they have itching ears."* The word *knēthō* means to tickle or scratch. They want their ears scratched. They want to be soothed, entertained, affirmed and inspired. And there will always be teachers willing to scratch.

Think about how easy this has become. Paul's readers had to travel to hear a new teacher. Today, if your pastor says something you don't like, you can find a dozen preachers online by Sunday afternoon who'll tell you something you like better. You can build your own church out of podcasts, clips and devotionals, and never have to hear

a single word that makes you uncomfortable. We are the first generation in history that can heap up teachers without leaving the couch. And where does it end? *"They will turn their ears away from the truth, and be turned aside to fables."* The word for "fables" is *mythos*, myths. Stories that feel meaningful but aren't true. Now, here's my point. Look at the people Paul is describing in both of these passages. They are not atheists. They are not people who have stopped coming to church. They are people who are very much involved in religious life, surrounded by teachers, perhaps more spiritually active than ever. Scripture doesn't say they stopped coming. It says they stopped loving the truth, and started collecting people who would tell them what they wanted to hear.

This has always been the pattern

This isn't a new phenomenon. The prophets saw it in Israel again and again. Isaiah described *"a rebellious people, lying children, children who will not hear the law of the LORD; who say to the seers, 'Do not see,' and to the prophets, 'Do not prophesy to us right things; speak to us smooth things, prophesy deceits. Get out of the way, turn aside from the path, cause the Holy One of Israel to cease from before us'"* {Isaiah 30:9–11}. They didn't want the prophets to stop prophesying. They wanted them to prophesy *smooth things*. And notice the last request: *Get the Holy One out of our sight*. They wanted religion without holiness.

Jeremiah put it even more bluntly: *"An astonishing and horrible thing has been committed in the land: The prophets prophesy falsely, and the priests rule by their own power; and My people love to have it so. But what will you do in the end?"* {Jeremiah 5:30–31}

My people love to have it so. That's the most frightening line in the passage. The false prophets didn't force their lies on the people. The people loved them. The religious leaders gave the people exactly what they wanted, and they were very popular for it.

And then there is King Ahab. When Ahab wanted to go to war, he gathered four hundred prophets, and all four hundred told him, *"Go up, for the Lord will deliver it into the hand of the king"* {1 Kings 22:6}. But Jehoshaphat, the king of Judah, sensed something was off and asked if there was one more prophet they could consult. Ahab's answer tells you everything: *"There is still one man, Micaiah… by whom we may inquire of the LORD; but I hate him, because he does not prophesy good concerning me, but evil"* {22:8}.

Ahab had four hundred prophets who told him what he wanted to hear, and he hated the one who told him the truth. That's heaping up teachers. And the end of the story is chilling. Micaiah revealed that God had allowed *"a lying spirit in the mouth of all these prophets"* {22:23}. Ahab wanted lies; God let him have them. Ahab went into battle and died, just as the one true prophet had said.

The love of many will grow cold

Jesus Himself described the last days in similar terms. When His disciples asked about the signs of His coming, the very first thing He said was, *"Take heed that no one deceives you"* {Matthew 24:4}. And then:

"For many will come in My name, saying, 'I am the Christ,' and will deceive many… And then many will be offended, will betray one another, and will hate one another. Then many false prophets will rise up and deceive many. And because lawlessness will abound, the love of many will grow cold. But he who endures to the end shall be saved." {Matthew 24:5, 10–13}

Count the word *many* in that passage. Many deceivers. Many deceived. Many offended. Many false prophets. The love of many growing cold. Jesus didn't say a few would be deceived. He said many.

Notice also that the false christs come *"in My name."* They use the name of Jesus. Some will claim to be Christ, and others will claim to speak with His authority. And then Jesus said that *"the love of many will grow cold."* The word for love is *agapē*, the word the New Testament uses for the love of God and the love of His people. These are not unbelievers whose love grows cold. You can only grow cold if you were once warm.

And the reason their love grows cold? *"Because lawlessness will abound."* Remember that word from Matthew 7:23, *anomia*. The people Jesus said He never knew were the ones who practiced *anomia*. Lawlessness isn't just a feature of the world in the last days. It seeps into the church and chills the love of God's people.

What a falling away looks like

So if we put these passages together, what does the great falling away look like? I don't believe it necessarily looks like empty churches, though in some places churches will empty. I believe it looks like this:

- Churches that are full of people and empty of the truth.
- Christians who have more access to teaching than any generation in history, and who know less of the Bible than their grandparents did.
- Teachers who use the name of Jesus to promote a different Jesus.
- Signs and experiences treated as proof that God is in something.
- An appetite for smooth things, and a growing resentment toward anyone who says *"Thus says the Lord"* about sin.
- Love for God growing cold, replaced by love for self, money and pleasure {2 Timothy 3:2–4}.
- And, most chillingly, people who are perfectly happy with it all. *"My people love to have it so."*

Jesus asked a question that I can't get out of my mind: *"Nevertheless, when the Son of Man comes, will He really find faith on the earth?"* {Luke 18:8}. He didn't ask if He would find churches. He asked if He would find faith.

Do you love the truth?

So here is the question this chapter comes down to. Not "Do you know the truth?" or "Do you agree with the truth?" But **do you love the truth?**

How can you tell? Here are a few signs from Scripture:

You come to the light, even when it exposes you. *"And this is the condemnation, that the light has come into the world, and men loved darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil. For everyone practicing evil hates the light and does not come to the light, lest his deeds should be exposed. But he who does the truth comes to the light"* {John 3:19–21}. A person who loves the truth wants to be exposed, because they want to be clean.

You welcome correction. *"Rebuke a wise man, and he will love you"* {Proverbs 9:8}. *"Let the righteous strike me; it shall be a kindness. And let him rebuke me; it shall be as excellent oil"* {Psalm 141:5}. How do you respond when someone points to a Scripture that confronts the way you live?

You value the truth above your comfort. *"I hate and abhor lying, but I love Your law"* {Psalm 119:163}. *"Buy the truth, and do not sell it"* {Proverbs 23:23}. A person who loves the truth will pay for it.

You don't shop for teachers who agree with you. You test teachers by the Word, not the Word by your preferences.

You obey what you already know. Jesus said, *"If anyone wills to do His will, he shall know concerning the doctrine, whether it is from God"* {John 7:17}. Love for the truth is shown in a willingness to do it. And that willingness is what opens the door to more understanding. After describing those who would perish because they didn't love the truth, Paul immediately turned to the Thessalonians with a very different word:

"But we are bound to give thanks to God always for you, brethren beloved by the Lord, because God from the beginning chose you for salvation through sanctification by the Spirit and belief in the truth... Therefore, brethren, stand fast and hold the traditions which you were taught, whether by word or our epistle." {2 Thessalonians 2:13, 15}

There is a way through the falling away: sanctification by the Spirit, belief in the truth, and standing fast in what the apostles taught. If you are troubled as you read this chapter, if you're hungry for the truth even when it hurts, that hunger is a gift. Feed it. Don't let anyone scratch it away.

Examine Yourself

1. Before reading this chapter, how did you picture "the falling away"? How has your picture changed?
2. Paul says people would perish because they "did not receive the love of the truth." On a scale of honesty, how much do you love the truth when it corrects you?
3. Think about the teachers you listen to. Did you choose them because they teach the Word faithfully, or because they make you feel good?
4. Ahab hated Micaiah because he never said anything good about him. Is there a "Micaiah" in your life that you've been avoiding?

CHAPTER TEN

Pharaoh's Heart

"But when Pharaoh saw that there was relief, he hardened his heart and did not heed them, as the LORD had said." {Exodus 8:15}

In the last chapter we came to one of the hardest sentences in the Bible: *"And for this reason God will send them strong delusion, that they should believe the lie"* {2 Thessalonians 2:11}. How can a good God send delusion? Isn't that unfair? Doesn't God want everyone to be saved?

Yes, He does. *"The Lord is not slack concerning His promise... but is longsuffering toward us, not willing that any should perish but that all should come to repentance"* {2 Peter 3:9}. *"As I live," says the Lord GOD, "I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but that the wicked turn from his way and live"* {Ezekiel 33:11}.

So how do we put these truths together? I believe the clearest answer in Scripture is the story of Pharaoh. And when you read that story carefully, counting every time the Bible mentions his heart, you discover something that changes how you understand God's judgment.

God knew from the beginning

Before Moses ever stood in Pharaoh's court, God told him how it would go: *"But I am sure that the king of Egypt will not let you go, no, not even by a mighty hand"* {Exodus 3:19}.

Notice what this is. It is not yet a statement that God will harden Pharaoh. It is a statement of what God *knew*. God knew Pharaoh's heart before Moses opened his mouth. God is not bound by time the way we are. *"With the Lord one day is as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day"* {2 Peter 3:8}. He says, *"I am God, and there is none like Me, declaring the end from the beginning, and from ancient times things that are not yet done"* {Isaiah 46:9–10}. God sees the end of every story before the first chapter is written. He knew exactly what kind of man Pharaoh was and what he would choose.

God then told Moses twice what He would do: *"I will harden his heart, so that he will not let the people go"* {Exodus 4:21}, and *"I will harden Pharaoh's heart, and multiply My signs and My wonders in the land of Egypt"* {7:3}. Those are prophecies, statements about the future. The question is, *when* and *how* did they come to pass?

Counting the hardenings

The Hebrew text uses three different words for Pharaoh's hardening. *Chazaq* means to make strong or firm. *Kabed* means to make heavy, dull or insensitive. And *qashah* means to make stiff or stubborn. And the subject of the verb is very important. Sometimes the text says Pharaoh hardened his own heart. Sometimes it says his heart "grew hard" or "was hard," describing his condition. And sometimes it says the LORD hardened it.

Watch the order. Before any plague began, Pharaoh's first words to Moses were: *"Who is the LORD, that I should obey His voice to let Israel go? I do not know the LORD, nor will I let Israel go"* {Exodus

5:2}. That was his starting point. He wasn't neutral. He had already decided.

Then:

1. **The staff becomes a serpent.** *"And Pharaoh's heart grew hard, and he did not heed them, as the LORD had said"* {7:13}.
2. **The water becomes blood.** *"Pharaoh's heart grew hard, and he did not heed them… Neither was his heart moved by this"* {7:22–23}.
3. **The frogs.** *"But when Pharaoh saw that there was relief,* ***he hardened his heart*** *and did not heed them"* {8:15}.
4. **The lice.** Pharaoh's own magicians told him, *"This is the finger of God." "But Pharaoh's heart grew hard, and he did not heed them"* {8:19}.
5. **The flies.** *"But* ***Pharaoh hardened his heart*** *at this time also; neither would he let the people go"* {8:32}.
6. **The death of the livestock.** Pharaoh actually sent investigators to confirm that not one of Israel's animals had died. *"But the heart of Pharaoh became hard, and he did not let the people go"* {9:7}.

Six times. Six times Pharaoh was confronted with the power of God, and six times his heart was hard. The text either says plainly that he hardened it himself, or describes his heart growing hard as he refused to heed. Not once in those six encounters does it say that God did the hardening.

And then:

7. **The boils.** *"But* ***the LORD hardened the heart of Pharaoh****; and he did not heed them, just as the LORD had spoken to Moses"* {9:12}.

For the first time in the story, God actively hardens Pharaoh's heart. From this point on, the text says the LORD hardened Pharaoh's heart again and again {10:1, 20, 27; 11:10; 14:4, 8}.

But notice one more thing. Even after God began to harden him, Pharaoh was still responsible. After the hail, the text says, *"He sinned yet more; and he hardened his heart, he and his servants"* {9:34}. God's hardening didn't turn Pharaoh into a puppet. It confirmed and sealed what Pharaoh himself had chosen, over and over.

This is what the Apostle Paul is describing when he says God sends *"strong delusion"* to those who *"did not receive the love of the truth"* {2 Thessalonians 2:10–11}. God doesn't randomly harden innocent hearts. He knows the end from the beginning. He gives every person light. And when a person refuses that light again and again, there comes a point when God gives them what they've insisted on. He confirms their choice.

I want to be honest that faithful Bible teachers have wrestled with these passages for centuries, especially with Romans 9:17–18, where Paul quotes God's words to Pharaoh: *"For this very purpose I have raised you up, that I may show My power in you, and that My name may be declared in all the earth."* God is sovereign, and He used even Pharaoh's rebellion to display His glory to the nations. But Exodus never presents Pharaoh as an innocent man forced into evil. It presents a proud king who said no to God six times before God said, in effect, *Have it your way*.

Relief is when the hardening happens

Go back to the frogs. This detail has haunted me since I first noticed it: *"But when Pharaoh saw that there was **relief**, he hardened his heart"* {8:15}.

When the frogs were covering everything, Pharaoh was ready to deal. *"Entreat the LORD that He may take away the frogs from me and from my people; and I will let the people go"* {8:8}. But the moment the pressure lifted, he changed his mind. The same thing happened after the hail. Pharaoh even sounded repentant: *"I have sinned this time. The LORD is righteous, and my people and I are wicked"* {9:27}. Those are good words. If you heard them in a church service, you might think a great conversion had taken place. But Moses saw through them: *"But as for you and your servants, I know that you will not yet fear the LORD God"* {9:30}. And sure enough, *"when Pharaoh saw that the rain, the hail, and the thunder had ceased, he sinned yet more; and he hardened his heart"* {9:34}.

Pharaoh's "repentance" was really just a way to get relief. When the pain went away, so did his sorrow. Paul describes this difference: *"For godly sorrow produces repentance leading to salvation, not to be regretted; but the sorrow of the world produces death"* {2 Corinthians 7:10}. Worldly sorrow is sorry about the consequences. Godly sorrow is sorry about the sin.

How many times have we done what Pharaoh did? A crisis hits. We cry out to God. We make promises. We go back to church, we start reading the Bible again, we tell God we'll change. And then the crisis passes, life gets comfortable again, and our promises quietly fade. Each time that happens, the heart gets a little harder. It becomes easier to make promises we don't intend to keep, and easier to ignore the next warning.

Pharaoh's offers

There's another part of the Exodus story that speaks directly to the gospel of accommodation. As the plagues got worse, Pharaoh began making offers. Each one was a compromise:

- *"Go, sacrifice to your God* ***in the land****"* {8:25}. Worship God, but stay in Egypt.
- *"I will let you go... only* ***you shall not go very far away****"* {8:28}. Follow God, but not too far.
- *"Go now,* ***you who are men****"* {10:11}. You can go, but leave your children here.
- *"Go, serve the LORD;* ***only let your flocks and your herds be kept back****"* {10:24}. Take your family, but leave your possessions.

Each offer sounded reasonable. Each one got Israel a little closer to freedom. And each one would have kept them tied to Egypt. Moses' answer to the last offer should be the answer of every believer: *"Our livestock also shall go with us;* ***not a hoof shall be left behind****"* {10:26}.

The enemy is still making Pharaoh's offers. *Worship God, but stay in the world. Follow Jesus, but don't go too far. Give Him your Sunday, but keep your money. Give Him your heart, but keep your plans*. The gospel of accommodation is just Pharaoh's offer in a nicer suit. God's answer hasn't changed: not a hoof left behind.

"God gave them up"

Pharaoh's story is not an isolated case. The same pattern runs throughout Scripture.

In Romans 1 Paul describes people who *"knew God"* but *"did not glorify Him as God, nor were thankful, but became futile in their thoughts, and their foolish hearts were darkened"* {Romans 1:21}. Then three times in eight verses, Paul says the same thing: *"God gave them up"* {1:24}, *"God gave them up"* {1:26}, *"God gave them over"* {1:28}. And look at the reason he gives in verse 28: *"And even as they did not like to retain God in their knowledge, God gave them over to*

a debased mind." They didn't want God in their thinking. So God let them have their own thinking, and it destroyed them.

In Psalm 81 God says something heartbreaking: *"But My people would not heed My voice, and Israel would have none of Me. So I gave them over to their own stubborn heart, to walk in their own counsels. Oh, that My people would listen to Me"* {Psalm 81:11–13}.

You can hear the grief in that last line.

Isaiah gives what may be the clearest statement of the principle: *"Just as they have chosen their own ways, and their soul delights in their abominations, so will I choose their delusions, and bring their fears on them; because, when I called, no one answered, when I spoke they did not hear"* {Isaiah 66:3–4}. *They chose their ways, so I will choose their delusions*. That's 2 Thessalonians 2 written seven hundred years earlier.

Zechariah describes the same process: *"But they refused to heed, shrugged their shoulders, and stopped their ears so that they could not hear. Yes, they made their hearts like flint… Therefore it happened, that just as He proclaimed and they would not hear, so they called out and I would not listen"* {Zechariah 7:11–13}. They made their hearts like flint. And then God stopped answering.

Ezekiel describes people who came to inquire of the Lord with idols set up in their hearts, and God said He would answer them *"according to the multitude of his idols"* {Ezekiel 14:4}. In my notes on hearing God's voice, I wrote this: *They're hiding sin, they know it's wrong, the stumbling block is right there before their eyes. And God says, "Should I talk to them at all?"* When we come to God with a hidden idol, determined to keep it, we may get an answer. But it may be the answer our idol wants to hear.

And finally, the Gospel of John shows the same thing happening to the people who saw Jesus' miracles: *"But although He had done so many signs before them, they did not believe in Him… Therefore they could not believe, because Isaiah said again: 'He has blinded their eyes and hardened their hearts, lest they should see with their eyes, lest they should understand with their hearts and turn, so that I should heal them'"* {John 12:37–40}. First, *they did not believe*. Then, *they could not believe*.

That is the progression. *Would not* becomes *could not*.

How a conscience gets seared

In my notes on hearing God's voice, I wrote that the opposite of a hearing heart is a heart that is "callused and hardened." I think that's exactly the right picture.

A callus forms through repeated friction. The first time you play a guitar, your fingertips hurt. If you keep playing, the skin thickens until you can't feel the strings at all. The callus is the body protecting itself from pain.

Conviction is supposed to hurt. When the Holy Spirit shows us a sin, it should sting. That pain is a gift. It's how God gets our attention. But every time we feel the sting of conviction and refuse to respond, the heart thickens a little. The next time, it hurts a little less. Eventually, we can do the very thing that once grieved us deeply and feel nothing at all.

Paul describes people who, *"being past feeling, have given themselves over to lewdness, to work all uncleanness with greediness"* {Ephesians 4:19}. "Past feeling" is *apalgeō*, literally to stop feeling pain. And notice the order again: they *gave themselves over*. In Romans 1, God gave them over. In Ephesians 4, they gave

themselves over. Both are true. We give ourselves to sin, and eventually God gives us to what we've given ourselves to.

That's what Paul meant when he described false teachers *"having their own conscience seared with a hot iron"* {1 Timothy 4:2}. A seared conscience doesn't feel guilty. And a person with no sense of guilt can no longer understand the truth about sin, because they have no inner witness left to agree with it. That's how sincere people end up believing what they would once have recognized as a lie.

Today

The writer of Hebrews takes the story of Israel in the wilderness, the very people Pharaoh had refused to release, and applies it to the church:

"Therefore, as the Holy Spirit says: 'Today, if you will hear His voice, do not harden your hearts as in the rebellion, in the day of trial in the wilderness'... Beware, brethren, lest there be in any of you an evil heart of unbelief in departing from the living God; but exhort one another daily, while it is called 'Today,' lest any of you be hardened through the deceitfulness of sin." {Hebrews 3:7–8, 12–13}

Notice that this is addressed to *brethren*. Believers can harden their hearts. And notice how it happens: *"through the deceitfulness of sin."* Sin deceives. It convinces us that this time is different, that God doesn't mind, that we'll deal with it later.

But notice the hope, too. *"Today."* The word appears again and again in this passage. As long as it is called today, there is still an invitation. *"Today, if you will hear His voice."* God is still speaking.

I don't know where the line is between a heart that is hardening and a heart that has been given over. Only God knows that. But I do know this: if the Holy Spirit is convicting you as you read this chapter,

if something in you is stinging, that is not a sign that God has given up on you. It's a sign that He's still knocking. Pharaoh never trembled at the Word of God. If you're trembling, respond.

And remember that Scripture is full of hard hearts that God softened when they humbled themselves. King Manasseh of Judah was one of the most wicked kings in Israel's history. He practiced witchcraft, filled Jerusalem with innocent blood, and put an idol in the temple of God. But *"when he was in affliction, he implored the LORD his God, and humbled himself greatly before the God of his fathers, and prayed to Him; and He received his entreaty, heard his supplication, and brought him back to Jerusalem"* {2 Chronicles 33:12–13}. Nebuchadnezzar, the proud king of Babylon, was humbled by God and ended his story praising the King of heaven, *"all of whose works are truth, and His ways justice. And those who walk in pride He is able to put down"* {Daniel 4:37}.

The difference between Pharaoh and Manasseh wasn't the size of their sin. It was what they did when God's hand was heavy on them. Pharaoh waited for relief and hardened his heart. Manasseh humbled himself and was heard.

"God resists the proud, but gives grace to the humble" {James 4:6}.

Today, if you hear His voice, don't wait for relief. Humble yourself.

Examine Yourself

1. Pharaoh hardened his heart when “there was relief.” Think of a time you made promises to God in a crisis. What happened to those promises when things got better?
2. Which of Pharaoh’s compromise offers (stay in the land, don’t go far, leave the children, leave the possessions) do you find most tempting?
3. Is there a sin that once grieved you deeply that you now commit without much feeling? What does that tell you?
4. The Holy Spirit says “Today.” Is there something He has been asking of you that you’ve been putting off? What would it look like to respond today?

CHAPTER ELEVEN

My Sheep Hear My Voice

"My sheep hear My voice, and I know them, and they follow Me." {John 10:27}

When I call my husband, I don't say, "Hello, this is Krista Smith, your wife." I just start talking. He knows my voice from the first word.

That's the picture Jesus uses for His relationship with His people. *"The sheep hear his voice; and he calls his own sheep by name and leads them out… and the sheep follow him, for they know his voice. Yet they will by no means follow a stranger, but will flee from him, for they do not know the voice of strangers"* {John 10:3–5}.

Notice what protects the sheep. It isn't that they've studied every possible stranger's voice. It's that they know their Shepherd's voice so well that any other voice sounds wrong. A shepherd doesn't drive his sheep from behind. He leads them, and they follow because they recognize him.

We've spent ten chapters looking at how deception works. In this chapter I want to talk about the best protection there is: knowing the voice of the true Shepherd. And I want to be honest about the other voices that will try to imitate His.

Hearing is not optional

God's basic requirement for His people has never changed. *"Obey My voice, and I will be your God, and you shall be My people"* {Jeremiah 7:23}. Jesus said the mark of His sheep is that they *hear* His voice. And He said, *"Everyone who is of the truth hears My voice"* {John 18:37}.

Some years ago I wrote in my notes: *Jesus did not say "My sheep read the Bible." Reading is essential, but it is not sufficient*. I want to be careful how I say this, because the Bible is the only infallible standard for testing every voice, and you will never hear God rightly while neglecting His Word. But the Pharisees read the Scriptures more than anyone and still didn't recognize the Shepherd when He stood in front of them. Jesus told them, *"You search the Scriptures, for in them you think you have eternal life; and these are they which testify of Me. But you are not willing to come to Me that you may have life"* {John 5:39–40}. The Bible is meant to bring us to a Person. Reading leads to hearing. Hearing leads to following.

Paul wrote that *"faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of God"* {Romans 10:17}. The Greek word for "word" there is *rhēma*, which often refers to a spoken word, an utterance. God's Word is settled forever in heaven {Psalm 119:89}. But He also speaks it to us, personally, day by day. Jesus told Satan that man shall live *"by every word [rhēma] that proceeds from the mouth of God"* {Matthew 4:4}. Notice the tense: *proceeds*. God is still speaking.

In my notes I wrote that hearing God's voice has three distinctive features. It's **personal**: He calls His sheep by name. It's **intangible**: we can't grasp it with our hands or measure it by our feelings. And it's **present**: God's name is *I AM*, not *I was* or *I will be*. His voice is always now. That's what makes it our protection. Not just belonging to a movement or holding to a doctrine, but personally hearing Him.

How Jesus listened

Isaiah gives us a remarkable prophetic glimpse into the inner life of the Messiah:

"The Lord GOD has given Me the tongue of the learned, that I should know how to speak a word in season to him who is weary. He awakens Me morning by morning, He awakens My ear to hear as the learned. The Lord GOD has opened My ear; and I was not rebellious, nor did I turn away. I gave My back to those who struck Me, and My cheeks to those who plucked out the beard; I did not hide My face from shame and spitting… Therefore I have set My face like a flint." {Isaiah 50:4–7}

This was the lifestyle of Jesus Himself. Every morning, He listened to His Father. And look at what came from that listening: words to sustain the weary, obedience (*"I was not rebellious"*), strength to endure suffering, and determination (*"I have set My face like a flint"*). If the Son of God began every day by listening, how much more do we need to?

A hearing heart

When God appeared to young King Solomon in a dream and told him to ask for anything he wanted, Solomon asked for *"an understanding heart to judge Your people, that I may discern between good and evil"* {1 Kings 3:9}. The Hebrew phrase is *lev shomea*. Literally, it means *a hearing heart*.

Have you ever asked God for a hearing heart?

Scripture shows us what a hearing heart requires.

Attention and humility. *"My son, give attention to my words; incline your ear to my sayings"* {Proverbs 4:20}. To incline your ear means to bend down, to bow your head. You don't argue with God

when you're bowing. You listen. Our culture makes this hard. We're used to doing two things at once, scrolling while we watch TV, half-listening to everyone. But God asks for undivided attention.

Freedom from preconceptions. Many people read the Bible through the lens of what they've always heard in church. If God says something different from what their denomination teaches, they simply don't hear it. They assume that if it isn't in their tradition, it isn't in the Bible. If we only expect to hear what we've already been told, we're spiritually deaf.

Time and quietness. *"Be still, and know that I am God"* {Psalm 46:10}. The Hebrew word for "be still" can mean to let go, to cease striving, to relax your grip. David told his own soul, *"My soul, wait silently for God alone, for my expectation is from Him"* {Psalm 62:5}. Most of us are afraid of silence. We fill every gap with noise. But God doesn't usually shout. He spoke to Elijah not in the wind, the earthquake or the fire, but in *"a still small voice"* {1 Kings 19:12}.

Worship. *"Oh come, let us worship and bow down; let us kneel before the LORD our Maker… Today, if you will hear His voice: 'Do not harden your hearts'"* {Psalm 95:6–8}. Notice the order. Worship comes first. Then the call to hear. Then the warning against hardening. When we come into His presence with reverence, acknowledging His majesty, our hearts become soft enough to hear.

Obedience. Jesus said, *"If anyone wills to do His will, he shall know concerning the doctrine, whether it is from God"* {John 7:17}. This may be the most important key of all. God speaks most clearly to people who have already decided to obey whatever He says. In my notes I wrote: *The moment you're ready to obey God at any cost, His voice will come through loud and clear*. When we come to Him saying, "Lord, show me Your will so I can decide whether I like it," we shouldn't be surprised by the silence.

When sin stops the ears

That brings us to something sobering. Hidden sin makes it almost impossible to hear God accurately.

"If I regard iniquity in my heart, the Lord will not hear" {Psalm 66:18}. And if He isn't listening to us, we shouldn't assume we're hearing Him.

In Malachi's day, the people were weeping at the altar, covering it with their tears, and they couldn't understand why God wasn't answering. God told them exactly why: *"Because the LORD has been witness between you and the wife of your youth, with whom you have dealt treacherously"* {Malachi 2:13–14}. They were crying out to God while living in betrayal. And God's answer was, in effect: *Go back and make it right. Repent. Change. Then I'll talk to you.*

You can weep all you want in your prayer closet and ask God whether something is right or wrong, when all along you know you've been listening to the wrong voice. When we are hiding a sinful deed, we will still hear voices. We'll hear the voice of our own flesh. We may even hear something that sounds like a still small voice, and it will flatter us. But the voice of the Good Shepherd will always call us *out* of our sin, never deeper into it.

The voice David should not have obeyed

There is a story in David's life that shows how even a man after God's own heart can be seduced by the wrong voice.

"Now Satan stood up against Israel, and moved David to number Israel" {1 Chronicles 21:1}.

When did this happen? Read the chapters before it. It was the most successful season of David's life. He had brought the ark of God back to Jerusalem. He had set worship in order. God had promised

to build him an everlasting house. He had defeated every enemy around him, including the giants of Gath {1 Chronicles 18–20}. God was pleased with him. And at the peak of his power and success, David heard a voice that said, in effect, *Count your army. See how strong you are.*

It didn't sound evil. It sounded like good management. Even David's general Joab, not a particularly spiritual man, could tell something was wrong: *"Why then does my lord require this thing? Why should he be a cause of guilt in Israel?"* {21:3}. But David overrode him. And seventy thousand men died in the plague that followed {21:14}.

The parallel account in 2 Samuel 24:1 says the LORD's anger was aroused against Israel and He moved David to take the census. Put the two accounts together and you see the same principle we saw in Pharaoh's story: God allowed the enemy access, and He did it for a reason. Israel's sin, and David's pride, had opened a door.

Why did David fall for it? I believe it's because he had become casual. Years earlier, when David sinned with Bathsheba, God's rebuke through Nathan was, *"Why have you despised the commandment of the LORD… because you have despised Me"* {2 Samuel 12:9–10}. To despise God doesn't necessarily mean to hate Him. It means to take Him lightly, to stop treating Him as holy. Success can make us casual. And when we become casual about God, we become careless about which voice we're listening to.

Peter warned, *"Be sober, be vigilant; because your adversary the devil walks about like a roaring lion, seeking whom he may devour"* {1 Peter 5:8}. The word *devour* means to gulp down, to swallow whole. *Vigilant* means to stay awake, to rise up out of drowsiness. David's victory became his drowsiness. If the man who wrote the Psalms could be seduced by the wrong voice at the height of his walk with God, so can we.

Jesus warned that in the last days *"false christs and false prophets will rise and show signs and wonders to deceive, if possible, even the elect. But take heed; see, I have told you all things beforehand"* {Mark 13:22–23}. Some take "if possible" to mean that it's impossible. But Jesus immediately turns to His disciples and tells them to take heed. He doesn't warn people against dangers that can't touch them. David was God's chosen king. Peter was a chosen apostle. Both were deceived by the wrong voice for a season. It is wisdom, not fear, to take Jesus' warning personally.

False prophets

If there are false voices in our own hearts, there are also false voices in the church. And we need to talk about them honestly.

God gave Israel a clear test for prophets:

"But the prophet who presumes to speak a word in My name, which I have not commanded him to speak... that prophet shall die. And if you say in your heart, 'How shall we know the word which the LORD has not spoken?' — when a prophet speaks in the name of the LORD, if the thing does not happen or come to pass, that is the thing which the LORD has not spoken; the prophet has spoken it presumptuously; you shall not be afraid of him." {Deuteronomy 18:20–22}

God took false prophecy so seriously that under the old covenant it was a capital offense. And Jeremiah's description of the false prophets of his day could have been written this morning:

"Do not listen to the words of the prophets who prophesy to you. They make you worthless; they speak a vision of their own heart, not from the mouth of the LORD. They continually say to those who despise Me, 'The LORD has said, "You shall have peace"'; and to everyone who walks according to the dictates of his own heart, they

say, 'No evil shall come upon you'... I have not sent these prophets, yet they ran. I have not spoken to them, yet they prophesied." {Jeremiah 23:16–17, 21}

Notice the content of false prophecy. It's almost always good news for people who aren't walking with God. *Peace. No harm will come to you. Everything's going to be fine.* And notice who it's spoken to: *"those who despise Me"* and those who walk *"according to the dictates of [their] own heart."* False prophecy doesn't confront sin. It comforts it.

I watched this happen in a very public way. In 2020 a number of well-known prophetic voices in the American church declared, confidently and "in the name of the Lord," who would win the U.S. presidential election. Their words were shared millions of times. And the prophecies didn't come to pass. To their credit, a few of those prophets publicly acknowledged they had been wrong and repented. But many others explained it away, moved the goalposts, or simply moved on to the next prophecy, and their followers moved on with them.

I'm not raising this to make a political point. This would be just as serious no matter who had been named or which party was involved. I'm raising it because Deuteronomy 18 is clear, and the church's response showed how little we take it seriously. When a prophecy fails, God says the prophet spoke presumptuously. *"You shall not be afraid of him."* That means we're not obligated to keep listening. When the church keeps following voices that have spoken falsely in God's name, it shows that we value excitement and agreement more than we value truth.

Jesus gave us the long-term test: *"Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ravenous wolves. You will know them by their fruits"* {Matthew 7:15–16}. Over time, what does this person's ministry produce? Humility or

celebrity? Holiness or license? Love for Jesus or love for the messenger? Obedience to Scripture or dependence on fresh words from the prophet?

"But we're not supposed to judge"

Whenever anyone raises these concerns, someone quotes Matthew 7:1: *"Judge not."* We've already seen in Chapter 4 that this verse is usually quoted without its context. But it's worth saying plainly: the Bible commands us to judge teaching.

- Jesus said to *"beware of false prophets"* and to know them by their fruit {Matthew 7:15–20}. You can't do that without judging.
- Paul said of anyone who preaches a different gospel, *"let him be accursed"* {Galatians 1:8–9}.
- He told the Ephesian elders to *"take heed"* and *"watch"* for wolves {Acts 20:28–31}.
- He wrote, *"Beware of dogs, beware of evil workers"* {Philippians 3:2}.
- He said, *"Have no fellowship with the unfruitful works of darkness, but rather expose them"* {Ephesians 5:11}.
- He named people who had made shipwreck of their faith or opposed the truth: Hymenaeus, Alexander, Philetus, and others {1 Timothy 1:20; 2 Timothy 2:17; 4:14}.
- John told us to *"test the spirits"* {1 John 4:1}.
- And the Bereans were called *"noble"* because they checked even the Apostle Paul's teaching against Scripture {Acts 17:11}.

What Jesus forbade was hypocritical, self-righteous judgment: condemning others while ignoring the plank in our own eye. He didn't forbid discernment. In fact, He said to take the plank out *"and*

then you will see clearly" {Matthew 7:5}. The goal is clear sight, not blindness.

And remember Jesus' parable of the wheat and the tares {Matthew 13:24–30}. The enemy sowed weeds among the wheat, and the two grew up together until the harvest. In their early stages, the weeds look almost identical to the wheat. We aren't called to rip up every plant we're suspicious of; that judgment belongs to the Lord of the harvest. But we are called to recognize that not everything that grows in the field is wheat.

How to test a voice

So how do we know when a voice, whether in our own heart or from a pulpit, is really the Shepherd's? In my notes I wrote down three ways to check, and over the years they have proven true:

1. It always agrees with Scripture. This is the first test and the final one. God will never tell you to do something His Word forbids. He will never contradict Himself. If the voice you're hearing leads you away from the plain teaching of Scripture, it isn't God, no matter how spiritual it feels.

2. It's confirmed by circumstances and by godly counsel. Truly spiritual people don't go off on their own, regardless of their brothers and sisters. I've always respected this about Paul. He knew God had called him, but he didn't just announce, "I'm going." At Antioch, the call was confirmed through the church: *"the Holy Spirit said, 'Now separate to Me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.' Then, having fasted and prayed, and laid hands on them, they sent them away"* {Acts 13:2–3}. It wasn't enough that Paul knew he was called. The body had to know it too. God speaks through the relationships He's placed us in: faithful pastors, a spouse, wise friends, mature believers. The better our relationships with them, the better we can hear God through them.

3. It brings God's peace as an umpire. *"And let the peace of God rule in your hearts… Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly"* {Colossians 3:15–16}. The word translated "rule" is *brabeuō*, which means to act as an umpire or referee. God's peace is an inner arbiter. When it's there, it says *go*. When it's withdrawn, when there's unrest, pressure or a sense that you have to act hastily, be on your guard. Remember, though, that peace never works alone. Notice that Paul puts it right beside *"the word of Christ."* Peace that contradicts the Word is not God's peace.

When all three line up (God's Word, confirmation, and His peace), you can move forward with confidence.

A simple practice

If you want to grow in hearing His voice, here's a simple practice I've written in my own notes and used for years:

1. **Get alone with God.** Find a place and a time without distractions.
2. **Focus your heart in worship.** Sometimes I put on worship music to quiet my mind and turn my attention to Him.
3. **Pray, and give Him your burdens.** It's hard to hear God when you're weighed down. Talk to Him about whatever is on your heart and hand it over. Prayer is an exchange: your burden for His peace. If you pray and walk away still carrying the burden, you might not have prayed. You might have just complained.
4. **Read the Scripture, and write down what you sense Him saying.** God is alive. Ask Him, *What are You saying to me?* He often leads us to a passage and speaks through it.
5. **Test what you've written.** Does it agree with Scripture? Is it confirmed? Do you have His peace?

Hearing God is like a child learning to talk. The ability is built in. You were made for this, because you are His sheep. But it has to mature over time. And the most important thing is this: be ready to obey before you hear. *"Everyone who is of the truth hears My voice."* When you come to Him saying, *Lord, I'll do whatever You say, whatever it costs,* He will be ready to talk to you.

Examine Yourself

1. If you had to describe how God's voice sounds in your life, what would you say? How confident are you that you'd recognize it?
2. David heard the wrong voice at the height of his success. Has success or comfort ever made you careless about what you were listening to?
3. Is there any hidden sin that might be blocking your ears to God's voice right now?
4. Have you followed any teacher or prophetic voice whose words did not come to pass? How does Deuteronomy 18:22 apply?

Part Four: The Way Back

CHAPTER TWELVE

Scriptures We Have Learned to Skip

"Open my eyes, that I may see wondrous things from Your law." {Psalm 119:18}

Every Christian has favorite verses. That's good. But most of us also have verses we've learned to skip. We don't consciously decide to ignore them. We just never hear them preached, our reading plans skim past them, and when we do run across them, they make us uneasy, so we move on to something more comforting.

This chapter is an invitation to stop skipping. I've gathered some of the passages that I believe the modern church most often overlooks. I'm not going to explain all of them away, and I'm not going to wrap them all up with a neat bow. I want you to read them, sit with them, and ask the Lord what He means by them.

Please read slowly. Better yet, read them aloud.

On who will enter the kingdom

- *"Enter by the narrow gate; for wide is the gate and broad is the way that leads to destruction, and there are many who go in by it. Because narrow is the gate and difficult is the way which leads to life, and there are few who find it"* {Matthew 7:13–14}.

- *"Strive to enter through the narrow gate, for many, I say to you, will seek to enter and will not be able"* {Luke 13:24}.
- *"For I say to you, that unless your righteousness exceeds the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees, you will by no means enter the kingdom of heaven"* {Matthew 5:20}.
- *"Pursue peace with all people, and holiness, without which no one will see the Lord"* {Hebrews 12:14}.

The word Jesus uses for "strive" in Luke 13:24 is *agōnizomai*, from which we get "agonize." It describes the effort of an athlete in competition or a soldier in battle. Jesus did not describe the way to life as a stroll. And He said that *many* will seek to enter and not be able. Many people want heaven. Fewer want the narrow road that leads there.

On continuing to the end

- *"Every branch in Me that does not bear fruit He takes away… If anyone does not abide in Me, he is cast out as a branch and is withered; and they gather them and throw them into the fire, and they are burned"* {John 15:2, 6}.
- *"But Christ as a Son over His own house, whose house we are **if** we hold fast the confidence and the rejoicing of the hope firm to the end"* {Hebrews 3:6}.
- *"For we have become partakers of Christ **if** we hold the beginning of our confidence steadfast to the end"* {Hebrews 3:14}.
- *"Therefore consider the goodness and severity of God: on those who fell, severity; but toward you, goodness, **if** you continue in His goodness. Otherwise you also will be cut off"* {Romans 11:22}.
- *"But he who endures to the end shall be saved"* {Matthew 24:13}.

I've noticed that people who love these verses tend to focus on the warnings, and people who dislike them tend to focus on God's faithfulness. But the passages themselves hold both. In Romans 11:22, *goodness* and *severity* sit in the same sentence. The little word *if* doesn't cancel the promise. It describes the kind of people the promise belongs to: those who continue.

On deliberate sin

- *"For if we sin willfully after we have received the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins, but a certain fearful expectation of judgment, and fiery indignation which will devour the adversaries… It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God"* {Hebrews 10:26–27, 31}.
- *"For if you live according to the flesh you will die; but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live"* {Romans 8:13}.
- *"Whoever abides in Him does not sin. Whoever sins has neither seen Him nor known Him… He who sins is of the devil"* {1 John 3:6, 8}.

The verbs in 1 John 3 are in the Greek present tense, which describes ongoing, habitual action. John isn't saying that a true Christian never commits a single sin. Two chapters earlier he wrote, *"If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves"* {1 John 1:8}. He's saying that a true Christian doesn't make a practice of sin, doesn't settle down in it and call it home. Hebrews 10:26 speaks the same way: *"if we sin willfully"* describes a continuing, deliberate course, not a stumble.

That should comfort the believer who falls and grieves over it. And it should alarm the professing believer who sins comfortably and calls it grace.

On obedience and love

- *"If you love Me, keep My commandments"* {John 14:15}.
- *"He who has My commandments and keeps them, it is he who loves Me… He who does not love Me does not keep My words"* {John 14:21, 24}.
- *"But why do you call Me 'Lord, Lord,' and not do the things which I say?"* {Luke 6:46}
- *"…teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you"* {Matthew 28:20}.
- *"For this is the love of God, that we keep His commandments. And His commandments are not burdensome"* {1 John 5:3}.

We've been taught to see love and obedience as opposites, as though obeying God's commands were cold and legalistic and "just loving Jesus" were warm and relational. Jesus didn't see it that way. He said the proof of love *is* obedience. Notice also what the Great Commission actually says. We're used to hearing "make disciples." But Jesus defined discipleship as *"teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you."* Not to know all things. To *observe* them.

On forgiveness

- *"For if you forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses"* {Matthew 6:14–15}.

- After the parable of the unforgiving servant: *"So My heavenly Father also will do to you if each of you, from his heart, does not forgive his brother his trespasses"* {Matthew 18:35}.

This may be the most skipped teaching of all, because it touches every one of us. Jesus put it right after the Lord's Prayer, as the one line of the prayer He felt He needed to explain. Bitterness that we refuse to release is not a small thing. It shuts the door to the very forgiveness we're depending on.

On judgment for believers

- *"For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, that each one may receive the things done in the body, according to what he has done, whether good or bad"* {2 Corinthians 5:10}.
- *"For the time has come for judgment to begin at the house of God; and if it begins with us first, what will be the end of those who do not obey the gospel of God? Now 'If the righteous one is scarcely saved, where will the ungodly and the sinner appear?'"* {1 Peter 4:17–18}
- *"But I say to you that for every idle word men may speak, they will give account of it in the day of judgment"* {Matthew 12:36}.
- *"Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling"* {Philippians 2:12}.

Paul says "we *all*." Peter says judgment *begins* with God's household. Many believers assume they'll simply be waved through on the last day, and that judgment is for other people. These verses say otherwise.

On fruit

- *"And even now the ax is laid to the root of the trees. Therefore every tree which does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire"* {Matthew 3:10}.

- The parable of the fig tree that bore no fruit for three years: *"Cut it down; why does it use up the ground?"* {Luke 13:6–9}.
- To the servant who buried his talent: *"And cast the unprofitable servant into the outer darkness. There will be weeping and gnashing of teeth"* {Matthew 25:30}.
- To those on His left hand: *"Inasmuch as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to Me"* {Matthew 25:45}.

In the parable of the talents, the servant who was cast out didn't waste his master's money on wild living. He didn't steal it. He simply did nothing with it. He was afraid, and he buried it {Matthew 25:25}. And in the parable of the sheep and the goats, the goats aren't condemned for terrible crimes. They're condemned for what they *didn't* do. In both stories, the danger is not active wickedness. It's a passive, fruitless life.

On money and the world

- *"Take heed and beware of covetousness, for one's life does not consist in the abundance of the things he possesses"* {Luke 12:15}.
- *"How hard it is for those who have riches to enter the kingdom of God!"* {Mark 10:23}
- *"But those who desire to be rich fall into temptation and a snare… For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil, for which some have strayed from the faith in their greediness, and pierced themselves through with many sorrows"* {1 Timothy 6:9–10}.
- *"Friendship with the world is enmity with God"* {James 4:4}.

Jesus spoke about money and possessions again and again. Paul says the love of money has caused some to *"stray from the faith."* For those of us who live in the wealthiest society in history, these verses aren't about other people. They're about us.

On purity

- *"For this is the will of God, your sanctification: that you should abstain from sexual immorality… For God did not call us to uncleanness, but in holiness. Therefore he who rejects this does not reject man, but God, who has also given us His Holy Spirit"* {1 Thessalonians 4:3, 7–8}.
- *"But I say to you that whoever looks at a woman to lust for her has already committed adultery with her in his heart"* {Matthew 5:28}.
- *"Marriage is honorable among all, and the bed undefiled; but fornicators and adulterers God will judge"* {Hebrews 13:4}.

Notice 1 Thessalonians 4:8. When we reject God's instruction about sexual purity, Paul says, we aren't rejecting the preacher or the church's "rules." We are rejecting God Himself.

On the tongue

- *"If anyone among you thinks he is religious, and does not bridle his tongue but deceives his own heart, this one's religion is useless"* {James 1:26}.
- *"Let no corrupt word proceed out of your mouth"* {Ephesians 4:29}.

A person who gossips, slanders and complains while thinking of himself as religious is, according to James, *"deceiving his own heart."*

His religion is useless. That's one of the plainest descriptions of sincere deception in the Bible.

On being ashamed of Him

- *"For whoever is ashamed of Me and My words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of him the Son of Man also will be ashamed when He comes in the glory of His Father with the holy angels"* {Mark 8:38}.
- *"If we endure, we shall also reign with Him. If we deny Him, He also will deny us"* {2 Timothy 2:12}.

Notice that Jesus says ashamed of *"Me and My words."* It's possible to be proud of Jesus in general and ashamed of what He actually said. We may love the Jesus who welcomed sinners and quietly avoid the Jesus who told them to go and sin no more.

On the fear of God

- *"And I say to you, My friends, do not be afraid of those who kill the body, and after that have no more that they can do. But I will show you whom you should fear: Fear Him who, after He has killed, has power to cast into hell; yes, I say to you, fear Him!"* {Luke 12:4–5}
- *"Therefore, since we are receiving a kingdom which cannot be shaken, let us have grace, by which we may serve God acceptably with reverence and godly fear. For our God is a consuming fire"* {Hebrews 12:28–29}.
- *"Therefore, having these promises, beloved, let us cleanse ourselves from all filthiness of the flesh and spirit, perfecting holiness in the fear of God"* {2 Corinthians 7:1}.

Jesus said this to His *friends*. Hebrews says it to people who are *"receiving a kingdom."* Paul says it to the *"beloved"* who have *"these*

promises." The fear of God isn't only for unbelievers. It's a mark of maturity in believers. It's not the terror of a slave who expects to be beaten. It's the reverence of a child who knows exactly how holy and powerful their Father is.

Don't skip the promises either

I want to be fair. If we're going to stop skipping the warnings, we need to stop skipping the promises too. There are just as many words of assurance in the Bible as there are words of warning.

- *"If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness"* {1 John 1:9}.
- *"Being confident of this very thing, that He who has begun a good work in you will complete it until the day of Jesus Christ"* {Philippians 1:6}.
- *"Now to Him who is able to keep you from stumbling, and to present you faultless before the presence of His glory with exceeding joy"* {Jude 24}.
- *"There is therefore now no condemnation to those who are in Christ Jesus, who do not walk according to the flesh, but according to the Spirit"* {Romans 8:1}.

The God who warns is the God who keeps. He doesn't give us warnings to make us anxious. He gives us warnings to keep us close to the One who is able to keep us from stumbling. A guardrail and a strong hand both serve the same purpose.

How to read a verse you'd rather skip

So what do you do when you come across one of these passages? Here's what I've learned to do:

1. **Stop.** Don't hurry on to the next verse. Read it again, slowly, out loud if you can.
2. **Resist the urge to explain it away.** Ask yourself, *If I had never heard a sermon on this, what would I think it means?* Very often, the plain meaning is the right one.
3. **Read the whole context.** Read the paragraph, then the chapter. Ask who's speaking, who's being addressed, and why.
4. **Compare Scripture with Scripture.** Don't let one verse cancel another. Hold them together, as Jesus did when He said, *"It is written again."*
5. **Ask the Lord for understanding.** *"Make me understand the way of Your precepts"* {Psalm 119:27}. *"Give me understanding, and I shall keep Your law"* {Psalm 119:34}. *"If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask of God"* {James 1:5}.
6. **Obey what's clear.** You won't understand everything right away. But you'll usually understand enough to take a step. Take it.
7. **Let it change you.** The goal isn't information. It's transformation.

That last point is the whole purpose of this chapter. Jesus prayed for His disciples, *"Sanctify them by Your truth. Your word is truth"* {John 17:17}. Paul wrote, *"Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind"* {Romans 12:2}. The word "transformed" there is *metamorphoō*, the same word used of Jesus' transfiguration, and the root of our word "metamorphosis." And Paul says it happens through the *renewing of the mind*. God changes the way we think by His Word, and changed thinking produces a changed life. Christ washes His church *"with the washing of water by the word"* {Ephesians 5:26}.

We can't be sanctified by verses we skip.

Lord, I don't want to be a person who only reads the parts of Your Word I like. Draw me into all of it. Open my eyes to see what I've been missing. Where I've explained Your words away, forgive me. Help me understand, and give me the courage to obey. Sanctify me by Your truth, and change the way I think. Amen.

Examine Yourself

1. Which passage in this chapter was most unfamiliar to you? Which one was most uncomfortable?
2. Have you ever noticed yourself skimming past a verse because it made you uneasy? Which one?
3. Choose one passage from this chapter and spend a week with it, following the seven steps above. Write down what the Lord shows you.
4. Read the promises at the end of the chapter. How do they change the way you hear the warnings?

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Not a Social Club

"...the house of God, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and ground of the truth." {1 Timothy 3:15}

Ask most people where their church is, and they'll give you an address. Ask them what their church is like, and they'll describe the building, the music, the pastor, the children's program, or the coffee. We talk about "going to church" the way we talk about going to the gym or the grocery store: a place we visit for a service.

But the New Testament never once uses the word *church* for a building. Not once.

If we're going to recognize the counterfeit Christ, we also need to recognize His counterfeit bride. Another Jesus always produces another kind of church. And I'm convinced that one of the reasons so many sincere believers are deceived is that they've been formed by a version of church that looks far more like a social club than the church Jesus is building.

What the word means

The Greek word translated "church" is *ekklēsia*. It comes from *ek* (out of) and *kaleō* (to call), and it was used in the Greek world for an assembly of citizens called together to conduct the business of their

city. You can see that ordinary use in Acts 19:39, where the town clerk of Ephesus refers to a *"lawful assembly"* (literally, a lawful *ekklēsia*).

When the Old Testament was translated into Greek, *ekklēsia* was often used for the *qahal*, the assembly of Israel gathered before God. So when Jesus said, *"I will build My church"* {Matthew 16:18}, His disciples would have heard: *I will gather My own assembly, a people called out and called together under My rule*. The church isn't a place. It's a people. It's the people God has called out of the world and gathered to Himself. And for roughly its first three centuries, the church mostly met in homes and other borrowed spaces. Paul greets *"the church that is in their house"* {Romans 16:5}, *"the church that is in his house"* {Colossians 4:15}, and *"the church in your house"* {Philemon 2}. The early Christians turned the Roman Empire upside down without owning a single church building.

I'm not against church buildings. I'm grateful for mine. But when the building becomes the church in our minds, we start to think of the church as something we attend rather than something we *are*.

How the Bible describes the church

Scripture uses a number of pictures to describe the church. None of them looks like a social club.

A body. *"Now you are the body of Christ, and members individually"* {1 Corinthians 12:27}. A body isn't an audience. Every part has a function, and every part needs every other part. *"The eye cannot say to the hand, 'I have no need of you'"* {12:21}. And the body has one head: *"He is the head of the body, the church"* {Colossians 1:18}. The church doesn't vote on what the head wants. It obeys.

A bride. *"Christ also loved the church and gave Himself for her, that He might sanctify and cleanse her with the washing of water by the word, that He might present her to Himself a glorious church,*

not having spot or wrinkle or any such thing, but that she should be holy and without blemish" {Ephesians 5:25–27}. Remember Paul's fear in 2 Corinthians 11:2: that the bride he had betrothed to one husband would be seduced by another. The church's first calling isn't to be successful. It's to be faithful and pure.

A temple of living stones. *"You also, as living stones, are being built up a spiritual house, a holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ"* {1 Peter 2:5}. Paul says believers *"are being built together for a dwelling place of God in the Spirit"* {Ephesians 2:22}. And he gives a serious warning: *"Do you not know that you are the temple of God and that the Spirit of God dwells in you? If anyone defiles the temple of God, God will destroy him. For the temple of God is holy, which temple you are"* {1 Corinthians 3:16–17}. In that passage the word "you" is plural. Paul is talking about the church together. God takes it personally when His dwelling place is defiled.

A household and family. *"...the household of God, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and ground of the truth"* {1 Timothy 3:15}. Notice what the household is for: to be the *pillar* and *foundation* of the truth. The church's job is to hold the truth up so the world can see it, and to keep it from falling. A church that won't hold up the truth has abandoned its reason for existing.

A flock. *"Shepherd the church of God which He purchased with His own blood"* {Acts 20:28}. *"Shepherd the flock of God which is among you... and when the Chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the crown of glory"* {1 Peter 5:2, 4}. The flock doesn't belong to the pastor. It belongs to Jesus, who bought it with His blood. Pastors are under-shepherds who will answer to the Chief Shepherd for how they fed His sheep.

A holy nation and royal priesthood. *"But you are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, His own special*

people, that you may proclaim the praises of Him who called you out of darkness into His marvelous light" {1 Peter 2:9}. This language was first spoken to Israel at Mount Sinai {Exodus 19:6}. Those of us who were once far off have been grafted into that calling by faith. And it is a calling to holiness: to be *set apart* from the world for God.

Soldiers. *"You therefore must endure hardship as a good soldier of Jesus Christ. No one engaged in warfare entangles himself with the affairs of this life, that he may please him who enlisted him as a soldier"* {2 Timothy 2:3–4}. Paul tells the Ephesians to put on the whole armor of God {Ephesians 6:10–18}. Armies don't gather for entertainment.

Pilgrims. *"Beloved, I beg you as sojourners and pilgrims, abstain from fleshly lusts which war against the soul"* {1 Peter 2:11}. *"For here we have no continuing city, but we seek the one to come"* {Hebrews 13:14}. The church is a people on the move, passing through this world on the way home. A social club is about settling in. The church is about passing through.

The church in Acts

If we want to see what the church looked like when it was born, we have a snapshot:

"And they continued steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in prayers. Then fear came upon every soul, and many wonders and signs were done through the apostles. Now all who believed were together, and had all things in common, and sold their possessions and goods, and divided them among all, as anyone had need. So continuing daily with one accord in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, they ate their food with gladness and simplicity of heart, praising God and

having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to the church daily those who were being saved." {Acts 2:42–47}

Look at the marks of that church:

- **Devotion to the apostles' teaching.** Not to a personality, but to the Word.
- **Fellowship.** The word is *koinōnia*, a sharing of life, not just coffee after the service.
- **The Lord's Supper and prayer.** Worship centered on Christ's death and dependence on God.
- **The fear of God.** *"Fear came upon every soul."*
- **Radical generosity.** People sold possessions to meet each other's needs.
- **Daily life together.** Not one hour a week, but daily, in the temple and in homes.
- **Joy and simplicity.** *"Gladness and simplicity of heart."* There's that word again, the same word Paul used in 2 Corinthians 11:3.
- **Growth that God produced.** *"The Lord added to the church."* Not marketing.

A few chapters later, something happens that would horrify most church growth consultants. Ananias and Sapphira lied to the Holy Spirit about their giving, and both of them fell dead {Acts 5:1–11}. Then Luke tells us: *"So great fear came upon all the church and upon all who heard these things… Yet none of the rest dared join them, but the people esteemed them highly. And believers were increasingly added to the Lord, multitudes of both men and women"* {Acts 5:11, 13–14}.

Read that carefully. The holiness of the church scared away the casual. Nobody joined it lightly. *And it grew anyway*. Multitudes were added to the Lord. A church doesn't need to lower the bar to

grow. When God is truly present, holiness and growth can go together.

Club or church?

Here are some of the ways I see the social club model quietly replacing the biblical picture:

Consumers instead of members. A club exists to serve its members' preferences. If it stops meeting your needs, you cancel your membership and join another. A body doesn't work that way. You don't leave your body because your foot is annoying.

Spectators instead of participants. Paul says that God gave pastors and teachers *"for the equipping of the saints for the work of ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ"* {Ephesians 4:11–12}. The pastor isn't the performer and the congregation the audience. The pastor is the coach, and every believer is on the field. *"Whenever you come together, each of you has a psalm, has a teaching… Let all things be done for edification"* {1 Corinthians 14:26}.

Comfort instead of accountability. A club rarely confronts its members. But Jesus gave His church a clear process for confronting sin, beginning privately and moving to the church only if necessary {Matthew 18:15–17}. Paul rebuked the Corinthians for tolerating sexual immorality in the church and told them to remove the unrepentant man, *"that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus"* {1 Corinthians 5:5}. The goal of church discipline is always restoration. *"If a man is overtaken in any trespass, you who are spiritual restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness, considering yourself lest you also be tempted"* {Galatians 6:1}. A church that never confronts sin isn't more loving. It's just more comfortable.

Affinity instead of unity. Clubs gather people who are alike. The church gathers people who would never otherwise be together:

"There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus" {Galatians 3:28}. James rebuked the church for giving the good seats to the rich man in fine clothes and telling the poor man to sit on the floor {James 2:1–4}.

Entertainment instead of edification. There's nothing wrong with excellent music or a welcoming atmosphere. But when the main question becomes "Did I enjoy it?" instead of "Was Christ exalted and were we built up in Him?" we've drifted.

Attendance instead of belonging. Many people "attend" a church for years without anyone really knowing them. That isn't the koinōnia of Acts 2. That's a seat in a theater.

"So do I still need to go?"

Some people hear that the church isn't a building and conclude that they don't need to gather with other believers at all. They can "do church" at home with a podcast and a cup of coffee. But that is just another form of the consumer mindset.

The writer of Hebrews is clear: *"And let us consider one another in order to stir up love and good works, not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as is the manner of some, but exhorting one another, and so much the more as you see the Day approaching"* {Hebrews 10:24–25}.

Notice three things. First, the point of gathering is not what *we* get out of it. It's what we can give: to *"consider one another"* and *"stir up love and good works."* Second, gathering becomes *more* important, not less, as the Day approaches. And third, it's tied to *"exhorting one another"*, the same remedy Hebrews 3:13 gave for avoiding a hardened heart. We need each other to stay awake. As my friend Teresa says, "We're all just walking each other home."

The true church is not four walls. But it is also not a solo pursuit.

The Lord among the lampstands

In Revelation, John sees the risen Christ *"in the midst of the seven lampstands,"* and Jesus explains that *"the seven lampstands which you saw are the seven churches"* {Revelation 1:13, 20}. He walks among His churches. He sees everything. And to Ephesus He warns, *"Remember therefore from where you have fallen; repent and do the first works, or else I will come to you quickly and remove your lampstand from its place"* {Revelation 2:5}.

A church can keep its building, its budget, its programs and its name, and lose its lampstand. It can still look like a church and no longer be a light. The question for every congregation, and every one of us within it, is not "Are we growing?" or "Are people happy?" but "Is Jesus walking among us, and is He pleased with what He sees?"

Around the world today, believers in places where the faith is persecuted often gather in homes and secret places, at great risk, with no buildings, no programs and no comfort. And in many of those places the church is growing. They have nothing a social club could offer. They have Jesus, His Word, each other, and the Holy Spirit. That's all the church has ever needed.

Examine Yourself

1. When you think of "church," what comes to mind first: a place, an event, or a people?
2. Of the biblical pictures in this chapter (body, bride, temple, household, flock, nation, soldiers, pilgrims), which one most challenges the way you've thought about church?
3. In your church life, are you more of a consumer or a member? A spectator or a participant?

4. Who in your church knows you well enough to tell you if you were drifting? If no one does, what step could you take this week to change that?

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Ask for the Ancient Paths

"Thus says the LORD: 'Stand in the ways and see, and ask for the old paths, where the good way is, and walk in it; then you will find rest for your souls.' But they said, 'We will not walk in it.'"
{Jeremiah 6:16}

There's a moment on every road trip when you realize you've missed your turn. Maybe the GPS lost its signal, or you were talking and didn't notice the exit. And you have a choice. You can keep driving, hoping the road will eventually bend back the way you need to go. Or you can stop, admit you're lost, look at the map, and go back to where you went wrong.

Most of us hate to stop. We'd rather keep driving. But the longer you drive in the wrong direction, the farther you have to come back.

That's the picture God gave the prophet Jeremiah for His people.

Stand, see, ask, walk

The setting matters. Just two verses earlier, God had described the religious leaders of Jeremiah's day: *"They have also healed the hurt of My people slightly, saying, 'Peace, peace!' when there is no peace"* {Jeremiah 6:14}. The prophets and priests were putting bandages on deep wounds and telling everyone they were fine. It's the same false comfort we saw in Chapter 11.

Into that situation, God speaks to His people as if they were travelers standing at a crossroads. He gives them four commands:

Stand. Stop moving. Don't just keep going in the direction the crowd is going. Before you can find the right path, you have to be willing to stop on the wrong one.

See. Look around. Pay attention to where you are and where each road leads. Be honest about what you see.

Ask for the old paths. The Hebrew phrase is *netivot olam*, the paths of long ago, the everlasting paths. Ask where the good way is. Ask the people who walked it before you. Ask God.

Walk in it. Knowing where the path is doesn't help unless you get on it. And God attaches a promise: *"Then you will find rest for your souls."*

But look at Israel's answer: *"We will not walk in it."* And then God says, *"Also, I set watchmen over you, saying, 'Listen to the sound of the trumpet!' But they said, 'We will not listen'"* {6:17}. God sent watchmen to sound the alarm, and the people simply refused to listen. The result: *"Behold, I will certainly bring calamity on this people — the fruit of their thoughts, because they have not heeded My words nor My law, but rejected it"* {6:19}. Notice the phrase *"the fruit of their thoughts."* The disaster was the natural harvest of what they had chosen to believe.

Jeremiah comes back to the same image later: *"Because My people have forgotten Me, they have burned incense to worthless idols. And they have caused themselves to stumble in their ways, from the ancient paths, to walk in pathways and not on a highway"* {Jeremiah 18:15}. They left the main road for side trails, and they stumbled.

Jesus is the ancient path

Here's something beautiful. Centuries after Jeremiah, Jesus stood up and said, *"Come to Me, all you who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and* ***you will find rest for your souls****"* {Matthew 11:28–29}.

"You will find rest for your souls." Jesus was quoting Jeremiah 6:16. He was saying, in effect, *I am the old path. I am the good way your prophets told you to ask for. Walk in Me, and you'll find the rest Jeremiah promised.*

He said it even more plainly later: *"I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Me"* {John 14:6}. The first Christians didn't call themselves Christians at first. They called their faith *"the Way"* {Acts 9:2; 19:9, 23; 24:14}. Following Jesus wasn't a new invention. It was the ancient path, the good way, finally walking among them in human flesh.

So when we ask for the ancient paths, we are not looking for an era, a style, or a tradition. We are looking for a Person, and for the way He laid down.

What the ancient paths are not

Let me clear away a few misunderstandings first.

The ancient paths are not nostalgia. They're not "the good old days" of our parents' church or a particular style of music, dress or worship. Every generation has had its own blind spots. Older isn't automatically truer. The oldest lie in the world is in Genesis 3.

The ancient paths are not human tradition. Jesus rebuked the Pharisees for exactly this: *"For laying aside the commandment of God, you hold the tradition of men… making the word of God of*

no effect through your tradition which you have handed down" {Mark 7:8, 13}. Our denominational habits, our church culture, and our favorite teachers are not the ancient paths. They may point to them, or they may obscure them.

The ancient paths are not a new revelation. If someone tells you they've discovered a truth that the church has missed for two thousand years, be very cautious. Jude urged believers to *"contend earnestly for the faith which was once for all delivered to the saints"* {Jude 3}. *Once for all.* The faith isn't being updated. It was delivered.

What the ancient paths are

So what does the old path actually look like? Here are some of its well-worn stones:

The Word of God. Paul told Timothy, *"Hold fast the pattern of sound words which you have heard from me"* {2 Timothy 1:13}, and told the Thessalonians to *"stand fast and hold the traditions which you were taught"* {2 Thessalonians 2:15}, meaning the apostles' teaching, now preserved for us in Scripture. The first church *"continued steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine"* {Acts 2:42}.

The fear of the Lord and wholehearted obedience. *"And now, Israel, what does the LORD your God require of you, but to fear the LORD your God, to walk in all His ways and to love Him, to serve the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul, and to keep the commandments of the LORD and His statutes which I command you today for your good?"* {Deuteronomy 10:12–13}. Notice the last two words: *for your good.* God's ways are not a burden. They're the path to life.

Justice, mercy and humility. *"He has shown you, O man, what is good; and what does the LORD require of you but to do*

justly, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God?" {Micah 6:8}

Repentance. The first word of John the Baptist, the first word of Jesus' preaching, and the first word of Peter's sermon at Pentecost were the same: *repent* {Matthew 3:2; 4:17; Acts 2:38}.

Faith. *"The just shall live by his faith"* {Habakkuk 2:4}. Hebrews 11 is a walk down the ancient path, past Abel, Enoch, Noah, Abraham, Sarah, Moses, Rahab and countless others who lived and died *"by faith."*

The cross. *"If anyone desires to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross daily, and follow Me"* {Luke 9:23}.

Love for God and neighbor. When Jesus was asked for the greatest commandment, He didn't announce something new. He quoted Deuteronomy 6:5 and Leviticus 19:18 {Matthew 22:37–40}. Love has always been the heart of the law.

None of these are complicated. None of them are new. And none of them are popular. That's how you know you've found the old path. It's the road that's always been there, quietly waiting, while the crowds rush past on the highway.

Like the Bereans, as if your life depends on it

When Paul and Silas preached in Thessalonica, some believed, but others became jealous and started a riot {Acts 17:5}. So the believers sent Paul and Silas on to Berea. And Luke writes this about the people there:

"These were more fair-minded than those in Thessalonica, in that they received the word with all readiness, and searched the

Scriptures daily to find out whether these things were so. Therefore many of them believed." {Acts 17:11–12}

The word translated "fair-minded" is *eugenēs*, which literally means "noble," well-born. The Bereans had a noble character. And notice the two things that made them noble, held together:

They received the word with all readiness. They were eager. They were open. They didn't come with their arms crossed.

They searched the Scriptures daily. The word for "searched" is *anakrinō*, a word used for examining evidence in a court of law. They were eager *and* careful. They examined everything against Scripture. Even the teaching of the Apostle Paul!

Most of us have one of these qualities without the other. Some people are eager but uncritical. They'll believe anything that comes with enough passion. Others are critical but not eager. They analyze everything and receive nothing. The Bereans were both open-hearted and clear-headed. And the result? *"Therefore many of them believed."* Careful testing didn't lead them away from faith. It led them into it.

If the deception we've talked about in this book is real, then knowing God's Word for yourself is not a hobby for the especially devout. It's a matter of life and death.

Seven keys to understanding the Word

Some people say they don't read the Bible because they don't understand it. I want to suggest that the problem is rarely vocabulary. Even the disciples, who heard Jesus in their own language, often didn't understand Him {Luke 18:34}. The Bible says that understanding God's Word is not mainly a matter of intelligence. It's a matter of the heart. Here are seven keys Scripture gives us:

1. A new heart. *"But the natural man does not receive the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him; nor can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned"* {1 Corinthians 2:14}. The first requirement for understanding the Bible is to be born again {John 3:3}. God promised, *"I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you"* {Ezekiel 36:26}. Have you received that new heart?

2. Prayer. *"Open my eyes, that I may see wondrous things from Your law"* {Psalm 119:18}. *"If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask of God"* {James 1:5}. Do you pray before you open your Bible? Jesus *"opened their understanding, that they might comprehend the Scriptures"* {Luke 24:45}. Ask Him to do the same for you.

3. Reading and hearing. *"Wisdom is in the sight of him who has understanding, but the eyes of a fool are on the ends of the earth"* {Proverbs 17:24}. What fills your eyes and ears every day? If our senses are saturated with television, social media, news and entertainment (and yes, even a constant stream of Christian content), there's little room left for the Word itself. And God also gives faithful teachers to help us understand. In Nehemiah's day the Levites *"read distinctly from the book, in the Law of God; and they gave the sense, and helped them to understand the reading"* {Nehemiah 8:8}. Choose teachers who do that, and test them like a Berean.

4. Seeking daily. *"Blessed is the man who listens to me, watching daily at my gates"* {Proverbs 8:34}. *"Be diligent to present yourself approved to God, a worker who does not need to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth"* {2 Timothy 2:15}. Have you studied the Bible with the same diligence you've given to your education, your career or your hobbies?

5. Delight. *"But his delight is in the law of the LORD, and in His law he meditates day and night"* {Psalm 1:2}. What do you delight in? We make time for what we love.

6. Memorizing and meditating. *"Your word I have hidden in my heart, that I might not sin against You"* {Psalm 119:11}. *"I have more understanding than all my teachers, for Your testimonies are my meditation"* {Psalm 119:99}. When your mind is idle, what does it drift toward?

7. Obedience. *"I understand more than the ancients, because I keep Your precepts"* {Psalm 119:100}. *"A good understanding have all those who do His commandments"* {Psalm 111:10}. This may be the most important key of all. Why would God give us more light if we aren't walking in the light He's already given?

And two more things to remember along the way. First, humility. *"Knowledge puffs up, but love edifies"* {1 Corinthians 8:1}. The more we learn, the more we need to stay low. Second, patience. *"The secret things belong to the LORD our God, but those things which are revealed belong to us and to our children forever, that we may do all the words of this law"* {Deuteronomy 29:29}. There are things we won't understand in this life. Even Daniel was told some words were *"closed up and sealed till the time of the end"* {Daniel 12:9}. But what God *has* revealed is enough to obey today.

Getting back on the path

So how do we actually walk the ancient path? Here are some simple, practical steps:

- **Read the Bible for yourself, a lot of it.** Don't just read a verse a day. Read whole books. On my thirtieth birthday I started reading Matthew and didn't stop until I'd read the entire New Testament. It changed my life. Try reading a gospel in a single sitting.
- **Follow a plan.** Read through the whole Bible in a year, or through the New Testament every few months.

- **Keep a notebook.** Write down what you read, what you sense the Lord saying, and what questions you have.
- **Memorize Scripture.** Start with one verse a week.
- **Open your Bible during sermons.** Check what you hear. Your pastor should welcome it. Mine does. He always says, "Don't take my word for it. Go and see what the Scriptures say."
- **Study with others.** Join or start a Bible study where people actually open the Word together.
- **Guard your input.** Turn some things off to make room for His voice.
- **Pray the Scriptures back to God.** Let His words become your words.

God is still standing at the crossroads, saying, *"Ask for the old paths, where the good way is, and walk in it."* The only question is whether we'll answer like Israel did, *"We will not walk in it,"* or whether we'll stop, look, ask, and walk.

Examine Yourself

1. If you stopped right now at the crossroads and looked honestly at the road you're on, where would it lead?
2. What "traditions of men" might you have confused with the ancient paths?
3. Are you more like the Bereans' readiness or their searching? Which quality do you need more of?
4. Of the seven keys to understanding the Word, which one is weakest in your life? What one step could you take this week to strengthen it?

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Fear and Trembling

"Therefore, my beloved, as you have always obeyed, not as in my presence only, but now much more in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling; for it is God who works in you both to will and to do for His good pleasure." {Philippians 2:12–13}

When God brought Israel out of Egypt, the sea saw Him coming and ran.

The psalmist tells it this way: *"The sea saw it and fled; Jordan turned back. The mountains skipped like rams, the little hills like lambs... Tremble, O earth, at the presence of the Lord, at the presence of the God of Jacob"* {Psalm 114:3–4, 7}. The waters felt the approach of the Almighty and got out of the way. The mountains shook. Creation knew exactly who was coming.

The sea trembles. The mountains tremble. The demons, James tells us, believe and *tremble* {James 2:19}. The seraphim who stand in His presence cover their faces and cry, *"Holy, holy, holy"* {Isaiah 6:2–3}.

And the church? Much of the church yawns.

I'm convinced that one of the deepest problems in the church today, and one of the main reasons so many sincere people are

deceived, is that we no longer fear God. We have drifted into a casual, man-centered faith that minimizes His holiness and ignores His judgment. We talk about Him the way we'd talk about a friend from the gym. We sing about Him with our hands in the air on Sunday and live as though He can't see us on Monday. We have taken His patience as a sign that He has changed, and we have quietly built a God who is more comfortable to live with than the One who is actually there.

This chapter is a plea. I'm asking you, with everything in me, to hear the full counsel of Scripture on this subject, and to let God be who He says He is.

No fear of God before their eyes

When the Apostle Paul wanted to sum up the condition of a humanity in rebellion against God, he built a long chain of Old Testament quotations in Romans 3: no one righteous, no one who understands, no one who seeks God, throats like open tombs, feet swift to shed blood. And then he ended the whole indictment with one final line, the root of all the others:

"There is no fear of God before their eyes." {Romans 3:18; quoting Psalm 36:1}

That's the bottom line of sin. Not ignorance. Not even unbelief, exactly. It is the absence of the fear of God. When the fear of God is gone, everything else follows.

God said the same thing through Jeremiah to His own people: *"Know therefore and see that it is an evil and bitter thing that you have forsaken the LORD your God, and the fear of Me is not in you"* {Jeremiah 2:19}. And again: *"'Do you not fear Me?' says the LORD. 'Will you not tremble at My presence, who have placed the sand as the bound of the sea?'... They do not say in their heart, 'Let us now fear the LORD our God'"* {Jeremiah 5:22, 24}.

That was the diagnosis for Israel. I believe it's the diagnosis for much of the church in our day.

Has God changed?

Here's the first lie we tell ourselves. Because God is patient, we assume He has changed. We read about His judgments in the Old Testament, the flood, Sodom, the plagues on Egypt, and we think of them as belonging to a different era, almost a different God. We tell ourselves that the God of the New Testament is gentler, softer, more understanding. And because judgment doesn't fall the moment we sin, we conclude that it isn't coming at all.

Solomon saw this exact pattern three thousand years ago: *"Because the sentence against an evil work is not executed speedily, therefore the heart of the sons of men is fully set in them to do evil"* {Ecclesiastes 8:11}.

And God Himself answered it in one of the most sobering verses in the Psalms: *"These things you have done, and I kept silent; you thought that I was altogether like you; but I will rebuke you, and set them in order before your eyes. Now consider this, you who forget God, lest I tear you in pieces, and there be none to deliver"* {Psalm 50:21–22}.

You thought that I was altogether like you. That's what happens when we mistake God's silence for His approval. We shrink Him down to our size. We assume that because we've grown comfortable with our sin, He has too.

But God says plainly, *"For I am the LORD, I do not change"* {Malachi 3:6}. *"God is not a man, that He should lie, nor a son of man, that He should repent"* {Numbers 23:19}. *"Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever"* {Hebrews 13:8}. The God who flooded the earth is the God who died on the cross. The God who

rained fire on Sodom is the God who welcomes the prodigal home. He has not mellowed with age.

"God is a just judge, and God is angry with the wicked every day" {Psalm 7:11}. Every day. Not only on the day of judgment. His anger against sin is not a mood that comes and goes. It's the settled response of His holiness to everything that defies Him.

Peter warned that in the last days scoffers would come, *"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'"* {2 Peter 3:3–4}. That's the scoffer's logic: *Nothing has happened yet, so nothing will.* But Peter explains what's really going on: *"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. But the day of the Lord will come as a thief in the night"* {3:9–10}.

God's patience is not a change in His character. It's an expression of it. And it has a purpose: repentance. Paul put it this way:

"Or do you despise the riches of His goodness, forbearance, and longsuffering, not knowing that the goodness of God leads you to repentance? But in accordance with your hardness and your impenitent heart you are treasuring up for yourself wrath in the day of wrath and revelation of the righteous judgment of God." {Romans 2:4–5}

Read that slowly. Every day that a person presumes on God's patience instead of repenting, they are *"treasuring up"* wrath for themselves. The word is *thēsaurizō*, to store up, to lay up in a treasury. It's the same word Jesus used for storing up treasures in heaven. Some people are storing up treasure in heaven. Others are storing up wrath. Both are making deposits every day.

And where does that stored-up wrath go? The book of Revelation tells us. An angel *"thrust his sickle into the earth and gathered the vine of the earth, and threw it into the great winepress of the wrath of God. And the winepress was trampled outside the city, and blood came out of the winepress, up to the horses' bridles, for one thousand six hundred furlongs"* {Revelation 14:19–20}. And when Christ returns on the white horse, *"He Himself treads the winepress of the fierceness and wrath of Almighty God"* {Revelation 19:15}. Isaiah saw the same scene: *"I have trodden the winepress alone… For the day of vengeance is in My heart"* {Isaiah 63:3–4}.

Those are not my words. They are the words of the Lamb's own revelation. And the One who treads the winepress is Jesus. The same Jesus who said *"Come to Me, all you who labor"* is the One who will one day judge the nations. If we only know the first, we don't know Him.

"He will never see"

The second lie is close behind the first. We think God doesn't see, or doesn't care.

The Psalms describe this attitude again and again. The wicked man *"has said in his heart, 'God has forgotten; He hides His face; He will never see'"* {Psalm 10:11}. *"Why do the wicked renounce God? He has said in his heart, 'You will not require an account'"* {10:13}. *"They say, 'The LORD does not see, nor does the God of Jacob understand'"* {Psalm 94:7}.

That last passage answers itself in a way that makes me smile every time: *"Understand, you senseless among the people; and you fools, when will you be wise? He who planted the ear, shall He not hear? He who formed the eye, shall He not see?"* {94:8–9}

Ezekiel was shown the elders of Israel worshiping idols in secret rooms of the temple, and they were saying, *"The LORD does not see us, the LORD has forsaken the land"* {Ezekiel 8:12}. These were religious leaders, inside God's house, who had convinced themselves that God wasn't paying attention. Zephaniah described people *"settled in complacency, who say in their heart, 'The LORD will not do good, nor will He do evil'"* {Zephaniah 1:12}. In Malachi's day they asked sarcastically, *"Where is the God of justice?"* {Malachi 2:17}.

And God's answer is the same in every age: *"The eyes of the LORD are in every place, keeping watch on the evil and the good"* {Proverbs 15:3}. *"And there is no creature hidden from His sight, but all things are naked and open to the eyes of Him to whom we must give account"* {Hebrews 4:13}. *"For God will bring every work into judgment, including every secret thing, whether good or evil"* {Ecclesiastes 12:14}.

He sees the browser history. He hears the gossip. He knows the thoughts we've never said out loud. And He cares, more than we can imagine. Not because He's looking for a reason to punish us, but because He is holy, and because He loves us too much to leave us in what is destroying us.

A God we'd rather imagine

The third problem is the deepest. People are so uncomfortable with the reality of God's holiness, of who He actually is, that they would rather dream up another idea of what He's like.

A.W. Tozer opened his classic book *The Knowledge of the Holy* with these words: "What comes into our minds when we think about God is the most important thing about us." And a few pages later he wrote: "The essence of idolatry is the entertainment of thoughts about God that are unworthy of Him."

You don't have to carve a statue to be an idolater. You only have to imagine a god who is easier to live with than the real One, and then worship that god. We saw it in Chapter 5 with the golden calf: Israel didn't think they had left the LORD. They gave the calf His name. That's what Paul describes in Romans 1: people who *"changed the glory of the incorruptible God into an image made like corruptible man"* {Romans 1:23}. We do it today not with gold, but with half-truths.

Let me show you one of the clearest examples. When Moses asked to see God's glory, God passed before him and proclaimed His own name. This is God describing Himself, in His own words:

"The LORD, the LORD God, merciful and gracious, longsuffering, and abounding in goodness and truth, keeping mercy for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, by no means clearing the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children and the children's children to the third and the fourth generation." {Exodus 34:6–7}

We love verse 6, and we should. It's one of the most beautiful descriptions of God in the Bible. It's quoted again and again throughout the Old Testament. But how often have you heard verse 7 quoted with it? *"By no means clearing the guilty."* God put both in the same breath, in His own self-revelation. When we keep the first half and drop the second, we haven't just left out a verse. We've edited God's description of Himself.

This is the pattern of every half-truth about God:

- *"God is love"* {1 John 4:8}. Yes. And *"our God is a consuming fire"* {Hebrews 12:29}.
- He is the Lamb who was slain {Revelation 5:6}. And He is the Lion of the tribe of Judah {5:5}.

- *"Consider the goodness and severity of God"* {Romans 11:22}. Not goodness *or* severity. Both.
- *"The LORD is slow to anger and great in power, and will not at all acquit the wicked"* {Nahum 1:3}.

God's love and God's holiness are not in tension within Him. They're perfectly one. His love is holy love, and His holiness is a loving holiness. The cross is where we see them both at full strength. It was His love that sent Jesus, and it was His holiness that made the cross necessary. If God weren't holy, the cross would be unnecessary. If He weren't loving, it would never have happened.

What does "fear" mean?

Now, many good Bible teachers will tell you that "the fear of the Lord" doesn't really mean fear. It means reverence, respect, awe. I understand why they say it. They want to protect people from a picture of God as a cruel tyrant. But I've studied this, and I have to be honest: in Scripture, fear means fear.

The main Hebrew words are the verb *yare*, to fear, and the noun *yirah*, fear. They are used for being afraid, for terror, and for reverence and awe, sometimes all at once. In the New Testament, the Greek word is *phobos* (and the verb *phobeō*), from which we get "phobia." When the disciples saw Jesus calm the storm, Mark says, *"they feared exceedingly"* {Mark 4:41}; literally, they "feared a great fear." They had just been afraid of the storm. Now they were more afraid of the One who stilled it.

The fear of the Lord does include awe and reverence. But it doesn't *exclude* the trembling. It's the posture of a creature who has seen, even a little, how holy, how powerful and how pure God really is.

So how do we put that together with God's love? Moses gives us the key in a single verse. When God came down on Mount Sinai in thunder and fire, the people were terrified. And Moses said to them:

"Do not fear; for God has come to test you, and that His fear may be before you, so that you may not sin." {Exodus 20:20}

Do you see it? In the same sentence, Moses says *do not fear* and *that His fear may be before you*. There are two kinds of fear here. One is the terror that drives you *away* from God, that makes you want to run and hide. The other is the holy fear that keeps you *close* to Him and away from sin. God doesn't want the first. He absolutely wants the second.

Think of a good father, one who loves his children deeply. His children aren't terrified of him. They run to him. But when they're tempted to do something he has forbidden, there's something in them that stops. They know he means what he says. They know he will correct them. They love him, and they take him seriously. That's not a contradiction. That's a healthy relationship. Even a young child weighs the consequences of disobedience, knowing she is loved and knowing there will be discipline. *"For whom the LORD loves He chastens"* {Hebrews 12:6}.

"But perfect love casts out fear"

Someone always raises 1 John 4:18 at this point: *"There is no fear in love; but perfect love casts out fear, because fear involves torment."* Doesn't that settle it?

Look at the verse just before it: *"Love has been perfected among us in this: that we may have boldness in the day of judgment"* {1 John 4:17}. John is talking about fear *of judgment*, the dread of condemnation. The word translated "torment" is *kolasis*, which means punishment. The believer who is abiding in God's love doesn't

have to live in terror of being condemned on the last day. Praise God for that! But John isn't saying that believers should stop revering and trembling before God. The same apostle fell at Jesus' feet *"as dead"* when he saw Him in His glory {Revelation 1:17}.

And what about 2 Timothy 1:7? *"For God has not given us a spirit of fear, but of power and of love and of a sound mind."* The Greek word there isn't *phobos*. It's *deilia*, which means cowardice or timidity. Paul was encouraging Timothy not to be ashamed of the gospel or afraid of what people might do to him {2 Timothy 1:8}. It's about fearing anything *other* than God. Isaiah said it perfectly: *"Do not be afraid of their threats, nor be troubled. The LORD of hosts, Him you shall hallow; let Him be your fear, and let Him be your dread"* {Isaiah 8:12–13}. When we fear God rightly, we don't have to fear anything else.

The fear of God didn't end at the cross

Some people think the fear of God belongs to the Old Testament and that we've moved past it. But the New Testament is full of it.

When Ananias and Sapphira lied to the Holy Spirit about their offering, both of them fell dead, and Luke records, *"So great fear came upon all the church and upon all who heard these things"* {Acts 5:11}. That was the church, under grace, after Pentecost.

When King Herod sat on his throne and let the crowd shout, *"The voice of a god and not of a man!"*, *"immediately an angel of the Lord struck him, because he did not give glory to God. And he was eaten by worms and died"* {Acts 12:22–23}.

When the Corinthians treated the Lord's Supper casually, eating and drinking without discerning the Lord's body, Paul told them, *"For this reason many are weak and sick among you, and many sleep"* {1 Corinthians 11:30}. Many sleep. Paul was telling a New

Testament church that some of their members had died because of how casually they approached the Lord's table.

And when the early church was growing and thriving, Luke describes it this way: *"Then the churches throughout all Judea, Galilee, and Samaria had peace and were edified. And walking in the fear of the Lord and in the comfort of the Holy Spirit, they were multiplied"* {Acts 9:31}. Notice that they had *both*: the fear of the Lord and the comfort of the Holy Spirit. They didn't see those as opposites. And they grew.

The apostles kept preaching it:

- *"And if you call on the Father, who without partiality judges according to each one's work, conduct yourselves throughout the time of your stay here in fear"* {1 Peter 1:17}.
- *"Knowing, therefore, the terror of the Lord, we persuade men"* {2 Corinthians 5:11}.
- *"Let us cleanse ourselves from all filthiness of the flesh and spirit, perfecting holiness in the fear of God"* {2 Corinthians 7:1}.
- *"Let us have grace, by which we may serve God acceptably with reverence and godly fear. For our God is a consuming fire"* {Hebrews 12:28–29}.
- *"It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God"* {Hebrews 10:31}.

Jesus Himself told His friends, *"Fear Him who, after He has killed, has power to cast into hell; yes, I say to you, fear Him!"* {Luke 12:5}. And here's something astonishing: Isaiah prophesied that the Messiah Himself would be filled with *"the Spirit of knowledge and of the fear of the LORD. His delight is in the fear of the LORD"* {Isaiah 11:2–3}. Hebrews says Jesus' prayers were *"heard because of His*

godly fear" {Hebrews 5:7}. If the sinless Son of God delighted in the fear of the Lord, who are we to outgrow it?

Even at the very end of the Bible, when an angel flies through heaven *"having the everlasting gospel to preach to those who dwell on the earth,"* what is the message? *"Fear God and give glory to Him, for the hour of His judgment has come; and worship Him who made heaven and earth"* {Revelation 14:6–7}. The everlasting gospel begins with "Fear God."

Why we stopped being afraid

If the fear of God runs from Genesis to Revelation, how did so much of the church lose it? I believe there are at least five reasons, and I suspect you'll recognize some of them, as I did, in your own heart.

1. We think love and judgment are opposites.

We've come to believe that a loving God wouldn't judge. But Scripture teaches the opposite: it is precisely *because* God is love that He must deal with sin.

Think of a surgeon whose patient has cancer. If she loves that patient, she doesn't leave the tumor alone to spare his feelings. She cuts it out, completely, because she wants him to live. Her love is exactly what makes her ruthless toward the disease.

God is preparing *"new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells"* {2 Peter 3:13}. In that place *"God will wipe away every tear… there shall be no more death, nor sorrow, nor crying. There shall be no more pain"* {Revelation 21:4}. How can God make that promise? Only because *"there shall by no means enter it anything that defiles"* {21:27}. Every tear in human history has sin somewhere at its root. A God who loves His people enough to end all their tears must also be a God who will remove sin completely. And if a person refuses to let go of their sin, they are choosing to be

removed with it {Revelation 21:8}. God's judgment is not the opposite of His love. It is His love refusing to let evil have the last word.

2. We don't know that fearing God is a command.

Most believers have never been told that the fear of God isn't optional. It's commanded. *"You shall fear the LORD your God and serve Him"* {Deuteronomy 6:13}. When Moses summed up everything God required of Israel, fear was the first word on the list: *"to fear the LORD your God, to walk in all His ways and to love Him, to serve the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul, and to keep the commandments... for your good"* {Deuteronomy 10:12–13}. Scripture even ties it to the length of our days: *"The fear of the LORD prolongs days, but the years of the wicked will be shortened"* {Proverbs 10:27}.

Some will answer, "That's the Old Testament." But Jesus didn't lower the bar. He raised it. Under the law, murder was sin; Jesus said that anger in the heart is already on that road. Under the law, adultery was sin; Jesus said that lust in the heart is already adultery {Matthew 5:21–28}. And it was Jesus, not Moses, who said, *"Fear Him who, after He has killed, has power to cast into hell; yes, I say to you, fear Him!"* {Luke 12:5}.

To see how seriously God takes defiance of His Word, consider a short and uncomfortable story in Numbers 15. God had just explained the difference between sins committed in ignorance, which could be atoned for, and sins committed *"presumptuously,"* literally "with a high hand," in open defiance. *"He has despised the word of the LORD, and has broken His commandment; that person shall be completely cut off"* {Numbers 15:30–31}. Right after that teaching, a man was found gathering sticks on the Sabbath. Moses and Aaron didn't know what to do, so they asked the Lord. And the verdict came from God Himself, not from Moses: *"The man must surely be put to death"* {15:35}. The issue wasn't the sticks. It was a man who knew

exactly what God had said and did what he wanted anyway. We may not live under Israel's civil penalties today, but God's view of defiance hasn't changed.

3. We assume that if God hasn't corrected us yet, He won't.

This may be the most common reason of all. We sin, nothing happens, and we conclude that nothing will.

The book of Acts tells a story that should shake that assumption. King Herod had the Apostle James put to death with the sword {Acts 12:1–2}. One of the twelve! And as far as we can see, nothing happened to Herod. Heaven was silent. Herod even arrested Peter next. But God was giving Herod time. Some time later Herod sat on his throne in royal robes, gave a speech, and allowed the crowd to call him a god. *"Then immediately an angel of the Lord struck him, because he did not give glory to God. And he was eaten by worms and died"* {12:23}. God's silence after James' death was not indifference. It was patience. And patience has an end.

We treat the "little" sins the same way: a white lie, a padded expense report, a flattering half-truth. That's exactly what Ananias and Sapphira told: a lie that would barely register by today's standards. They gave a generous gift. They just pretended it was more generous than it was. And the church never forgot what happened next. We have grown comfortable with sins that God has never called small.

Here's the truth we forget: every breath you take is a gift. *"He gives to all life, breath, and all things… for in Him we live and move and have our being"* {Acts 17:25, 28}. Daniel told a proud king, *"The God who holds your breath in His hand and owns all your ways, you have not glorified"* {Daniel 5:23}. That king died that same night. The only reason any of us is still here is that God, in His mercy, is still holding our breath in His hand.

And while He waits, He grieves. Paul writes, *"Do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, by whom you were sealed for the day of redemption"* {Ephesians 4:30}. The word *grieve* (*lypeō*) is the word for sorrow and heartache, the kind of pain we feel over someone we love. The Holy Spirit is not a force. He is a Person, and He feels the pain of our indifference. Imagine God saying: *I gave you life. I give you every breath. I sent My Son for you. I live inside you. And you don't talk to Me. You don't ask Me for help. You keep the very thing that's destroying you, and you won't let Me take it*. That is the grief of a loving Father. It should break our hearts.

4. We've adopted the world's way of life.

Much of the church has taken on the lifestyle and values of the culture around it: the materialism, the pride, the independence. The world says, *I'm in charge of my life. I'll make my own rules. I'll decide what's right for me*. It reasons that either there is no God, or that if there is, He won't do anything about it.

And too many pulpits have baptized that attitude. The prosperity gospel teaches people to covet more and to press God to deliver it. It presents God as a kind of heavenly Santa Claus who exists to fulfill our wish lists, especially if we give generously to the right ministry. Holiness, self-denial, and obedience are quietly set aside, and the appetite for more takes their place. You can't fear a God you've turned into a vending machine.

So here's the question that cuts through all of it: *Do you want more out of this life, or do you want more of God?* Those are two very different prayers.

5. We don't really believe what's coming.

Many of us would say we believe the book of Revelation. But if we truly believed what it describes, would we live the way we do?

Revelation describes the sun turning black and the moon like blood, the sky receding like a scroll, and every mountain and island

moved out of its place {6:12–14}. A third of the trees and all the green grass burned up, a third of the sea turned to blood {8:7–9}. Four angels released *"to kill a third of mankind"* {9:15}. Painful sores, seas and rivers turned to blood, the sun scorching people with fire, darkness over the beast's kingdom {16:2–11}. And finally the greatest earthquake in history, the cities of the nations falling, every island fleeing away, the mountains disappearing, and hailstones *"about the weight of a talent"* (somewhere around seventy-five pounds or more) falling from heaven {16:18–21}.

And even then, Revelation says, people *"blasphemed God"* and *"did not repent of their deeds"* {16:9, 11}.

If we really believed this was coming, I don't think we'd be casual. I think we'd be on our knees. I think we'd be sharing the gospel with everyone we love. I think we'd be crying out, *Lord, have mercy on me. Help me stop sinning. I don't want to hold on to anything You hate.* That's what it means to fear God. And that's the message our generation most needs to hear.

Casual with a holy God

I want to show you one more story, because I think it captures our generation better than almost any other.

King David wanted to bring the ark of God to Jerusalem. His heart was right. He gathered thirty thousand men. There was music and celebration and dancing before the Lord. But instead of having the ark carried on poles by the Levites, as God had commanded {Numbers 4:15}, they put it on a new cart, the way the Philistines had once moved it. When the oxen stumbled, a man named Uzzah reached out his hand to steady the ark. *"Then the anger of the LORD was aroused against Uzzah, and God struck him there for his error; and he died there by the ark of God"* {2 Samuel 6:6–7}.

We often recoil at that story. Uzzah was just trying to help! But David's own words months later explain what went wrong: *"Because you did not do it the first time, the LORD our God broke out against us, because we did not consult Him about the proper order"* {1 Chronicles 15:13}. They had good intentions, great music and a lot of enthusiasm. But they approached God's holy presence on their own terms. They were casual with what God had called holy.

And what was David's response? *"David was afraid of the LORD that day"* {2 Samuel 6:9}. That fear changed him. The second time, he did it God's way, and the ark came home with joy.

I wonder how many of our churches are bringing God's presence in on new carts: great music, great energy, good intentions, and no fear of the Lord. We approach Him casually in worship. We take Communion while holding onto known sin. We use His name as an exclamation in casual conversation {Exodus 20:7}. We pick up His Word when it's convenient and set it down when it confronts us. We sin on Saturday night and expect to feel His presence on Sunday morning.

God asked the priests of Malachi's day a question that should still pierce us: *"A son honors his father, and a servant his master. If then I am the Father, where is My honor? And if I am a Master, where is My reverence?"* {Malachi 1:6}

The fear of the Lord is where wisdom begins

And here's what we miss when we lose the fear of the Lord: we lose the very thing that makes everything else in life make sense.

"The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge, but fools despise wisdom and instruction" {Proverbs 1:7}. *"The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom, and the knowledge of the Holy One is understanding"* {Proverbs 9:10}. If you want to really

understand life, what it's for and how it works, the Bible says you have to start here. Proverbs even tells us how to find it: *"If you seek her as silver, and search for her as for hidden treasures; then you will understand the fear of the LORD, and find the knowledge of God"* {Proverbs 2:4–5}. The fear of the Lord isn't the opposite of knowing God. It's the doorway into knowing Him.

And look at what God promises to those who fear Him:

- *"The fear of the LORD is a fountain of life, to turn one away from the snares of death"* {Proverbs 14:27}.
- *"In the fear of the LORD there is strong confidence, and His children will have a place of refuge"* {Proverbs 14:26}.
- *"The fear of the LORD leads to life, and he who has it will abide in satisfaction; he will not be visited with evil"* {Proverbs 19:23}.
- *"The angel of the LORD encamps all around those who fear Him, and delivers them"* {Psalm 34:7}.
- *"Who is the man that fears the LORD? Him shall He teach in the way He chooses"* {Psalm 25:12}.
- *"The secret of the LORD is with those who fear Him, and He will show them His covenant"* {Psalm 25:14}.
- *"The LORD takes pleasure in those who fear Him, in those who hope in His mercy"* {Psalm 147:11}.
- *"Oh, how great is Your goodness, which You have laid up for those who fear You"* {Psalm 31:19}.
- *"And His mercy is on those who fear Him from generation to generation"* {Luke 1:50}.

Do you see Psalm 25:14? *"The secret of the LORD is with those who fear Him."* The Hebrew word *sod* means intimate counsel, close friendship, the kind of conversation you have only with your closest companions. The fear of the Lord doesn't keep us at a distance from

God. It's what makes real intimacy with Him possible. Those who take Him seriously are the ones He confides in.

And remember Malachi 3:16. In a time of widespread compromise, *"those who feared the LORD spoke to one another, and the LORD listened and heard them; so a book of remembrance was written before Him for those who fear the LORD and who meditate on His name. 'They shall be Mine,' says the LORD of hosts, 'on the day that I make them My jewels.'"* God keeps a book of the people who fear Him. He calls them His jewels.

What it looks like to fear God

So what does the fear of the Lord actually look like in a person's life?

It hates what God hates. *"The fear of the LORD is to hate evil; pride and arrogance and the evil way and the perverse mouth I hate"* {Proverbs 8:13}. The fear of God is not hatred of sinners; God loves sinners, and so must we. It's hatred of sin, wherever we find it, beginning in ourselves. And this is exactly where our culture has gone. We don't hate sin. We tolerate it, redefine it, celebrate it, and call that love. If you don't hate sin, you're living dangerously, because you've stopped seeing it the way God does.

It turns away from evil. *"By the fear of the LORD one departs from evil"* {Proverbs 16:6}. The fear of God isn't just a feeling. It's a direction. It moves your feet.

It obeys. *"And now, Israel, what does the LORD your God require of you, but to fear the LORD your God, to walk in all His ways and to love Him, to serve the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul, and to keep the commandments of the LORD and His statutes which I command you today for your good?"* {Deuteronomy 10:12–13}. Notice that fear comes first in the list, and

love comes right after it. They go together. And notice the last words: *for your good*.

It serves. *"You shall fear the LORD your God and serve Him"* {Deuteronomy 6:13}. Joshua put it the same way before his famous challenge: *"Now therefore, fear the LORD, serve Him in sincerity and in truth… choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve"* {Joshua 24:14–15}. People who fear God aren't looking for the minimum. They're looking for ways to serve Him.

It trembles at His Word. *"But on this one will I look: on him who is poor and of a contrite spirit, and who trembles at My word"* {Isaiah 66:2}. When God speaks, the person who fears Him doesn't argue, negotiate, or explain it away. They take it seriously. They let it change them.

It agrees with God. This is what I long for most in the church: a people who will agree with God. The New Testament word for confession, *homologeō*, literally means "to say the same thing." When we confess our sin, we are saying the same thing about it that God says {1 John 1:9}. We stop arguing. We stop renaming it. We stop ignoring what He has written. We simply agree with Him. That's what the fear of the Lord produces: humble agreement with a holy God.

It puts hope in God, not the world. *"Do not let your heart envy sinners, but be zealous for the fear of the LORD all the day; for surely there is a hereafter, and your hope will not be cut off"* {Proverbs 23:17–18}. The person who fears God doesn't envy what the world offers. They know it's passing away, and they know God will keep every promise.

Work out your salvation with fear and trembling

Which brings us back to Paul's words to the Philippians. Read them again, carefully:

"Therefore, my beloved, as you have always obeyed… work out your own salvation with fear and trembling; for it is God who works in you both to will and to do for His good pleasure." {Philippians 2:12–13}

Notice who Paul is talking to. Not rebels. Not unbelievers. *"My beloved,"* people who had *"always obeyed."* This was one of the healthiest churches Paul ever planted. And still he tells them to work out their salvation *"with fear and trembling."*

Why? Look at the next word: *"for."* For *it is God who works in you.* The reason for trembling is that the living, holy God Himself has taken up residence inside you and is at work in you. When Moses approached the burning bush, God said, *"Take your sandals off your feet, for the place where you stand is holy ground"* {Exodus 3:5}. Paul is saying that the believer's life has become holy ground. God is at work there. How could we be casual about that?

Fear and trembling isn't the opposite of assurance. It's the posture of someone who understands what's at stake and who is doing business with a holy God. It's wisdom. And Paul is pleading with us to get it.

It's the same plea he made to the Galatians: *"Do not be deceived, God is not mocked; for whatever a man sows, that he will also reap"* {Galatians 6:7}. God is not mocked. He is not fooled by our religious activity. He has not changed because He has been patient. He sees. He cares. And He is holy.

So let's stop dreaming up a God we're more comfortable with. Let's stop treating the King of the universe as a casual acquaintance. Let's become a people who tremble at His Word, who hate what He hates, who agree with Him about our sin, and who love Him with the kind of love that takes Him seriously.

The sea saw Him and fled. Let us see Him and fall at His feet.

Father, we thank You for Your Word. Let the understanding of the fear of the Lord come into us with great force. Forgive us for being casual with You. Forgive us for shrinking You down to our size and for mistaking Your patience for approval. We live in a generation that has forsaken You and a culture that makes its decisions without any regard for You. Let it be different with us. Give us hearts that tremble at Your Word, that hate what You hate, and that agree with You. Teach us to work out our salvation with fear and trembling, knowing that You are at work in us. We ask this in the name of Jesus. Amen.

Examine Yourself

1. Have you ever assumed that because God hasn't judged a particular sin in your life, He must not mind? Read Psalm 50:21 and Romans 2:4–5. How do they speak to that?
2. In what ways have you approached God casually: in worship, in prayer, at the Lord's Table, in how you use His name, or in how you handle His Word?
3. Read Exodus 34:6–7 aloud, both verses. Which half of God's self-description have you tended to leave out?
4. Proverbs 8:13 says the fear of the Lord is to hate evil. Is there any sin you've grown comfortable with? What would it look like to agree with God about it today?

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

If We Do Not Love the Law

"One who turns away his ear from hearing the law, even his prayer is an abomination."
{Proverbs 28:9}

That is one of the most startling verses in the book of Proverbs. Read it again slowly.

It doesn't say the prayers of pagans are an abomination. It doesn't say the prayers of murderers or idol worshipers are an abomination. It says the prayer of *someone who turns away his ear from hearing God's law* is an abomination. Someone who is praying! Someone who wants God to listen to them, while they refuse to listen to Him.

The word *abomination* is *to'evah* in Hebrew. It's one of the strongest words in the Old Testament, used for idolatry, detestable practices, and things God finds repulsive. And here it's applied to a prayer.

How can that be? And how does it square with something we say all the time: *"God knows my heart"*?

What "the law" means

The word for "law" in Proverbs 28:9 is *torah*. We usually think of law as a list of rules, but *torah* is a richer word. It comes from a root that means to point, to aim, to teach. Torah is God's instruction, His

teaching, His direction for life. In Proverbs, the word is used for a father's teaching to his son {Proverbs 3:1; 4:2}. It's the loving guidance of someone who knows the way.

So Proverbs 28:9 describes a person who doesn't want God's instruction. They don't want to be told how to live. They want God to listen to their requests, but they turn their ear away when He speaks.

That's not a relationship. That's a vending machine.

The God who hides His eyes

This isn't an isolated verse. Scripture says the same thing again and again.

Through Isaiah, God told His very religious people: *"When you spread out your hands, I will hide My eyes from you; even though you make many prayers, I will not hear. Your hands are full of blood. Wash yourselves, make yourselves clean; put away the evil of your doings from before My eyes. Cease to do evil, learn to do good"* {Isaiah 1:15–17}.

And again: *"Behold, the LORD's hand is not shortened, that it cannot save; nor His ear heavy, that it cannot hear. But your iniquities have separated you from your God; and your sins have hidden His face from you, so that He will not hear"* {Isaiah 59:1–2}.

The psalmist said, *"If I regard iniquity in my heart, the Lord will not hear"* {Psalm 66:18}. And we saw in Chapter 10 how Zechariah described people who *"stopped their ears so that they could not hear"*, and so when they called, God would not listen {Zechariah 7:11–13}.

The New Testament says the same thing. Peter warned husbands to treat their wives with honor *"that your prayers may not be hindered"* {1 Peter 3:7}. And John wrote, *"And whatever we ask we*

receive from Him, because we keep His commandments and do those things that are pleasing in His sight" {1 John 3:22}.

Do you see the pattern? God's ear is open to the one whose ear is open to Him.

Now, I want to be very clear about something. This does not mean God only hears perfect people. If it did, none of us would ever be heard. The tax collector who beat his breast and prayed, *"God, be merciful to me a sinner!"* went home justified {Luke 18:13–14}. God always hears the prayer of a repentant heart. *"The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit, a broken and a contrite heart; these, O God, You will not despise"* {Psalm 51:17}.

The prayer that is an abomination is not the prayer of the sinner who comes to God broken and asking for mercy. It's the prayer of the person who has decided to keep their sin and still expects God's favor. It's Micah hiring a priest. It's the people of Jeremiah's day walking into the temple after a week of idolatry and saying, *"We are delivered!"* It's using prayer to get God to bless a life that has turned its ear away from Him.

Do we still need to love the law?

Some Christians will push back here. *That's the Old Testament. We're not under the law anymore. We're under grace.*

It's true that we are not saved by keeping the law. *"A man is not justified by the works of the law but by faith in Jesus Christ"* {Galatians 2:16}. I believe that with all my heart. Some parts of the law, such as the sacrifices and the earthly priesthood, are fulfilled in Christ, who offered Himself once for all and is now our High Priest {Hebrews 9:11–12; 10:10–14}. But fulfilled does not mean abolished, and God's instructions for how His people are to live, including what He calls clean and unclean (as we saw in Chapter 3), have not been

rewritten. My main point here, though, is about the posture of the heart toward God's instruction.

And on that point, the New Testament is very clear.

When God promised a new covenant through Jeremiah, He didn't say He would do away with His law. He said, *"I will put My law in their minds, and write it on their hearts"* {Jeremiah 31:33; quoted in Hebrews 8:10}. Under the new covenant, God's law isn't abolished. It moves inside.

Paul asked, *"Do we then make void the law through faith? Certainly not! On the contrary, we establish the law"* {Romans 3:31}. He called the law *"holy, and the commandment holy and just and good"* {Romans 7:12}. He said, *"For I delight in the law of God according to the inward man"* {Romans 7:22}. And he explained that Christ came *"that the righteous requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us who do not walk according to the flesh but according to the Spirit"* {Romans 8:4}.

Jesus said, *"Do not think that I came to destroy the Law or the Prophets. I did not come to destroy but to fulfill"* {Matthew 5:17}. James calls it *"the perfect law of liberty"* {James 1:25}. And John says, *"For this is the love of God, that we keep His commandments. And His commandments are not burdensome"* {1 John 5:3}.

We are actually held to a higher calling now than before we were saved, because we have a knowledge of the truth and the Holy Spirit within us to empower us. Grace doesn't lower the standard. It gives us the power to walk in it.

Remember the word Jesus used in Matthew 7:23 for those He never knew: *anomia*, lawlessness. And remember what He said would cause the love of many to grow cold in the last days: *"Because lawlessness will abound"* {Matthew 24:12}. A gospel that teaches

people they no longer need to care about God's instruction is not the gospel of grace. It's the doctrine of the Nicolaitans. It's lawlessness wearing grace's clothes.

A born-again heart doesn't resent God's law. It loves it. That's one of the clearest signs that God has written it there.

"Oh, how I love Your law! It is my meditation all the day" {Psalm 119:97}.

"I delight to do Your will, O my God, and Your law is within my heart" {Psalm 40:8}.

"Great peace have those who love Your law, and nothing causes them to stumble" {Psalm 119:165}.

That last verse is a direct answer to the danger of deception. People who love God's instruction don't stumble easily. Their love keeps them on the path.

"But God knows my heart"

So where does that leave the phrase we hear so often: "God knows my heart"?

Usually, people say it when their actions and their professed faith don't line up. *I know I'm living with my boyfriend, but God knows my heart. I know I haven't been to church or opened my Bible in months, but God knows my heart. I know I shouldn't talk to my coworker that way, but God knows my heart.* It's meant to say: *My behavior may not look right, but deep inside, I'm a good person, and God sees that.*

Yes, He does. God absolutely knows your heart. And that's exactly the problem.

"For the LORD does not see as man sees; for man looks at the outward appearance, but the LORD looks at the heart" {1 Samuel 16:7}.

"For the word of God is living and powerful, and sharper than any two-edged sword... and is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart. And there is no creature hidden from His sight, but all things are naked and open to the eyes of Him to whom we must give account" {Hebrews 4:12–13}.

"I am He who searches the minds and hearts. And I will give to each one of you according to your works" {Revelation 2:23}.

Notice that in the last verse, Jesus connects knowing the heart to judging the works. He searches the heart, and He repays according to works. That's because, in Scripture, the heart and the works are never separate. The heart is the root, and the works are the fruit.

"For a good tree does not bear bad fruit, nor does a bad tree bear good fruit... A good man out of the good treasure of his heart brings forth good; and an evil man out of the evil treasure of his heart brings forth evil. For out of the abundance of the heart his mouth speaks" {Luke 6:43–45}.

If my life is consistently disobeying God, "God knows my heart" isn't a defense. My life is *showing* my heart. The fruit is telling the truth about the tree.

And here's something that stopped me in my tracks. Jesus Himself used the phrase "God knows your hearts." But He didn't use it as a comfort. He used it as a rebuke. Speaking to the Pharisees, who were lovers of money and had just scoffed at His teaching, He said: *"You are those who justify yourselves before men, but* ***God knows your hearts****. For what is highly esteemed among men is an abomination in the sight of God"* {Luke 16:15}.

There's that word again: *abomination*. The Pharisees were justifying themselves. They looked good to people. But God knew their hearts, and what He saw there was an abomination.

And remember what God said about the human heart: *"The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked; who can know it?"* {Jeremiah 17:9}. When we say, "God knows my heart," we usually mean, "*I* know my heart, and it's good." But we don't know our own hearts. That's the point. Our hearts deceive us. Only God knows them truly.

The right way to say it

There is a right way to say "God knows my heart." David said it this way:

"Search me, O God, and know my heart; try me, and know my anxieties; and see if there is any wicked way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting." {Psalm 139:23–24}

Do you see the difference? David doesn't say, "God knows my heart, so I'm fine." He says, "God, *search* my heart, and *show me* what's wrong with it, and *lead me* out." He invites God's knowledge as a light, not as an excuse.

And there's one more beautiful example. After Peter denied Jesus three times, the risen Lord met him on the shore of Galilee and asked him three times, *"Do you love Me?"* The third time, Peter was grieved, and he answered, *"Lord, You know all things; You know that I love You"* {John 21:17}.

That's a broken, humbled man appealing to Jesus' knowledge of his heart. Peter had failed terribly. He had no record to point to, so he pointed to what Jesus could see inside him. And Jesus accepted it.

But notice what Jesus said next: *"Feed My sheep."* And then: *"Follow Me"* {John 21:17, 19}.

Peter's "You know that I love You" didn't excuse him from obedience. It sent him into it. Real love always leads to following. If God truly sees love for Him in your heart, He'll also see that love leading you back to His instruction, back to His Word, and back to obedience.

Turning the ear back

So how do we respond to Proverbs 28:9? Not by giving up on prayer, but by turning our ear back toward God's instruction. Here's what that looks like:

- **Listen before you ask.** Before you bring God your requests, open His Word and let Him speak first.
- **Ask Him to search you.** Pray Psalm 139:23–24, and mean it. Then be quiet and let Him answer.
- **Confess what He shows you.** Don't explain it, justify it, or point to your good intentions. Agree with Him about it. *"If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us"* {1 John 1:9}.
- **Obey the next thing.** Love for God's law isn't a feeling you wait for. It grows as you obey. Do the next thing He's shown you.
- **Ask Him to make you love His law.** If you don't love His instruction yet, tell Him so honestly, and ask Him to change your heart. *"Incline my heart to Your testimonies, and not to covetousness"* {Psalm 119:36}. That's a prayer He delights to answer.

God isn't looking for perfect people. He's looking for people with open ears. *"Today, if you will hear His voice, do not harden your hearts."*

Examine Yourself

1. Have you ever used the phrase "God knows my heart" to excuse something in your life? What was it?
2. Is there any area of God's instruction that you have "turned your ear away" from? How might that be affecting your prayer life?
3. Read Psalm 119:97 aloud. Can you honestly say it? If not, what would it take for that to become true?
4. Pray Psalm 139:23–24 this week every morning. Write down what the Lord shows you.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

The Conclusion of the Whole Matter

"Let us hear the conclusion of the whole matter: Fear God and keep His commandments, for this is man's all. For God will bring every work into judgment, including every secret thing, whether good or evil." {Ecclesiastes 12:13–14}

I want to end this book with the story of a man who was sincerely deceived, even though he was the wisest man who ever lived.

The wisest man in the world

When Solomon became king, the Lord appeared to him in a dream and invited him to ask for anything. Solomon asked for *a hearing heart*, an understanding heart to discern between good and evil {1 Kings 3:9}. God was so pleased that He gave him wisdom beyond any king before or after him, along with riches and honor he hadn't asked for {3:12–13}.

Solomon built the temple of the Lord. He prayed one of the most beautiful prayers in the Bible at its dedication {1 Kings 8}. The glory of God filled the house. People came from all over the world to hear his wisdom. If anyone seemed safe from deception, it was Solomon.

But God had given Israel's kings a specific warning centuries earlier: *"Neither shall he multiply wives for himself, lest his heart turn away"* {Deuteronomy 17:17}. Solomon knew that command. He was the wisest man alive. And yet:

"But King Solomon loved many foreign women… from the nations of whom the LORD had said to the children of Israel, 'You shall not intermarry with them, nor they with you. Surely they will turn away your hearts after their gods.' Solomon clung to these in love… For it was so, when Solomon was old, that his wives turned his heart after other gods; and his heart was not loyal to the LORD his God, as was the heart of his father David." {1 Kings 11:1–2, 4}

Solomon built shrines for Chemosh and Molech on the hill east of Jerusalem, facing the very temple he had built for the Lord {11:7}. And the Bible adds a heartbreaking detail: *"So the LORD became angry with Solomon, because his heart had turned from the LORD God of Israel,* ***who had appeared to him twice****"* {11:9}.

Twice God had appeared to him. He had the greatest gift of wisdom ever given to a human being. He had built God's house. And he still drifted, slowly, over many years, "when he was old," one compromise at a time. Centuries later, Nehemiah would still be pointing to Solomon as a warning: *"Was there not a king like him among many nations… Nevertheless pagan women caused even him to sin"* {Nehemiah 13:26}.

If Solomon could be deceived, so can you. So can I.

Everything under the sun

The book of Ecclesiastes is traditionally attributed to Solomon. The writer calls himself *"the Preacher, the son of David, king in Jerusalem"* {Ecclesiastes 1:1}. And it reads like the reflections of a man looking back over a life in which he had tried everything.

He tried pleasure: *"I said in my heart, 'Come now, I will test you with mirth; therefore enjoy pleasure'"* {2:1}. He built houses, planted vineyards, made gardens and parks, gathered silver and gold, acquired singers and *"the delights of the sons of men"* {2:4–8}. *"Whatever my eyes desired I did not keep from them. I did not withhold my heart from any pleasure"* {2:10}.

That's the Laodicean dream. Rich, comfortable, needing nothing, every pleasure available. And what was his conclusion?

"Then I looked on all the works that my hands had done and on the labor in which I had toiled; and indeed all was vanity and grasping for the wind. There was no profit under the sun." {Ecclesiastes 2:11}

The word translated "vanity" is *hebel*, which literally means vapor, breath, a puff of smoke. You can see it, but you can't hold onto it. And the phrase that runs through the whole book is *"under the sun"*: life lived from a purely earthly perspective, as if this world is all there is.

In *Don't Die in the Pew* I wrote about building my family tree and realizing that only the bottom couple of branches are still alive. Everyone else is gone, impressive or not, and one day I'll just be a name on someone's tree. James asks, *"For what is your life? It is even a vapor that appears for a little time and then vanishes away"* {James 4:14}. Solomon learned the hard way that a life spent chasing what's under the sun ends up with nothing but smoke.

The conclusion

And then, at the very end of his book, after all his searching, Solomon gives us the conclusion of the whole matter:

"Fear God and keep His commandments, for this is man's all."

The Hebrew is even more striking: *"For this is the whole of man."* Other translations say *"the whole duty of man."* This is what human life is for. This is what we were made for. Everything else is vapor.

Notice the two halves.

Fear God. Not a cringing terror, but the deep reverence and awe that recognize God for who He really is: holy, all-powerful, all-knowing, the Judge of all the earth, and infinitely worthy. The fear of the Lord is *"the beginning of wisdom"* {Proverbs 9:10}. Solomon began with wisdom and ended with foolishness, and at the end he came back to where wisdom starts.

Keep His commandments. The fear of God isn't just a feeling. It shows itself in obedience. Jesus said the same thing in His own words: *"If you love Me, keep My commandments"* {John 14:15}. Fear and love aren't opposites in Scripture. They're two strands of the same rope.

And then Solomon tells us why it matters: *"For God will bring every work into judgment, including every secret thing, whether good or evil"* {12:14}. Every work. Every secret. There are no exceptions. Paul echoes this: *"For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ… Knowing, therefore, the terror of the Lord, we persuade men"* {2 Corinthians 5:10–11}.

That's why I've written this book. Not to frighten anyone for the sake of fear, but to persuade. Because one day each of us will stand before the real Jesus, and on that day it will matter more than anything whether the Jesus we followed was Him.

He is what matters

If Solomon's search teaches us anything, it's this: everything under the sun is vapor. So what isn't? What is left when everything else blows away?

One Person. Jesus.

He is what matters. Honestly, I think all of us are still just on the path to understanding that. He is the only thing that truly matters in the grand scheme of our existence. Not our plans, not our reputations, not our comfort, not even our ministries. Him.

All sixty-six books of the Bible, from the first page to the last, point to Him. Jesus said so Himself. On the road to Emmaus, *"beginning at Moses and all the Prophets, He expounded to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning Himself"* {Luke 24:27}. He told the religious leaders, *"You search the Scriptures… and these are they which testify of Me"* {John 5:39}. He is the Seed promised to crush the serpent's head {Genesis 3:15}. He is the ram caught in the thicket on Mount Moriah {Genesis 22:13}, the Passover Lamb whose blood turns away judgment {Exodus 12:13; 1 Corinthians 5:7}, the bronze serpent lifted up in the wilderness {Numbers 21:9; John 3:14}, the Kinsman-Redeemer of Ruth, the Suffering Servant of Isaiah 53, the Son of Man of Daniel 7, and the pierced One of Zechariah 12:10. He is revealed in every book, and everything points to Him. *"All things were created through Him and for Him. And He is before all things, and in Him all things consist… that in all things He may have the preeminence"* {Colossians 1:16–18}.

Heaven is about Him

I think about this whenever someone we love dies. We say things like, "Well, now she's reunited with her husband," or "Now he finally gets to see his mother again." And I understand that. It's a sweet and

beautiful thought. I want to be reunited with my loved ones too. I really do. And by God's grace, one day I will be.

But heaven is not a family reunion where we sit around catching up and talking about how the Ravens did this season. Heaven is about Jesus. That entire place is about Him.

Read what John saw when a door opened into heaven. At the center of everything is a throne, and around it are living creatures who *"do not rest day or night, saying: 'Holy, holy, holy, Lord God Almighty, who was and is and is to come!'"* {Revelation 4:8}. They never stop. They have been in His presence longer than any of us can imagine, and they still haven't run out of reasons to cry "Holy." Then the elders fall down and cast their crowns before the throne {4:10}. Then every creature in heaven and on earth joins in: *"Blessing and honor and glory and power be to Him who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb, forever and ever!"* {5:13}.

And in the new Jerusalem, John says, *"I saw no temple in it, for the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb are its temple. The city had no need of the sun or of the moon to shine in it, for the glory of God illuminated it. The Lamb is its light"* {Revelation 21:22–23}. The greatest promise of heaven isn't the streets of gold or even seeing the people we've lost. It's this: *"They shall see His face"* {Revelation 22:4}.

Paul didn't long for heaven because of what he'd find there. He longed for a Person: *"For to me, to live is Christ, and to die is gain… having a desire to depart and be with Christ, which is far better"* {Philippians 1:21, 23}. And the psalmist said it better than any of us can: *"Whom have I in heaven but You? And there is none upon earth that I desire besides You"* {Psalm 73:25}.

Worship, glorifying Him, magnifying who He is: that is what heaven is. If that doesn't sound like heaven to us now, it's worth asking whether we really know Him.

Too magnificent to comprehend

Scripture says, *"The LORD by wisdom founded the earth; by understanding He established the heavens"* {Proverbs 3:19}. And when we come to the New Testament, we learn that this Wisdom has a name. Christ is *"the power of God and the wisdom of God"* {1 Corinthians 1:24}, the One *"in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge"* {Colossians 2:3}. The wisdom that set the stars in place and laid the foundations of the earth became flesh and walked among us.

How can we not fall on our faces at the very mention of His name? One day every knee will. *"God also has highly exalted Him and given Him the name which is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of those in heaven, and of those on earth, and of those under the earth, and that every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father"* {Philippians 2:9–11}. When John, who had leaned on Jesus' chest at the Last Supper, saw Him in His glory, he *"fell at His feet as dead"* {Revelation 1:17}.

I think Jesus is too magnificent for us to even begin to comprehend properly. He is everything. Nothing and no one else matters like Him. No one. Nothing.

Jesus. That's who it is. Praise the Lord!

So here is the conclusion of the matter, as plainly as I know how to say it: if what we're doing in this life isn't for His glory, it's all vapor. *"Therefore, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to*

the glory of God" {1 Corinthians 10:31}. Everything else will pass away. He will not.

Remember now your Creator

Just before his conclusion, Solomon wrote: *"Remember now your Creator in the days of your youth, before the difficult days come, and the years draw near when you say, 'I have no pleasure in them'"* {Ecclesiastes 12:1}. The urgency is unmistakable. Don't wait. The days are short. The silver cord will be loosed, the golden bowl broken, the dust will return to the earth, and the spirit to God who gave it {12:6–7}.

None of us knows how much time we have. Jesus said, *"Watch therefore, for you do not know what hour your Lord is coming"* {Matthew 24:42}. And as I said in my first book, none of us will get out of here alive, unless Jesus rolls back the clouds first.

Looking back over the road

Let's look back over the road we've traveled together.

We started with Paul's fear: that sincere believers would put up with *another Jesus, a different spirit,* and *a different gospel*, and not even notice {2 Corinthians 11:4}. We saw that Satan disguises himself as an angel of light, and that his servants come dressed as ministers of righteousness.

We heard Paul's warnings, given night and day with tears. We saw that "doctrines of demons" can sound more spiritual than the truth, and that they follow the serpent's oldest pattern: *Did God really say? You will not surely die. You will be like God.*

We saw how deception actually works. It doesn't come packaged like hell. It comes through what is left out, through what we never bothered to learn, and through the slow work of making the gospel

all about us. We saw faith that feels right but isn't: golden calves called by God's name, partial obedience, Sunday safety, and spectacular ministries Jesus never knew.

We met Micah and his Levite, serving God for ten shekels and a shirt. We looked at the cross the modern church rarely tells anyone to carry, and at Laodicea, rich and comfortable and nauseating to the Lord, with Jesus knocking outside its door.

We saw that the great falling away isn't mainly people leaving church, but people who stay and stop loving the truth, heaping up teachers to scratch their itching ears. We watched Pharaoh harden his own heart six times until God confirmed his choice. And we learned that the voice of the Good Shepherd is still speaking to those who want to hear and obey Him.

And then we looked for the way back: the Scriptures we've learned to skip, the church as God designed it, the ancient paths, and a heart that loves God's law instead of hiding behind "He knows my heart."

Which Jesus?

So let me ask you the three questions one last time.

Which Jesus do you follow? The Jesus who exists for your happiness, or the Lord who bought you with His blood and calls you to deny yourself, take up your cross, and follow Him?

Which spirit do you have? A spirit that makes you comfortable in sin, or the Holy Spirit who convicts, sanctifies, and produces the fruit of Christlike character?

Which gospel have you believed? The gospel of humanism, which offers the benefits of the cross without the cross? Or the gospel

the apostles preached: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, was buried, and rose again on the third day; that you must repent and believe; and that grace, received by faith, teaches us to deny ungodliness and live for Him {1 Corinthians 15:3–4; Titus 2:11–12}?

If you've realized you followed another Jesus

If, as you've read this book, the Holy Spirit has shown you that the Jesus you've been following isn't the Jesus of Scripture, please hear me: that realization is not the end. It's a gift. It means God is still knocking.

Here's what I'd encourage you to do:

1. **Stop.** Stand at the crossroads. Be honest with God about where you are.
2. **Repent.** Not just sorry for the consequences, but sorry for the sin itself, and for the ways you've robbed God of the worship and obedience He deserves. Turn away from whatever He shows you.
3. **Receive the real Jesus as Lord.** Tell Him you want *Him*, not what He can give you. Surrender your life, your plans, your possessions, your relationships, and your future to Him. Trust what He did on the cross to forgive you, not anything you have done.
4. **Open His Word.** Start with one of the Gospels. Read it like a Berean. Meet the real Jesus there.
5. **Find a faithful church.** Look for one that teaches the whole counsel of God, where you can belong, serve, and be known.
6. **Keep walking.** Endurance is part of the path. You will stumble. When you do, confess it and get up. *"He who has*

begun a good work in you will complete it" {Philippians 1:6}.

Keep yourselves in the love of God

The little letter of Jude was written for exactly the situation this book has described. Jude wanted to write about "our common salvation," but he felt compelled instead to urge his readers to *"contend earnestly for the faith which was once for all delivered to the saints"* {Jude 3}. Why? Because *"certain men have crept in unnoticed… ungodly men, who turn the grace of our God into lewdness and deny the only Lord God and our Lord Jesus Christ"* {Jude 4}.

That's another gospel. Grace turned into permission. Crept in unnoticed.

And here's what Jude told the faithful to do:

"But you, beloved, building yourselves up on your most holy faith, praying in the Holy Spirit, keep yourselves in the love of God, looking for the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ unto eternal life. And on some have compassion, making a distinction; but others save with fear, pulling them out of the fire, hating even the garment defiled by the flesh." {Jude 20–23}

Build yourself up in the faith. Pray in the Spirit. Keep yourself in God's love. Wait for His mercy. Show compassion. Pull people out of the fire. That's the calling of every believer in the last days.

And then Jude ends with one of the most glorious promises in Scripture, and I can think of no better way to end this book:

"Now to Him who is able to keep you from stumbling, and to present you faultless before the presence of His glory with exceeding

joy, to God our Savior, who alone is wise, be glory and majesty, dominion and power, both now and forever. Amen." {Jude 24–25}

The God who warns us is the God who is able to keep us. He doesn't want any of us to be sincerely deceived. He wants us to be sincerely His.

Paris Reidhead closed his sermon with the cry of those young Moravian missionaries, and I'll close with it too, because I believe it's the opposite of every counterfeit gospel. It is the heart that has stopped asking what it can get from God and started asking what God deserves:

May the Lamb that was slain receive the reward of His suffering.

Father, thank You that You are not willing that any should perish. Thank You for warning us because You love us. Open the eyes of every reader to see the real Jesus. Where we have followed another Jesus, received another spirit, or believed another gospel, forgive us and bring us back to the ancient path. Give us a love for the truth, a hearing heart, and the courage to take up our cross and follow You. Keep us from stumbling, and present us faultless before Your glory with exceeding joy. Let the Lamb who was slain receive the reward of His suffering in us. In the mighty name of Jesus Christ, Amen.

Fear God, and keep His commandments. This is the whole of who we are.

Don't be sincerely deceived.

Examine Yourself

1. Solomon had extraordinary wisdom and still drifted. What "foreign wives" (things you love that pull your heart toward other gods) do you need to guard against?
2. If you summarized your life so far, what would the "conclusion of the matter" be? What do you want it to be?
3. Look back at your answers to the Examine Yourself questions in earlier chapters. What has the Lord shown you through this book?
4. Jude tells us to pull others out of the fire. Who in your life needs you to share the real Jesus with them? Pray for them by name this week.

Notes

Introduction

- Krista D. Smith, *Don't Die in the Pew: The Mystery of Israel and the Deception of Eternal Security* (2 Thrive Publishing Group, 2018).

Chapter 1

- Priscilla Shirer quotation as cited in *Don't Die in the Pew*, ch. 2 (via ChurchLeaders.com, "Can You Tell the Difference Between Right and Almost Right?").
- The saying "Discernment is not knowing the difference between right and wrong…" is widely attributed to Charles H. Spurgeon, though it does not appear to be found in his published sermons.
- Greek word meanings throughout this book follow standard lexicons (Strong's Concordance; BDAG, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*).

Chapter 5

- Christian Smith with Melinda Lundquist Denton, *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005).

Chapter 6

- Paris Reidhead, "Ten Shekels and a Shirt," sermon (c. 1965). Points from the sermon are summarized and paraphrased in this chapter.
- The Westminster Shorter Catechism (1647), Question 1.
- On the suspended *nun* in Judges 18:30, see the notes in the NIV, ESV and NKJV at that verse.
- The Moravian missionaries were Leonard Dober and David Nitschmann, who sailed for the Danish West Indies (St. Thomas) in 1732. Accounts of their willingness to become slaves are part of Moravian tradition.

Chapter 7

- Appian, *The Civil Wars* 1.120, records the crucifixion of six thousand of Spartacus' followers along the road from Capua to Rome.
- Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship* (first published in German as *Nachfolge*, 1937).

Chapter 8

- Tacitus, *Annals* 14.27, on Laodicea rebuilding after the earthquake of A.D. 60.
- On the hot, cold and lukewarm waters of the Lycus Valley, see M. J. S. Rudwick and E. M. B. Green, "The Laodicean Lukewarmness," *Expository Times* 69 (1958).
- Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 1.26.3, on the Nicolaitans.

Chapter 11

- Handwritten study notes by the author, "Hearing God's Voice."
- On the failed 2020 election prophecies and the public apologies of some prophetic leaders, see contemporary reporting by *Christianity Today* and the *Christian Post* (January 2021).

Chapter 14

- The "seven keys" adapt the outline of a study handout titled "Understanding the Word" in the author's files (source unknown).

Chapter 15

- A. W. Tozer, *The Knowledge of the Holy* (New York: Harper & Row, 1961), chapter 1.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Krista D Smith is a watchman, standard-bearer, and disciple-maker dedicated to equipping the Body of Christ. Following a successful 19-year career owning a mortgage firm, Krista answered a divine call in 2017 to close her business and realign her life fully around God's purposes. Today, she serves as President of a Christian school in South Carolina and Director at Tour of Truth, a global online ministry. With over 30 years of Bible study experience, Krista has done mission work in East and West Africa, co-established a 24/7 virtual house of prayer for Israel, and authored multiple books, including *Don't Die in the Pew*, *the Appointed Times series*, and *Sincerely Deceived*. Her life's mission is to disciple believers and encourage them to stand firm in the Word of the Lord.

Reverend Bernie Dorsey is the Founder and Executive Director of Transforming Spirit Ministries, Inc. A graduate of Duke University and The George Washington University Law School, he left a successful career in transactional real estate and civil litigation to answer a full-time call to ministry. Today, he oversees approximately thirty churches in Africa and directs major mission projects across the United States, Africa, and Asia. He has conducted numerous international missions, leading open-air crusades, planting churches, and feeding the poor in tribal regions. He is also a passionate advocate for Israel and the Jewish people. He lives in Washington, DC, with his wife of twenty-six years, Ericka, a civil rights attorney, and their two sons.

Pastor Sylvia Laughlin is the Senior Pastor of World Outreach Christian Life Center Ministries in Orlando, Florida, and a facilitator for the global online Bible study fellowship at Tour of Truth. A native of Charlotte, North Carolina, she holds a Bachelor's degree from Excelsior College and brings a profound, disciplined focus to discipleship, prayer, and spiritual warfare. Prior to full-time ministry, Pastor Laughlin dedicated 29 years of distinguished service to the United States Army. Enlisting in 1984 in the Adjutant General Corps, she served across the globe—including Germany, Korea, and the Marshall Islands—and graduated from the prestigious Sergeant Major Academy.

Today, she has been dynamically reassigned by the Lord of Heaven's Armies to build and equip God's people. From co-founding the 24/7 virtual Altar of Prayer in 2020 to executing international missionary mandates in Uganda, Kenya, Liberia, Singapore, and Germany, Pastor Laughlin travels the world preaching the uncompromised good news of Jesus Christ.

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WHAT IF THE JESUS YOU WORSHIP ISN'T THE JESUS OF THE BIBLE?

On judgment day, many will cry, "Lord, Lord!" They prophesied in His name. They did miracles in His name. They were certain they belonged to Him.

And He will say, "I never knew you." {Matthew 7:21–23}

These people won't be atheists or scoffers. They will be churchgoers, ministry leaders, worship leaders, and volunteers: people who were sincere and sincerely deceived.

The Bible warns that a great falling away is coming. But the people who fall away don't leave church. They stay. They fill the pews, collect teachers who tell them what they want to hear, and slowly trade the truth for a counterfeit that feels better.

THIS BOOK WILL CONFRONT YOU WITH QUESTIONS MOST PULPITS AVOID:

Is the gospel you've heard about His glory, or about your happiness?

What if the great falling away is happening inside full churches?

Has God's patience convinced you that He has changed?

Has church become a place to feel safe, instead of a place to be changed?

What happens to a conscience that keeps saying no to God?

Is your church making disciples of Jesus, or copies of its leaders?

Could you be sincere, committed and still be wrong?

Drawing from Paul's urgent warnings, the hardened heart of Pharaoh, the priest who served God for ten shekels and a shirt, and the forgotten fear of the Lord, Krista, Bernie, and Sylvia expose the subtle deceptions that have crept into the modern church. They are calling readers back to the ancient paths and to the real Jesus.

This is not a comfortable book. It's a necessary one.

"Today, if you will hear His voice, do not harden your hearts."

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