THOUGHTS OF MAY, 2018

1. Is it something Jesus would not do or could not do for them? He went about doing all sorts of healings, both physical and mental. But, what condition would He not heal for them during His three-year ministry? Answer: He did not heal the religious mind. The religious mind is set on certain certainties that are not certain, whether they are Christian or other religion. Yes indeed, there are absolute basics, but we squeeze on those basics until there is no more life in them, as did those who thought they had cornered Jesus when they brought Him the woman who had been caught in adultery. Repentance [for example] has no room within the religious mind, whether for that mind or for those others “who are the real sinners.” The religious mind can be convicted [in the mind], but has difficulty being repentant [in the heart].

I suppose it should be said that Jesus also did not heal the political mind, which was a big thing for Judas. He was a member of a political group that would do anything to promote the nation of Israel by the power of the flesh. He tried to force Jesus’ messianic fulfillment as earthly king by betraying Him to the religious and political leaders, but it did not work out his way or to his satisfaction. Let’s hear that message as we deal with religion and politics.

1. The Lord said He would regather and restore national Israel “to their own land which I gave to their fathers” after He had scattered them. He even stated how He would do it. Jeremiah 16:16 reads, “Behold, I am going to send for many fisherman,” declares the Lord, “and they will fish for them; and afterwards I will send for many hunters, and they will hunt them from every mountain and every hill and from the clefts of the rocks.” Notice how the Lord has done exactly that as He has been restoring Israel. He first sent “fishers of men” for them [Matt. 4:19], and then He sent the hunters [Hitler, et. al.].

Knowing that those things that happened to the world and to God’s people in the Old Testament 1) happened to them for our sake, and 2) were recorded for our sake [Rom. 15:4; 1 Cor. 10:6, 11], let’s take a good look at those fishermen and hunters in our lives. We were wooed by the fishers of men who were sent by the Lord. The bait was Jesus. Some of us were caught – thank God! Others of us who ran from the fishers, or broke their line when we were almost caught, had to be hunted [trials of ill health, financial problems, foul living, mistreatment by others, all forms of human idiocy] until we turned to the Lord for relief. He dug us out of our pits for one reason; He looked at us and loved what He saw – Deut. 7:7-8; Rom. 9:all. That applies to the time of our original salvation and to events in our ongoing salvation [sanctification].

1. Why do you think the Holy Spirit had Paul and Luke write the account of Paul’s travels as recorded in Acts 16:6-8? Was it so we could look back there and rejoice in those old days when the Lord had spoken to Christians? Yes, but more than that. Was it so that we could know that He might still speak to a few real Christians? Yes, but more than that. It was because He wants every believer to know that He speaks and will still fix our spiritual ears so we also can hear Him. He has never changed and never will. Little people still hear Him.
2. Be sure that you understand the problem that ordained clergy have. They are responsible for the religious aspect of the church, not only the spiritual life. The religious aspect is the part that shows first and foremost, except in the very rare church where Jesus is being lifted up and our cross walks are being lived. So very much time, effort and money are spent on the religious aspect that the spiritual [such as intimacy with Jesus] tends to be the obscure part. When the religious part grows, things about Jesus, not He Himself, become the focus. As the spiritual becomes even more obscure, “the church” is exalted and preached. Then the special things of that denomination are highly prioritized. It is a downhill slide. Deception, deafness, blindness and religiosity are prevalent causes and results.

If you understand the above, and I hope you do, you will have compassion for and will love the clergy in special ways, such as seeing the church as your mission field. Definition of “mission field” is “a place to go live as Christ Jesus and lay down your life as He did.” The project involves going, embedding, knowing your calling and place, speaking the truth in love, clearly speaking against sin in its many deceptive presentations, and hanging in there until put out. I will add that another way out is the Lord calling you out, but it must be recognized that our flesh will have many temptations to “split.” Don’t split. When it is the Lord who calls you “out from among them” you will be heartbroken and will not want to leave. Remember Jesus’ own reluctance to leave them, but left in obedience to His Father, knowing that better things were to come but only after He left.

Remember that the Lord said the door was narrow and was only the beginning of things narrow. The way, which the narrow door ushers us into, is also narrow and is difficult; so narrow and difficult that not many find their way along it. But the narrow, difficult way leads to Life. There is no other way to that Life. Fellow missionaries, we are on that narrow and difficult way and the established church is part of our missionary field – the most difficult part.

1. Do we really know ourselves? If we do, we know that nothing good is in our flesh so nothing good can be produced by us – Rom. 7:18. We also know that there is no room for our self-condemnation – Rom 8:1-2. We have learned that we need the Lord’s wisdom, strength, knowledge, etc. which comes from above, often through others [friends, strangers, books, etc.].

Do you recognize your weaknesses? Do you know how to be faithful in your weaknesses? And in your failures and defeats? David was running from King Saul’s death squad and needed a place to hide, long term. He feigned insanity and went over to the enemy – 1 Sam. 21:10-15; Ps. 34. That saved his life, temporarily. David knew fear, unbelief and sin but yet he was the apple of God’s eye and received God’s promise that a son of his would be the Messiah. He knew how to trust the Lord while he was at his worst.

Notice that it was Jesus who said we should know when to hold and when to fold when we did not have what it took in certain struggles – Matt. 5:25-26; Luke 14:31-32.

1. Money and distinction are attractive to our flesh. That applies to every area of human life, including the religious. Micah, in Judges chapters 17 and 18 [not the prophet Micah of several centuries later], was a well-to-do man. He lived during the 400 or so years when there was little leadership in Israel. Thus, it is written several times during those years that “In those days there was no king in Israel; and everyone did what was right in his own eyes.” That is both an excuse for and a judgment against them. Times were like that, and still are. Selah.

Micah was the son of a rich woman. Both had a strongly religious bent. She seemed to enable him in whichever direction he desired. At the beginning of the story he stole 1,100 pieces of silver from her, heard his mom proclaim a curse on whoever stole it, and promptly returned it to her. She was so happy that she dedicated the money to the Lord and used 200 pieces to form an idol to go along with the other idols at their family shrine. Micah already had grown sons, one of whom he consecrated as family priest although the son was not a Levite.

But, a young Levite was nearby. The Levite came by Micah’s looking for a place to live. Micah jumped at the opportunity. He offered the Levite an annual salary of 10 pieces of silver, a suit of clothing, and room and board. The Levite accepted the offer and became the father-figure of the young family priest. Micah said to himself, “Now I know that the Lord will prosper me, seeing I have a Levite as priest.” He had bought a priest who was for sale.

Do you get the picture so far? The family was like the Laodicean church of Revelation 3:14-22; they had everything, including the customization of their own religion, so did as they wanted. After all, was it not their church? Had it not been their God who was blessing them? So, they hired a religious father-figure. They gave the Levite financial security, a robe to display his identity as a religious person, and a parsonage/manse/rectory. He settled in, being bought and well paid.

But that’s not, and never is, the end of the story. You guessed it; another denomination of Israelites upped the salary and made off with the very willing Levite. He took Micah’s idols, his robes, and other items as he desired. Remember Romans 15:4 and 1 Corinthians 10:6, 11. That Levite’s ministry was available to the highest and most prestigious bidder. A church-going unbeliever told me one time that he would become a believer when he saw preachers “hear God” tell them to go to smaller and less affluent congregations.

1. I have found you again in Isaiah 50:4-5. You have the life-giving tongue of a disciple and you use it to God’s advantage. You give life in word and action. It is the same word of life that you continually receive from study of scripture while having fellowship with the Master. Others have noticed you; I am only putting it into words for them.
2. Much has been said about unity in the body of Christ, but not enough. We have been enabled to love one another, the world, and our enemies more than we usually do. However, we don’t seem to want to, so we don’t. Like, “more is not necessary.” I’m not talking about shallow love and unity. I’m talking about going for the love and unity Jesus our Brother had and has with His and our Father, and with us. That is what Jesus prayed for us – John 17:20-23. His unity had to do with unity in and around the truth like we experience from time to time, brother to brother, truth to truth.

The unity we are offered around the truth is not to be sacrificed for the sake of a lesser form of lesser unity. Every individual Christian can be united with anyone who is in the flesh because of the Holy Spirit in us, but the other person is the weak link in regards to having a reliable relationship. For example, Jesus linked with those in the flesh, and they let Him down. He still links with us as our Spirit is willing and our flesh is weak, so we have often let Him down.

I know that we will not be able to have the perfection of that unity during our lifetime on earth, but it seems that we are not interested in having more of it than we have lived with during our years. We all have our reasons but I don’t think we know them. As in Thought 5 above, we don’t know ourselves even though we know we will soon stand alone at the judgment seat of Christ and be held responsible for all things of ourselves, without excuse. That day is designed by the Lord to be a wonderful experience because we can arrive there clean of our known sins and [wonder of wonders] clean of our unknown sins. It depends on the reality of a ready penitence, whereby the Lord can put His finger on our sinfulness and get an adequate response. That is for now in this earth life, not when we stand before Him.

1. Have you ever been flown with all expenses paid from your hometown to a beautiful and peaceful resort, given a deluxe room, ushered into an extravagant meeting room with high quality others, and handed an agenda that was out of this world? I have experienced that in this life, but the one that we live by faith is far beyond any that we could experience here.

Jesus is now seated at the right hand of our Father in heaven and we are in Him. We don’t have to try to enter into Him and into the Father’s presence, hoping to have a room ready for us. We don’t have to work up faith or try to get some sort of victory in order to be there in Jesus. We are already there in the victory of and with the Victor. Jesus Himself got the victory and we know it. That’s victorious faith. Our place is above all spiritual [which means “all”] principalities and powers. Our enemy will try to convince us that we are not there yet, that we must work harder to accomplish whatever it takes to be worthy of being there. But we have been made one with the Victor, by nothing of ourselves. That comfort enables us to get about the work that He has planned for us. Read Ephesians 1.

1. If you are not up on your Robert Browning, you are about to be. He wrote, “Ah, but a man’s reach should exceed his grasp, Or what’s a heaven for?” That is solidly biblical. The old time Pentecostals said it this way, “Leave room for God.” All of scripture supports the simplicity of those statements, that the Lord wants us to lean on Him for understanding, power, and the completion of that which has come to the end of our assignment in it.
2. It is interesting to consider that Isaiah 45 is prophetically related to American president number 45, but there is not much substance to that simple comparison. It might be added that Isaiah 45 was about the leader of the world’s greatest empire at that time – King Cyrus of the Medo-Persians Empire, and that American president number 45 is Donald Trump, the leader of the world’s greatest empire at this time. Then notice the great things the Lord said to Isaiah and Israel about King Cyrus, which was several generations before Cyrus was born, things that show promise of also being applicable also to President Trump. Cyrus was told about his being called by name by the God of Israel and anointed by that God to do special and powerful things, among which was to be a blessing to Israel. He accepted his place in Isaiah’s prophecy and acted upon it. That was genuine faith. President Trump is doing those same things. Especially, he is being a blessing to Israel. Yes, now president no. 45 is becoming interesting.
3. For those who are hungry for some comfort of souls, some balm of the Holy Spirit, here is a dose. You know that it is the Lord who processes our spiritual growth. He is the Potter and we are His clay. His hands are upon us 24/7 – no exceptions. When we start to dry out, He adds water. We are His workmanship. That up and down repetitious process in our lives is a fundamental pattern disciples become accustomed to and are soon able to recognize and develop confidence in as we see the results. We pass through those seasons of tearing down and building up experiencing the Lord’s severity and His gentleness. It’s the work of His plan for us. Our prayers for help are leading to being changed into His likeness. Look up!
4. How much are you impressed with the way the Lord has handled His son, Israel? You know the multi-millennial story. It has been a tough trip for Israel. We are in the final chapter of this church age dispensation as Israel is being brought back to the front of the stage. Yes, He told Jeremiah [31:27-40] 2,600 years ago and Amos [9:15] 2,750 ago that He would make a new covenant with them and do what was necessary to cause them to walk in it. God is faithful and we have been caught up in that heavenly plan.
5. Isaiah said there would be no end to the increase of His government – [9:7]. We are now, and for 2,000 years have been, in the beginning of fulfillment of that government as the Lord governs in believers’ hearts through faith. One evidence of that government at work is the life, and the abundance of that life, in the citizens of His kingdom – John 10:10. Every born-again believer in Jesus Christ has the life. It is further good news that the abundance of His life increases continually, there being no limiting cap. The life is visible because it is not only for the one who possesses it but is for those who have been granted a desire to possess it. It is the evidence of present reality, not only of the coming realities. Ask Him for it. Likely He will call you to a more child-like obedience so that His more abundant life can be seen in you. If you need a hint about how you might start, pray through Jesus’ sermon on the mount – Matthew chapters 5, 6, and 7.
6. During most of King Solomon’s life he did well. But later, as he began to compromise his obedience, he turned into a reprobate. He turned his heart away from the Lord by loving things of the flesh more than he loved the Lord. That which started off splendidly went into the gutter. Our purpose is to stay on the “trust and obey” course all the way, increasing as the road gets longer. Right? Don’t start coasting as if to retire from service. We have more to offer the Lord the further we go. Situations will change, and our bodies require us to outwit our disabilities, but our spiritual growth and service continues. You are headed for a, “Well done, good and faithful servant” greeting. Remember, put a squirt of whipping cream and a cherry on your life for the Lord before you leave.
7. Must we, Lord? That is such a terrible question! “Do I have to do that, Lord? I know that you told us it was necessary, and you had it written in my language, but will you please lower the bar a bit? What is the minimum that you require so I can live my own life here on earth and still get into heaven? That’s the measure of my love for you, and what I think of your sacrifice for me. I want the benefits but I don’t want to give you my life 100% 24/7.”

We would not be able to hold down a good job very long if we were that sort of earthly employee. Neither are we of functional value to the Lord our boss. That sort of thinking and acting indicates that we think we work in a cheap kingdom for a worthless, wimpish, vacillating King.

J. B. Phillips put Jesus’ words this way: “If anyone wants to follow in my footsteps, he must give up all right to himself, carry his cross every day and keep close behind me. For the man who wants to save his life will lose it, but the man who loses his life for my sake will save it. For what is the use of a man gaining the whole world if he loses or forfeits his own soul? If anyone is ashamed of me and my words, the Son of Man will be ashamed of him when he comes in his glory and the glory of the Father and holy angels” – Luke 9:23-26.

Let’s look into those words. It is obvious that the Lord Jesus is making an offer to believers, and perhaps to those who are considering becoming believers. There are many in the second group who are watching us and deliberating, “Is it real and worth my life?” It can be compared to considering joining military service. Citizens may have a certain amount of zeal for the military, but they are not in the military until they have taken the oath. Only then are they in. The Lord is saying that following in His footsteps shows that we are “in.” Taking the oath is the believer giving up all right to himself, agreeing to carry his own cross every day, and committing to keep close behind Him. It is also similar to the line drawn in the sand at the Alamo. All were in the army, but those who stepped over the line committed their lives to the battle. Then they were useful.

The offer is still, “If anyone wants to follow in my footsteps ..” I think that the church is not presenting Jesus’ offer as scripture presents it and as Jesus presented it. Too often, the church’s offer is of religious fellowship, peace and fulfillment, religious tradition, and escaping hell/going to heaven. That is not Jesus’ offer. It is His earthly manna, but He is offering the heavenly. The distinction between heavenly manna and earthly manna is in its nutritional effect, as judged by the Lord Himself in scripture and the church’s effect on the world. The results are predictable and obvious. Except for individual acts of hypocrisy, those making an offering in the name of Jesus cannot offer anything beyond where they themselves live. Honest preachers, who do not have a grasp on true cross bearing and following behind, reduce their messages in order to stay honest.

Then there are the “must” and “all” words: We “must give up all right” to ourselves. The usual obstructions to “must” and “all” are our well-constructed life’s directions, peer and family and culture pressure, greed, focuses on our and others’ needs, and weakness of the church’s vision for discipleship. Of course, there is the problem of our re-interpretation of “must” and “all.” “Must” can be turned into an option or plea instead of an absolute, and “all” into “more, if the Lord ever convinces me that He wants more.”

We will not know if He wants us to go with Him into the darkest area of even the next-door world if we do not first give Him all of ourselves, for a necessary time where we are experience victorious living in that “all,” and then actually be available for wherever and whatever.

Then there is the carrying of our crosses and doing that “every day.” That sounds so very bad, doesn’t it! Who wants to have such a negative life?! We have a life to live, places to go, and things to do. And doesn’t the Lord want us to be happy? No, He gives us joy full-time but happiness is situational. Until we have Life and Understanding, we who are orientated to self-fulfillment should stand aside while others move forward. Don’t hinder those who are experiencing Life and Light in the call to their crosses. Those taking up their crosses every day are the standards for Christ. They are not perfect, but they are Jesus’ replacements, His new normals being processed. Those who live in safe harbors to avoid that which the whole world is experiencing, including life’s storms, cannot be used as the Lord’s standards.

And then the Lord said, “.. and keep close behind me.” We are much more productive and experience many less disappointments when we not only stay close to Jesus, but close behind Him. There is an intimacy with Jesus, a peace and productivity during tempests, and [always] heavenly and [usually] earthly success when we keep close to and behind Him. Following Him, watching what He is doing, and getting into step with Him as we work has much to do with “abiding.” That is a picture of a life that is pleasing to Him, and that is what we are to be about.

But isn’t our acceptance of His call to follow in His footsteps really a response to, 1) the depth of our perception of His personalized love for us [does He love me as much as He says?], 2) our belief in the ready availability of the Almighty’s all-mighty power [is He able to do what He says He will do?], and 3) our confidence in His ever-abiding presence with us [will He leave me dangling if I live for Him?]? Yes, and even more reasons than those. Yet, do you not see the self-centeredness of those questions? They show that my eyes are on the big ME, not on Him. The joy is that His eyes are on us! The blunt summation of self-centeredness is: “I will not lay down MY life for a lying, untrustworthy, weak, supposed god like that?!” So, we don’t.

Where does that leave us? Remember the last thing Jesus said in that quotation from Luke 9 verse 26: “If anyone is ashamed of me and my words, the Son of Man will be ashamed of him when he comes in his glory and the glory of his Father and holy angels.” Let’s not be found in that category. He is worthy of our all, without our knowing in advance where He will lead or what He will do. His offer is to any who will follow closely in His footsteps.

Therefore, our response can be something like: “Through faith and by baptism I died on the cross with Christ Jesus. My present life is no longer the big ME, but the resurrected Jesus within me. I am still in this natural body, but I am living in it through faith in the Son of Man who loved me and sacrificed His life for me. I am not going to live my own life, asking for His help only when I see that I need it, but I will trust Him to live in and lead me at all times. I can see that my cross is His grace for that reality to be accomplished in me.” That is Life. That Life will be pleasing to Him when He comes for me/us.

Some “little” after-thoughts: 1) Is the Lord always with you – Matt. 28:20? What does that mean? No problems? Perhaps. Occasional problems? Perhaps. Many problems? Perhaps. The “perhaps” mean that all of that is up to the Lord. 2) Are you guaranteed peace, rest and joy? “Yes, always; it will be well with my soul.” Or, “Yes, occasionally?” The answer of “Yes, occasionally,” is only when we decide to walk “occasionally” in the Spirit and “occasionally” in the flesh.

Peter shows us the way to avoid the shame when Jesus comes in His glory to bring us into His eternal kingdom [2 Pet. 1:11, in verses 2-10]. 3) So, how does the Lord equip a believer to ride out a storm? “Throw out four anchors from the stern [anchor yourself in that which the Lord has already said and done], pray for light [understanding and direction will surely come, on God’s schedule, after the darkness], eat some bread [abide in Jesus, the Bread of Life ], take heart [deliberately trust the Lord], and thank the Lord in the presence of the others [which is why He has you there with them]” – Acts 27:29-38. Notice that every bad event in that story was followed by another bad event, relentlessly. The Lord of all events had found Paul to be trustworthy. All was well with Paul’s soul, and to varying degrees all was well with the other 275 on board.

1. The kingdom of heaven, also known as the kingdom of God, is a present, fully functional kingdom with its King and His own rules. King Jesus taught kingdom rules in Matthew chapters 5, 6, and 7 and elsewhere, and the Holy Spirit continues teaching them to us. Jesus condensed them in Deuteronomy 6:5 and Matthew 22:37 [yes, it was Him both times]. The rules are already in effect, in heaven and on earth. Citizens of His kingdom know them and are committed to living them, not waiting until we arrive in heaven. That means that we bring heaven down upon earth now, not waiting until the time of Revelation 21. Isn’t it good that we don’t have to wait any longer to live in the kingdom?!

There are some conflicts between Jesus’ kingdom and the kingdom of this world, and we are the conflict resolvers, the lights in this world who show others the way through its present darkness.

1. One of Henry Ford’s thoughts on attitude: “If you think you can, or you think you can’t, you are right.”
2. Life is full of distractions. That’s why my Thoughts often return to “keeping focus.” Everyone faces distractions but few distractions should be accommodated. To make progress we have to recognize and reject distractions. Life’s main distraction is anything or anyone whom we allow to take our eyes off of Jesus. The distraction may be an excellent and godly thing or person, and it/they may have no intent to distract us from the Lord and His purposes. The distraction problem is in us, the beholders. The Lord has helped us by providing examples in scripture of how His people can be distracted. Our example today is King Solomon:

 In 1 Kings 3:1-15 Solomon had become the king of all Israel. Life was good and getting better. He was married to the daughter of the ruler of the world’s most powerful nation [Egypt], and had a great, walled-in house to live in in Jerusalem. It had been built by his father, King David, and Solomon had renovated it. We might call it the family’s homestead in Jerusalem. His next planned projects were a house for God [the temple] and more inclusive city walls for the city of Jerusalem.

Although the ark of the covenant was already in Jerusalem, it was within the walls of the city of David. It needed its own and most prominent location. God wanted and deserved a better place to live on earth among His people. Although the priests led worship of God at the ark, many people, including Solomon, had also been sacrificing on local “high places,” places where they liked to worship their God “their own way.” Then Solomon had a dream. Wow! It was the first time the Lord appeared to him. Seeing the Lord [who in later years on earth would be known as Jesus of Nazareth] and talking with Him really impacted Solomon, as it had Abraham, Moses, and others.

Solomon asked the Lord for wisdom [lit. “hearing,’” meaning the ability to receive God’s mind on matters] to judge and lead God’s people. [See 1 Cor 2:16, indicating that now “we” have the mind of Christ, not “me.”] If you were Solomon, what might you have asked the Lord for? There was and is something better than wisdom, but wisdom was actually a good request, seeing that it pleased the Lord. In 7:1 Solomon had been distracted from building God’s house because for him remodeling the homestead was of first order [bad sign]. After that, work on the temple was completed – v. 51. It makes me wonder why he did not first build the temple. Our own things can distract us from the Lord’s things, can they not? But imperfect Solomon was growing in the Lord.

In 9:1-9 the Lord appeared to Solomon a second time. In verses 4 and 5 the Lord indicated that Solomon might have asked for something better in His first appearance, something that would have been a greater request while facing the challenges ahead.

The distractions increase in 10:1-13. The Queen of Sheba was blessed by receiving all she desired, according to her personal desire, and they were given personally by Solomon – v. 13. What was such a personal request? Obviously, she did not need gold and spices – v. 10. The ancient records in Ethiopia from those days show that the emperors of Ethiopia from the time of Solomon have been descendants of Solomon. Haile Selassie, the 225th king of Ethiopia, was overthrown in 1974 by communists, thus ending the reign of Ethiopian kings. He traced his line back to Menelik, the first king of Ethiopia, who was credited with being the child of King Solomon and the Queen of Sheba. Have you been reading about the thousands of Ethiopian Jews returning to Israel in recent years?

Solomon’s distractions multiplied in 11:1-13 because of his many foreign women and their gods! Who would have thought it would happen to such a wise and godly person? He had such a good beginning. Does it help to add that he loved them? Was not that good? Yes, it was good, but it was disobedient for him to marry them and to worship their gods. The best of things can be turned into idols. See Mark 10:23-31; Luke 18:28-30; John 21:15-22. In Solomon’s old age, when he should have been putting a bow on the gift of his life to the Lord, he was distracted by family and religious matters.

In verse 6 he “did not follow the Lord fully, as David his father had done.” Don’t miss the Lord’s insertion of “fully.” You know David, that he was grossly imperfect, but the Lord says he followed the Lord “fully.” Wow! How can God say that? David and Solomon sinned greatly but notice that in verse 9 there was a difference in David’s and Solomon’s hearts. What could Solomon have asked the Lord for? Perhaps for a heart like His father’s – Matt. 22:37.

1. King David revealed the condition of his heart in many places in scripture. In Psalm 40 he sang praised to his God for restoring him – many times. The Lord heard David cry out to Him, brought him out of his sin and its consequences, set him back on solid ground, and sent him off into renewed futures. David would compose a new song to the Lord on those occasions. He was a sinner, but a repentant one who trusted the Lord to redeem him. It was the condition of David’s heart that moved the Lord in this way, contrary to the depth of David’s sinful acts.
2. This is a golden oldy thought. There are two gates for us to choose from. We must enter one of them. One is broad and easy to get through, enabling us to stand straight up and dance through, but its easy entrance leads to death. The other gate is narrow and difficult to get through, requiring us to go low in order to enter it. Both gates have a path beyond their entrance. All paths have destinations; they lead to somewhere, as do these. The broad gate has a broad path because it is well-worn and used by many. It leads to death. The narrow gate, which few enter, leads to Life. All who go on either paths die an earthly death, but those who enter the wide gate and walk the broad path die into a living death. Those who enter the narrow gate and walk the narrow, difficult path find that it leads to living a grand life forever. The narrow gate and path put pressure on our carnality, and disciples have chosen it.
3. The difference between a Christ-centered faith and a church-centered faith is that the church cannot save people. The church can be God’s instrument for living and proclaiming Jesus our Savior, but the church cannot save anyone by any of its doctrines, religious practices, and sacraments. By the Spirit, Paul wrote in 1 Timothy 4:1 that the church can depart from the faith. He instructed Timothy in 2 Timothy 2:2 to teach the gospel to those who will be faithful to pass along the gospel. A Christ-centered faith is simple and is focused on Jesus; a church-centered faith is powerless, complex and is centered on theology, personalities, repetitive practices, and humanism.
4. Once we get a taste of the good results of dying on our crosses, it encourages us to go further. It is then that we have a sense that His grace is actually bringing about our ability and fitness to follow the Lord Jesus – Luke 9:62. Desire got us started, and success is thereafter encouraging. “Whosoever loses his life for My sake will find it” begins to make sense. Our human mind will not agree with that, but until we die to ourselves we really are not fit to follow Him – Matt. 10:37-38. In other words, when I am following myself, I am not following Him. When we have died to ourselves we are then fit to follow Him. We cannot live the new Life until we have died to “my” life. Finding our new Life is incomparable – Matt. 16:25.
5. The Lord is offering discipleship to those whom He has given new life. We were snatched out of the pit, made sons of God, and given that offer. It is my experience that most believers do not know if they are disciples, some simply believe that all believers are disciples, and then some believe there is no longer such a thing as disciples and discipleship; just be good.

To be His disciples, Jesus said we must take up our crosses daily and follow closely behind Him. That means a daily experience of our insufficiency and His sufficiency. It is a deliberate loss of our self, and an increase of Him. For example, Paul said he died daily – 1 Cor. 15:31. His testimony of the Lord’s life and power are very attractive, aren’t they! It shows that it was not Paul, but Jesus alive and functioning in him. – Gal. 2:20. That verse reads, “I have been crucified with Christ; and 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 up for me.” More below.

1. It is remarkable that the Lord told us to go into all the world being and teaching the gospel and making disciples. With our going is another instruction, that when we are not received we should shake the dust of that place from our feet and move on – Matt. 10:14; Mark 6:11; Luke 9:5. Then He did something that made our efforts more efficient; he said we were to receive and listen to the Holy Spirit who would direct us. So, Peter went to Cornelius’ house and had good results – Acts 10:all. He did not throw his pearls before swine – Matt. 7:6. Paul experienced the same spiritual leadership in Acts 16, with a resulting good harvest. I wonder how much more fruitful we Christians would be if we were disciples, watched what the Lord was doing, listened to the Spirit, and followed Him closely -- that being from behind Him?

Vince Lombardi was a great football coach. When he was hired to coach an already good team, he walked into his first meeting with the team saying, “Gentlemen, this is a football.” He started with the basics, which was a review for all of the team, but he knew that every member needed to have a thorough review of the game from the ground up. And he needed to find out if each person really wanted to play on his team. Saints, Jesus is asking us if we really want His purpose for being here. Being in our time and place are no accidents; our purpose is to live intimately with the Lord Jesus and to move in obedience to the Spirit – not to be self-directed believers. So, why are you here, why do you do [everything] that you do, and what is your purpose in life?

1. Do you believe Galatians 2:20? Immediate answers are something like; “Of course I do; I’m a Christian so I believe the Bible, whatever it says!” Let’s break down that verse:
2. “I have been crucified with Christ; ..” That says that Jesus Christ [God the Son born onto the earth to live as a male human] has been [past tense] crucified [was killed in that certain way]. So far, so good; I am believing that which many good and intelligent people believe but many others do not believe. So far, this is only about the death of Christ Jesus, not about His resurrection, ascension, reigning above, and coming again. That also says I have been [past tense] crucified with Him. The question here is what it means for me to have been crucified [put to death] with Him and if so is it indeed a past [and done done] thing for me. If so, my “self” is dead [dead to myself by my faith and God’s grace] by my deliberate and on-going choice.
3. “.. and it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; ..” As a born again believing in Christ person I understand that I am not to live according to even the best of life’s rules, but by loving the Lord with everything of myself, and my neighbor as myself. I have been given God’s Spirit to enable and empower me to do that, so I have been relieved of having to live by rules hoping to please God or man. By continual faith in God’s truth I no longer live of and for myself, but of and for Christ in me. That’s the truth and I am learning to live by faith in that fact.
4. Therefore, “.. the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, ..” This flesh, this physical body with its living soul, is now lived in and directed by God’s Spirit, so for me to live is Christ – Phil. 1:21. I fail to exercise that faith 24/7 but the Lord is working on and in me. He will complete the good work which He has started – Phil. 1:6. I am His workmanship – Eph. 2:10.
5. “.. who loved me and gave Himself up for me.” As He was dying on the cross He said, “It is finished.” His work was done, and by faith His work is being done and will be finished in me.

Notice the next verse, verse 21; “I do not nullify the grace of God, for if righteousness comes through the Law [even by God’s Law, which is the best of life’s rules – ed.], then Christ died needlessly.” So, saints, we are not only delivered from living by rules, but are given the means of life. The Law in any form is meant to drive us to the Lord on our knees, asking Him to stir up Jesus’ life in us as we learn to minimize ourselves.

1. Take heart, you who have not done well in your life/project/service for the Lord. “Whatever is worth doing is worth doing badly” – G. K. Chesterton. Doing it goodly is preferable, but not doing it at all is unacceptable. Make your offering, even if it is not worth much. That evaluation may be only yours.

On another perspective, don’t say; “Nothing is impossible,” because I know people who do nothing every day.

1. All that exists was created by the Lord, and for His purposes. His purpose in all of His creative activity was, is, and forever will be to bring all of creation into alignment with(in) Him. That purpose is gradually [earth-attitude speaking] being accomplished. There have been times when the purpose has leaped ahead, then other times when it looked like it was going backward and being stopped. All the while He was moving ahead and working out His purpose.

During those backward-appearing times our natural minds are incapable of seeing His progress, so He gave us His words of truth and the powerful eyes of faith. It is a shame that during those times we reject His truth and eyes for our natural understanding and eyes, when His mind and eyes were given for those exact times. We see evil flourishing and think that the devil is winning. That’s not true for one moment even in the smallest of things. All things are designed to work for His obvious glory, which can be seen only with the special eyes He has provided us.

1. This Thought will take some “hanging in there” while it’s not-so-obvious theme is developed. Since Abraham is our father in faith, who is his nephew Lot to us? Our cousin, of course. Let’s see how a spiritual cousin can be and how we might should be relating to our present spiritual cousins. [That will require some identification.] Lot, not being a descendent of Abraham, was not included in God’s blessing of Abraham’s physical seed. In fact, Lot was not to go with Abraham when Abraham, at God’s command, left country and family.

By faith Lot could have been of Abraham’s spiritual seed, as we are, but was he? However, Lot was what I will call a “nephew seed” to Abraham and a “cousin seed” to us. I had to manufacture those terms, as you noticed. But those loose relationships seem to exist, and God deals with us and them, so we should consider them.

Are you still “hanging in?” This Thought will be expansive of mind and time. It will cover generations and centuries of Lot’s spiritual decline and that of his descendants but will be more than a slide into an unrighteous dead end. It will show God’s grace and patience, and His grand mercy of ultimate redemption because of His covenant relationship with Abraham.

I will lay the foundation for our story. Abraham was an idol worshiper, who dwelled in a heathen country. God told him to leave his country and family and go to a foreign land. He had a living father, a wife who was his half-sister, and an orphaned nephew named Lot. When Abraham prepared to leave his country, leaving his family was somewhat of a problem to him. He was under the family authority of his father, married to a half-sister, and had family responsibility for Lot. But, those covenant responsibilities were not his problem; they were God’s responsibility. So, Abraham left home and set out with his father in charge. They were about half way to where the Lord wanted them when they settled for several years – until his father died. Then Abraham became the leader of their group. They resumed their journey and settled [most of the time] as nomads in Canaan – unknown to them to be the land of God’s appointment. Eventually the Lord made it clear that Abraham was to keep his wife, Sarah.

Then the Lord separated Lot from Abraham, peacefully – Gen. 13:1-11. Questions: Did Abraham do the right thing by giving Lot the first choice of the land division? Neither of them had any claim on any of the land; it was “owned” by the many inhabitants in those cities and villages. Abraham and Lot only wandered through it to their benefit. Did Lot do the right thing when he chose the best land of the river valley, with its grass and water? Was grass and water what attracted Lot to that half? While Lot continued to have his growing herds and herdsmen, he moved into the city with wife and kids and became a city leader – Gen. 19:1. Evaluate that, please. Would you have chosen the best first if offered to you? Do you do that now? Would you have offered the other person first choice despite your “rights?” Do you live that way?

With Abraham out of his country, and the covenants with father, half-sister, and nephew settled, the Lord told Abraham, “You did not know it, Abraham, but all of what you have been through has brought you to the place [geographically and in your soul – ed.] where I want you. I have given you and you descendants all of this land!” Notice that the Lord had just marginalized Lot. No, He did not eradicate Lot from his relationship with Abraham, and that will be our major point. Continue with our story about Father Abraham and Cousin Lot.

In Genesis 18:16, 22 Abraham recognized the Lord and the two angels. It was purely a spiritual recognition. After a feast and fellowship, the Lord lingered with Abraham while the two angels continued to Sodom where righteous [by faith, not by actions] Lot lived. Lot recognized who the angels were, but the people of Sodom saw them only as humans [a common spiritual disability]. That was to Lot’s credit, but he lacked that which Abraham had – an abiding fellowship with the Lord.

Why did not the Lord destroy Lot along with Sodom? Lot had made his choices, and they were terrible. He tried to persuade his two sons-in-law-to-be to escape with him, but they laughed at him. No respect there! He had no believer’s testimony. He even offered his two virgin daughters to the mob at the door, who wanted the two men [angels] for sodomizing, but the mob turned him down. This was Lot, Abraham’s nephew and our spiritual cousin.

Notice that Abraham still had personal concern for and spiritual clout with the Lord in regards to Lot. At this point I will begin to show where we are headed with this Thought. Do you have Lots in your life, or are you someone’s Lot? You children of Abraham, do you have godly relationships with, concern for, spiritual responsibility for, give yourself to, and pray earnestly for someone who just is not making it with the Lord in this world? Or, have you washed your hands of those bothersome, stumbling people? Abraham was out there on the road with the Lord, interceding for Lot. Does your relationship with the Lord mean anything on behalf of your Lots? Do your relationships with your Lots mean anything to the Lord? If not, what is your abiding relationship with the Lord for? Is it only for your personal righteousness and blessings, and for those on your heart who are doing quite well? Selah.

Now for the longer-range outcomes of Lot’s life choices. By his unintended incest with his daughters, Lot produced the tribes of Moab and Ammon. In the centuries ahead, those two tribes [along with numerous others] were thorns in the side of Abraham’s descendants. At first, the Lord protected those two tribes from His retribution through Moses and the Israelites – Deut. 2:9, 19. Why? Do you see some answers to your prayers that you did not see before, even after your own lifetime? We have our Lots, and some of us may be others Lots.

In due time, those two tribes were dealt with by the Lord. They went through His painful afflictions so they would be brought to the acknowledgment of Him as their God – Ps. 83:all. Notice Moab and Ammon in verses six through eight, and the grand mercy of God’s ultimate redemption in verse eighteen. Don’t lose faith when your prayers “are not answered.” Jesus said our prayers would be answered, a remarkable statement by the truthful One on our behalf. When Jesus checks on you, will He find this area of faith alive in you? We are so very short sighted, are we not? That which happens today!, to us!, seems to be the totality of reality! Not so.

To conclude this Thought, and this issue of THOUGHTS, enrich yourself a bit more on this topic in 2 Peter 2:1-10. Consider how remarkable that Peter and the Holy Spirit could call Lot “righteous.” Why didn’t Lot move out of Sodom years before the angels took him by hand and pulled him out, seeing that he was being tormented by Sodom’s lawless deeds? Why don’t we separate ourselves from sins [our sins] instead of abiding with them? He got, in his flesh, as we in our flesh get, something we value from our ongoing sins; something that satisfies us. By Lot’s abiding in Sodom, he was central to the production of the longtime pain and temptation of Abraham’s seed through his seed.

Kami o tataeyo