THOUGHTS OF SEPTEMBER, 2018

For Thought No. 1 I offer you my teacher’s notes from a recent Saturday Night Bible Study in our home – the one to which you are always invited. Its topic is Personal Righteousness into Spiritual Maturity.

Part 1: David was not yet king of Israel, although for years he had been anointed for the office. In 1 Samuel 25 he was on the run from King Saul and the army of Israel. He was hiding out in a wilderness area with 600 of his men, plus unnumbered others. A rich man named Nabal had many flocks of sheep and goats in the area, and David and his men had a good relationship with Nabal’s shepherds. Not only had they not taken any of the flock, but they had protected them and had had only good words with the shepherds. Festival time arrived so David sent some men to Nabal, asking for a contribution of food for the feast, thinking that Nabal would be thankful and generous because of his riches and the quality of their relationship. Nabal angrily refused the request. [Remember to be a blessing to those who have been a blessing to you, and that blessings take many forms.] We will begin reading in verse 2 and go through verse 42. Then we will move on to Part 2 and come back to David and Nabal later. [Read 1 Samuel 25.]

Part 2: How are we doing in regards to the coming of the Lord? When a hurricane is coming our way here on the coast, we make hurricane-specific preparations. Are there any specific preparations for us to make when we expect the Lord’s soon return?

Perhaps we don’t expect His soon return. In Matthew 24:37 (32-39) the Lord tells us that believing-faith is necessary for our preservation. When He returns, people will be living what they consider to be “good, normal lives,” but they will be lacking one thing necessary to meet God’s definition of a “good, normal life.” Noah had that life – the righteousness of faith that is shown by its works of preparation for a coming major event that had never before happened.

Noah believed God so he did all that God had commanded him – Gen 6:9, 22. What did God command him to do? Answer: Build the ark. Notice that Noah was to construct that which would be God’s instrument for saving himself and the others who believed and built with him – showing that his and their faith was real. Was it the ark that saved them, or was it their faith? Answer: Their faith. Besides the ark, what else did Noah do that showed his faith to be real? Answer: He preached righteousness – 2 Pet. 2:5. He was a preacher of righteousness during over a century of ark building, and possibly before then. That leads us into our lesson for tonight.

 Part 3: Growth in personal righteousness is a good, overall title for all of our Bible studies because it leads to spiritual maturity, which is our desire. Our present level of spiritual maturity has come from having received considerable personal attention from the Holy Spirit [often involving others], which has required the humbling of ourselves to Him and them. We know that we have further to go, and as we watch over one another we can see how we are doing, where we are headed, and if we are currently having any positive growth. Here are some spiritual maturity strong points we have focused on during our life together. As we go through them, I will point out that David lived through all of them in 1 Samuel 25, which you read in Part 1, above.

 1) We call our sin what it is, sin. That’s because we are comfortable in the Lord and with one another. By accepting our sin [the weakness of our flesh] and sins [our acts of disobedience] we have been accepting part of the truth about ourselves. Putting forth years of personal effort toward controlling our sin had been a fruitless effort, as was the opposite [self-justification], but admitting the truth of our weakness and the truth of God’s ability and intent to change us was a step toward becoming really free.

We trusted the Lord for our deliverance while others held our heads above water until we acted like humans, or were at least somewhat delivered of our animalism. We have been coming out of the habitual darkness of the kingdom of this world, where “change yourself, cover it up, or run” were our habits, and we are learning to walk in the light with our Holy God and His holy ones. [Look around the room for good examples]. That shows that Jesus is our righteousness. Becoming kingdom of God oriented is changing us and our whole lives.

Abigail helped David see his sin, and to call it sin. He appreciated her so much that he married her.

 2) Have you noticed that we don’t steal from the Lord as much as we formerly did? We, all people, and all things absolutely belong to Him. We whom He has purchased with His Own blood belong to Him in a deeply personal way, and all things we would have formerly possessed have become His, meaning actually and functionally. We are now His trusted stewards of His stuff. As such, we have times of examination and testing so that we do not deceive ourselves regarding the difference between ownership and stewardship. See Malachi 3:8-12.

The thought of “this is mine” is still very common, is it not? If yielded to, that sort of thinking brings spiritual death instead of spiritual maturity. On the other hand, when we yield to the truth of our stewardship we have peace about our material things, which are a large part of life’s involvements.

Just for a short time, David forgot that Nabal was God’s chosen steward of those sheep. He forgot because he did not agree with Nabal’s stewardship. [Imagine that oversight!] He was good at remembering that King Saul was God’s anointed, and that David should not lay a hand on him, but now David was about to commit murder and steal some of God’s stuff from the Lord’s steward.

 3) “But how about ME?!” When the ME has been at least somewhat dealt with we enter into a wonderful life. The process can be scary to the flesh, but here we are, in it. In the past we put ourselves first, so we stood on shaky ground instead of the Rock. Now we check on the desires of God’s heart and do what pleases Him [at least we are learning]. Our confidence grows through the experiences of our obedience and His responses. That’s developing spiritual maturity – John 1:12; Rom. 8:14.

Two ways to check on the progress of our stewardship is to watch our fear and self-defense levels. Fear is the flesh’s signal that we are exposing ourself to danger [a real danger unless the Lord does something] and self-defense proclaims ourselves our owner and self-protector.

David was still young and had the tendency to put himself above God and others. His big ME rose up against Nabal “out of nowhere.” That’s contagious in the world and in the church, but God’s people know what to do about it when they see it – the sinners repent and the Family loves them in customized, effective ways.

 4) None of us are on a desert island, although we sometimes live like we think we are. We are part of Christ’s body, the church, which He has created and is perfecting. I have been the recipient of 1 Peter 4:8 many wonderful times. It reads, “Above all, keep fervent in your love for one another, because love covers a multitude of sins.” It is one of those almost unimaginable things to be a known sinner, with my sins revealed, and to be loved intensely and steadily by Nancy and the rest of “the church” as we were in at that time.

My reputation as one of God’s children and a minister of God’s word has been sustained by others sometimes more than by myself. The Lord has separated me from my sins as far as the east is from the west [Ps. 103:12], and God’s people have done the same! Yes, almost unbelievable. My point is that in my life I have been surrounded by people who have buried my sins, covering them with love. Subsequently, they have not spoken badly of me. Not speaking badly of others is a real mark of holy spiritual maturity.

David had no readily available personal higher authority in his life, and his men were dedicated to him so all were being swept along in the moment. Instead of from within his group of 600, the Lord used someone whom David was about to commit a terrible offence against [murder]. He listened to her, spared her and others, and soon bound himself to her in marriage.

 5) Pride is the mark of an insecure, immature person. Even as believers our flesh likes “MY shining glory” to be noticed, even if we have to proclaim it ourselves. But the trouble is that the Lord is jealous of His glory and will not share it with another. It makes no difference if it is our reputation in worldly labors or in religious labors. He has many ways to humble us, and He will, because He chastises those whom He loves – Heb. 12:6 (4-11). Giving up one’s reputation is difficult only on the flesh, but Jesus did exactly that Himself and will help us do the same. Everyone has a reputation, and we should build a good one, but let’s not seek “MY shining glory.”

David’s personal “shining glory” was very bright in his own eyes, and it blinded those brothers whom the Lord had given him, but it dimmed to a tolerable level when the Lord’s word [with appropriate actions] came to him through Abigail.

2. Scripture examples are numerous. The Lord opens the eyes, ears, wombs, etc. of those He chooses to do so, and closes them in others. On the road to Emmaus, the eyes [recognition of Him] of the two disciples were closed until His time for them to be opened – Luke 24:15-16, 31. If we committed Christians can tolerate the thought, He even hides the obvious from His disciples. The reason? His wisdom and love, and our unbelief. Our part? Open our minds to that which is beyond us.

3. All of us, especially the Lord, know that Moses did very well when it was the Lord’s time for him to begin God’s ministry. But near the end of his time of service Moses disobeyed the Lord. He was told to speak to the rock so that it would give water to the millions of Israelis and their animals in the desert wilderness. In the past, the Lord had told him to strike the rock with his rod, and water had come forth; but now it was, “take your rod and speak to the rock” – Num. 20:8-13. Moses had fallen into a religious traditional mode, so he struck the rock just as he had before.

Moses suffered for his disobedience, but why? 1) Moses disobeyed the Lord, simply put. 2) Moses misrepresented the Lord to His people. Moses was upset at and impatient with them, but the Lord was not. Our children and others who look up to us rightfully consider our attitudes to mirror those of the Lord. God wants to send those to the task who will obey Him and who will personify Him. 3) Moses also took credit for the nation-saving miracle. He stood with Aaron before the people, saying, “Listen now, you rebels; shall we [notice the “we,” meaning Moses and Aaron – ed.] bring forth water for you out of this rock?” The Lord will not share His glory with anyone. [Ouch; that hurts!]

4. True revival has been defined many ways, the variations dependent on the biblical education and spiritual experience of those offering their definitions. Some definitions of Holy Spirit revival:

1) For football fans, “revival is God taking the field.”

2) For the believer who is under conviction, “revival is God’s finger pointing at me.”

3) For those abandoning religion and eagerly taking up their crosses, “revival is God revealing Himself in awesome holiness and irresistible power.”

4) For those freshly observing a revival, “revival is a people saturated with God.”

5) For the Bible teachers whom the Lord has involved in a revival, “revival is simply New Testament Christianity, the saints going back to normal.”

6) For those who at first resisted revival, but thereafter yielded to the Lord, “revival is a holy shock to apathy and carelessness.”

7) For the faithful of the most previous revival, who had hung on to the Lord while praying for His help, “revival is God’s reminder of His faithfulness to His remnant.”

8) For those who had been walking with one foot in the world and one foot in Christ’s kingdom, “revival is a life-changing reminder that holiness is a constant necessity rather than an occasional option.”

5. Mercy, love, patience, justice, humility, etc. are precious fruit. “Precious” means a) rare, scarce and b) valuable, expensive to acquire. Although some believers seem to have them in abundance and to have come by them easily, surely such grace took time and trials and abiding faith, as the Lord customized to each of us. We others who are less abundantly endowed must have had more base backgrounds that hindered our spiritual growth, or so might we want to think. In any case, those are the things that the Lord requires of us.

Read Micah 6:6-8. For the Lord to label those fruit as requirements removes them from the option list. But, we rightly believe that those are not requirements for salvation [the free gift of going into eternity with the Lord]. So, required for what? Answer: They are required when we [His people] approach the Lord, “bowing before Him” [prayer, worship, our lives], especially when including our needs and wants in our prayers [most pointedly, our daily need to be forgiven]. In those times He does not need our most sacrificial sacrifices, our most extreme services, or our largest offerings. Those things do not cover our sins.

We are in need of mercy but if we are refusing to give mercy to others we are in trouble. He sees our rebellious acts [sins] and calls for us to produce and use our basics, our spiritual fruits. Those are the precious items that He requires of us before He will grant forgiveness and further grace. Yes, they are options as to whether we will do them or not, but they are requirements for spiritual strength and growth.

6. The Lord portioned out land to each of Israel’s tribes in the Promised Land, except to the tribe of Levi. Why did He do that to the tribe of Levi? How might that tribe have reacted to their not being given a portion of the long-Promised Land? Can you hear a cry of, “But how about me?!” They had been in that toilsome wilderness as long as the other Israelis! Not only that, but they had had to carry the ark of the covenant of the Lord all those years, plus their own baggage, and that duty continued into the Promised Land – Deut. 10:8-9; Num. 18:all.

Is that answer adequate for us when we Christian Levites are slighted or mistreated? Do we continue giving of ourselves in those situations and interceding for our tormentors’ sinfulness, when the righteous hand of God comes to us in the unrighteous hand of humanity? Are we getting what the Lord wants for us? Is He being fair? Will there be a payday someday? You know your answers, and you know God’s answers, if there is any difference between the two. We are ambassadors of Christ, not sent into the world to receive justice and equality, but to be and give it, with mercy. Our portion in this world is the Lord. He is enough. [Fortunately for life and service in this world we usually get more than the Lord “only.”]

7. What made [and makes] a Pharisee? I’ll be very generous to all Pharisees with my answer. The Pharisees of Jesus’ time had squeezed down the truth so that there was no variation from their “totally understood” truth; all else was false. They killed the truth that they had, and refused to consider anything to be true that was outside of their acceptable truth. They squeezed and trimmed on the truth until there was no room for exceptions. It was almost down to, “Only God is righteous, man is only sinful, all except God and Pharisees are going to hell.” The Sadducees were no better although, because they did not believe in an after-life, they did not have to worry in advance about going to hell.

Jesus came and undid all of their transgressions of the Truth. He showed them where they had squeezed the truth so much that there was no more life in that which they accepted, but that there was a wealth of truth outside of their self-imposed limited acceptance. Examples: A person harboring hate is a murderer; a person with lustful eyes is a fornicator and adulterer; possessing that which your brother needs today, but not helping him with it, is theft. On the other hand, possessing active sin prevents the proper judging of another; not helping your neighbor get his ox out of the ditch on the Sabbath is ungodly; and forgiving others and being forgiven ourselves starts a new life.

Anyone, believer or otherwise, can be a big-time or occasional Pharisee. The cardinal sign of Phariseeism is confidence in one’s absolute knowledge, its being totally true, and that there is no other truth on the matter. That’s not even scientific, much less holy spiritual.

8. I don’t have any backup verification on this, but I think that we are often bothered by that in us which the Lord has no intent to change. Our flesh will always be with us in this life, which makes us susceptible to temptation and liable to committing sins, and that is not going to change by confessing that we have our flesh and that it is susceptible to sin. We will have this soul and its openness to sin [but not bondage to sin] until we leave here. Let’s not ask forgiveness for being temptable and tempted. Rightly handling our weakness results in spiritual strength. The devil and our human nature no longer have power over us, but still our flesh can hear the devil roar like a lion. Don’t forget that we are in the Lord’s classroom and all is in His hands. The Lord has paid our tuition. Stay and listen to Him. Always do what Jesus says.

9. Grape vines are not the only plants that need pruning. When the last of your season’s roses drop to the ground, you start the pruning job, don’t you. All of the old dead blooms are cut off, then the shriveled branches. Then you pare the bush back to shape it. At that point it looks pretty sad, but you have the bush’s interest in mind. The Lord does the same with us, even though He gets [got] pierced in the process. If those rose bushes could talk they would be saying the same things we say as we are pruned. What is currently being pruned out of your life? Mine seems to be always fear, a manifestation of unbelief. Prune onward, Lord.

10. Fellowship with Christians is great. Fellowship with non-Christians is great. Fellowship “long distance” with people we have never seen is great [slo-mail, e-mail, phone, through others, etc.]. Fellowship takes all forms, and its loving and helpful communication in any way pays off. Here’s the “but.” But when you don’t have that fellowship, what is to be done about it? C. B. says we will never fully appreciate or fully benefit from fellowship until we have learned to live without it. I believe he is right, and many Christians have experienced that condition. Many of those examples are found in nations where Christians are persecuted, but it can happen without religious persecution, such as when held in isolation.

But, we are never without fellowship with the Lord Jesus. For many, the loss of fellowship with living humans has enriched their fellowship with the Lord, which they would have not otherwise gained. Even during extreme torture, they experienced the closeness that comes from drawing close to Him. The Lord draws close to us the greater our need for Him.

Another experience of fellowship with only the Lord comes when we may be around many people, yet be in our own private spiritual wilderness. Wilderness times are no pleasure to our flesh, but they are fruitful when we realize our situation and the possibilities offered – that being we can experience the reality of our theology, such as, “Jesus is enough.” So, when you are not having fellowship with the saints, or your current quality of that fellowship is inadequate, your answer may be to have it with Jesus. Turn to Him only, put your mind on Him, resist distractions and mind-wandering. He is there and waiting.

11. It doesn’t have to feel like it, it doesn’t have to sound like it, it doesn’t have to look like it, it doesn’t make any difference what people say about it, and it doesn’t make any difference what the devil does about it!!! The “it” is “the truth.” He who is within us is greater than he who is in the world – 1 John 4:4. That’s a fact that will never change. It is substance that will always be true and functional, and will remain true and functional when all else passes away. Lazarus was dead for four days and was stinking. It did not matter that Paul was stoned to death, his head mashed flat. Both walked again.

So don’t settle for just agreeing with whatever the Bible may say. Live by what you understand in the Bible. When the trial begins, remember that Jesus is in charge all the way. If it costs all that you are and have, Jesus was in charge all the way. Get in step with Him. Stay in the boat; the storm was formed to glorify Him, to bless us forever, to show the world more of Jesus and to display some real Christianity.

12. Furthermore, although we do want to be as pleasing to the Lord as possible in what we think, say and do, remember that He does not accept anyone or anything less than the perfect righteousness of Jesus. Not to worry, because for those who have placed their trust in Jesus that impossible requirement is fully met on the basis of Christ’s perfection, not our performance. The Law points us beyond itself to Jesus who took the Law into Himself and fulfilled it on behalf of those who would trust that He did exactly that for them personally. Then, His love and sacrifice motivate us to live by grace alone. It goes like this: Scripture alone, Christ alone, faith alone, grace alone.

13. Psalm 122 tells God’s people to plant their feet within the gates of Jerusalem and give the Lord thanks for the way He is running all things. When we read 2 Chronicles 6:32-33 we who are from distant lands and are neither Jew nor Israelis see that we are included in that invitation to Jerusalem by God and Israel. We are being beckoned to Jerusalem to pray there so that all of our needs may be met by God and Israel. Zechariah reinforced the international invitation in 8:20-23; and in 14:16 he specifically included the remnant of people from the nations that had so terribly oppressed Israel. The fullness of that invitation will occur during the millennial reign of Jesus in Jerusalem, but we are seeing a taste of it now. Israel is blessing the world with many innovations medically, electronically, agriculturally, etc., etc. Israel is the first nation to respond on site after an earthquake or tsunami, and is helping many nations in many ways. And the nations are responding by beating a path to Jerusalem.

14. Creation, the world, empires and nations, cities and individuals – none are flowing along absent the diligent purpose and direction of our Creator, down to the smallest atomic particle. He is its purpose. His will is focused on each of us. The Lord is fully intentional. He is the Lord God of all, no matter how finite or infinite we define “all.” There are no accidents. The physical world and the spiritual world reveal His plan, and you and I are the only ones who know that. Let’s show reality to the world and church. We don’t have to know much to be able to do that. It’s a matter of knowing the truth and living it. That’s a definition of righteousness – believing what the Lord says is the truth, then committing our lives to Him and it. On those numerous times when we don’t know the facts, knowing Jesus is Lord will get us by until we know more about the matter. Babies don’t have to know much, do we?!

15. On Earth in His human flesh, as the son of Man, Jesus wanted to perform His purpose, the purpose of His Father, that He bring Quality Life to the world, that Life being eternal in quality and quantity. The way He lived [in the Spirit] and died [on the cross] were the Way for Him, so He chose and walked it. He shared the Way with His disciples, and they took it, too. By His same Spirit and faith, they lived and died. His disciples still Live that way, with the same calling, Spirit, and results. Our old man’s life, too, is crucified by the same faith so that the life of Jesus can live and be seen.

16. We see Jesus initiated in Mary’s womb by the Holy Spirit, formed into a human in her, born in a manger, taken to Egypt, returned to Israel as a toddler, comfortable speaking to religious leaders by age twelve, then attending a wedding when He was 30 years old. That is an 18-year gap that we do not need to know about but often would like to know. Here is a bit of fill-in. When Jesus, His disciples, and Mary were at a friend’s or a family member’s wedding in Cana, they ran out of wine. Mary presented the problem to Jesus, expecting Him to solve it. When He initially declined the responsibility, she was not insulted or discouraged but left the problem in His lap, saying to the servants, “Whatever He says to you, do it.” She had learned over those 18 years that Jesus was her “go to” person. Neither she nor Jesus knew that He was going to do a miracle, His first, but she knew He could and would handle the problem. Mary knew to whom to go, and Jesus knew how to take responsibility for that which was given Him. Theirs’ were voices of experience and confidence. It seems that she was accustomed to and comfortable with going to Jesus and getting results. She simply laid the problem in His lap without telling Him what to do. Their well-established relationship took over from there. Mary may have thought that Jesus would hustle-up some money and come back with the wine, or something like that, well-knowing her Son. It does not appear that she or He were expecting a miracle. They had prayed and talked many times about His calling in God, and He had recently left home and begun forming His ministry team. She had encouraged Him in His calling many times. Now something new was happening. Expectancy was in the air. Now, He offers the same opportunities to us, regularly. Whatever He says to you, do it.

17. It takes faith and wisdom to apply this Thought accurately. The Lord works mightily to show Himself more than adequate for any task. He says that five of His faithful ones can put 100 to flight and 100 put 10,000 to flight – Lev. 26:8. Then again, He says one can put 1,000 to flight and two put 10,000 to flight – Deut. 32:30. That is encouraging, is it not? Then He sobers us up by saying that 1,000 of His people shall flee at the threat of one of the enemy – Is. 30:17. What a reversal!

He lists [at least some of] the reasons for the reversal: Rebelliousness, carnal and vain alliances, refusal to listen to Him through visions and the prophets, rejection of God’s word, and depending on the strength of their flesh. Let’s define those reasons. 1) Rebellion – knowing the will of God and deliberately choosing otherwise. 2) Carnal and vain alliances – covenantal ties not approved by the Lord [same-sex marriages, unrighteous business partners, spiritually unbalanced marriages, etc.]. 3) Refusal to listen to Him through His selected and anointed servants – not listening to Him because we do not like His messages or messengers. 4) Rejecting His word – simply not liking who or that which the Lord likes. 5) Depending on our selves instead of Him – humans like to make too much of self-confidence, or at least we leave the Lord out of our resources. America is the most powerful nation on earth, but we need to remember that the Lord is the one who decides outcomes.

18. For the few who may not know, the Episcopal Church is experiencing problems. Its current headlined problem is that it has accepted homosexuality and same-sex marriage as being normal. The dissenting minority in the Church is being pressured to agree with the majority -- to submit or get out. Members of the minority have proposed faithful courses for themselves: 1) Disarm, be weak like Jesus, stay in the Church, and identify with the Lord in His humiliation [Not my choice of words – ed,]. 2) A second course was suggested, that being to leave the Church [divorce, break covenant with – My words – ed.]. This little writing is to encourage a third course of action: 3) Briefly stated: Stay in the church, don’t break covenant, speak up often [clearly, humbly, strongly] without rebelling or complaining. [Staying in the Church and being quiet would indicate agreement with the majority, which is clearly to be avoided.] Good communication among the dissenters and a bit of organization would be necessary. Yes, Jesus did the same and was called a rebel; and we will be called rebels, but those temporary noises came and will come from out of the darkness, not from the Light.

I want to offer my observation on how the Episcopal Church got where we are. Some of the righteous minority will reject this, but you will notice that such objections will strengthen my observation of how the Episcopal Church arrived at today. And, this will not be pretty for the traditionalists or secularists.

 1) For several generations the church has relied on its traditions, teachings, liturgy, reason, and local canons, omitting God, His printed word, and His Holy Spirit. There is a vast, unnecessary difference. We had the word and Spirit, but ceased honoring them as our primary persuasion. That removed our only foundation of Truth, which is Jesus Christ and what He said. We abandoned the Truth, including during times of debate with the world and with the world as it powered its way into the Church. It is not surprising that when the Church abandoned the word and Spirit that it lost its voice to the world and to itself. We had nothing to say and no strength to stand.

 2) Instead, we began to depend on our calling of good will and unity in the Church and began to be self-directed. We were pressured by our ambient culture, and by whomever rose to power in the Church through our well-intended go-along-with-them reasoning. The Church had fallen into the hands of the Church even before our current problems.

 3) Having abandoned “Scripture alone, Christ alone, faith alone, grace alone” and similar biblical foundational thinking we became that which we wanted – a socially acceptable elite religious organization in step with the modern world, a world which actually had stationed itself a half-step ahead of us on the decline. We became different from our strong, biblically informed ancestors because we abandoned our biblical roots. An example: Women being placed in position of authority over men, a seemingly non-injurious, necessary disobedience in these enlightened times.

I’m going to use several Old Testament scriptures to encourage its acceptance by those who may not see much value there. Let me point first to a few New Testament encouragements:

1. Romans 15:4 and 1 Corinthians 10:6, 11 tell us that all of those things that happened to God’s Old Testament people, the Jews, happened to them for our sakes, and were recorded for our sakes. Those people endured tough lives and the tougher Law for our sakes without their knowing it. We owe the Lord and them our attention!
2. Paul wrote to Timothy [2 Timothy 3:14-17] that the Old Testament leads to our gaining God’s mind, corrects us, should be taught, and will equip us for living and teaching God’s life. The Church needs all of that. We need to know God’s Truth, believe it, then commit our lives to it. [That’s a good definition of righteousness.]

By definition, rank unbelievers do not believe in God or the devil, but religious unbelievers believe in both, although in their unbelief they have God’s and the devil’s roles reversed. The highly educated religious leaders of Jesus’ day rejected their humanspun, living God as He walked among them. It may be difficult for us to believe, and to see ourselves doing the same, but they called Jesus a devil, and called themselves God’s people, claiming their godly ancestry [“We are descendants of Abraham!”] and resting comfortably on their traditions. See John 8:31-47. They were the shepherds of Israel, but they rejected their long-awaited Great Shepherd, Jesus Messiah. Unbelievable! Sliding out of the Spirit and into religiosity is deceptive.

Ezekiel saw it coming. Israel’s shepherds were feeding off of their sheep but in return were not feeding good food to their sheep. God’s word from a true shepherd’s heart is that good food. These sheep were sickly, weak, broken, scattered, and lost. The sheep had no real shepherds to love, protect, and feed them. As a result, the Lord said He would be against those shepherds. [Our self-created theologies prevent our hearing for ourselves that same tough and precious word from the Lord.] He said He would take their sheep from them and give them to another. All of that is in Ezekiel 34. The message for us in those verses is that the sheep of the Episcopal Church are being removed from the Church’s care, and are being given to others. Isn’t the current removal at 40% over the past 20 or so years? That’s remarkable, even frightening, for shepherds who love their sheep. The false shepherds will consider instead the ill-effect on the Church of those departing sheep. Programs will be prepared, congregations closed and combined, but the truth of our sins and the depth of our repentance is found wanting. Our hope is in the Lord who humbles the unrepentant and restores the humble. He chastises those whom He loves and, hopefully, that includes us.

In the previous chapter, chapter 33, Ezekiel had the Lord’s mind and heart on another topic. The Lord charged Israel’s watchmen with being alert and active in their duty as watchmen. When they saw or heard something, they were to raise the alarm. If they did not raise the alarm they were held responsible by the Lord for the calamity that followed. If they did raise the alarm, they were free of God’s consequences. Watchmen of God’s people are shown that which is happening and is about to happen. They [you, me, others] must speak up for the sake of the Lord’s Church when we are granted His vision. To not speak up will place us in the same dust bin as those who do not hear or listen to God’s warning. That speaks of things both temporal and eternal.

Here is a thought, although not a new one, that Jesus described as an ongoing problem in the Church. It can be described as being one of many possible settings for the tares among the wheat – Matthew 13. The ratio between tares and wheat varies from time to time. The days we are talking about the tares being in control of the Church. In Romans chapters 9 and 11, Paul wrote that not all of natural born Israel [born of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob] were God’s spiritually chosen Israel. That must have insulted mightily those Israelites who could see they were not on what Paul called “God’s list of His chosen Israelites.” The Lord told us to relate properly to the tares, even if they were religious leaders [Matt. 23:1-3], and to not try to pull them up from among us because that would injure the Church. The tares do not hear that word, so they go on thinking the Church would be better without the wheat, and working toward that end. Remember that the tares have the roles reversed concerning righteousness and unrighteousness. But the wheat hear the word and obey the Head of the Church – the One who is in charge no matter the sadness of any conditions.

The message to the Church: 1) Stay in covenant, love one another, trust the Lord, raise our voices often and clearly and humbly, develop a support organization, communicate with and encourage all, and if we get thrown out [like Jesus was], then go peacefully and in victory. In that, there will be Life for us and others, and our Lord will be pleased. 2) A word: Within three years the supposed right-ness of the Church’s current leadership will be in disrepute, its leadership will be brought down, and their numbers will be very small and impotent. 3) Our current crisis’ greater purpose is to show us where we have drifted and to call us back to the Lord and biblical reality. Our problem is not homosexuality and same-sex marriage; it is us.

19. During the first coming of Jesus, He found that His religion, Judaism, was in the hands of those who were not God’s chosen people – Rom. 9:all. Those in charge had promoted themselves to leadership, without even being chosen by God to be citizens of His kingdom, the kingdom of God – Matt. 23:1-3. Those unchosen ones were citizens of the kingdom of this world, children of the devil, unregenerate, and spiritually lost – but they held religious position and power over those who were God’s people – John 8:23-24; 37-47. Notice how Jesus handled that. He spoke up, gently at first but more forcefully as the time of His departure neared. And, He held Himself to the same standard that He gave us of the church who now find ourselves in His situation – Matt. 13:24-30; 36-43.

Where did Jesus get the authority to tell us about the tares and what to do about them? Of course, from His Father. Jesus came to do the will of His Father, and He did exactly that. But to be more specific with the answer, Jesus got His authority in the matter of the tares from facing the same situation Himself, and doing it right. He was tempted in every way that we are, and handled every temptation righteously. That’s why and where He got [from His Father] His authority to tell us about the tares and what to do about them in the church.

Why did Jesus tell us about tares among the wheat, and what to do and not to do about them? Obviously, He wanted us to know about the situation and to handle it properly. Our situation is that the religious organization known as the church contains wheat [believers, who will shine forth as the sun in the kingdom of our Father] and tares [unbelievers, who will be thrown into the furnace of fire]. The tares are not only among us but are in positions of leadership. That should never be, but as it was in Jesus’ day, it is today. That’s why He informed us in advance. Remember Jesus’ solution: Don’t split or rebel, speak up with the truth in love clearly and often, feed the sheep, love one another, and trust the Lord.

The religious organization called the church is a missionary field of many tares. It is important that we see the problem as it is, and that we use good [accurate] and godly [attitude] judgment. “Not pulling them up from among us” not only means “don’t run them out of the church,” but possibly also means “don’t forsake them as your missionary field.” If we do our job right, some may be born again, as some were in Jesus’ case.

That process is a good one for developing ripe good fruit. We are in the hands of the One who has chosen us and appointed us to this task. This task is fruit bearing, not to be confused with what we do in our ministry – Gal. 5:22-23. Instead, fruit bearing is that which the Lord does in us while we are under duress. It is the transformation of our character while we walk the difficult parts of our walk, which makes worthwhile everything we faithfully endure. We have been chosen and appointed to bear fruit – John 15:16.

20. Let’s think about the end times. Not THE end times, but the end times of each one of us as the time for our individual promotions from earth into the after-life draws near; those end times. The Lord addresses our individual end times:

 1) Matthew 10:22 – Jesus was speaking to His disciples [in the hearing of anyone else who heard Him speaking or subsequently reads these verses, such as we are now doing], saying, “.. it is the one who has endured to the end who will be saved.” Our eternal, irretractable salvation is a gift, but thereafter our earthly faithfulness greatly affects our condition from the time of our appearance at the judgement seat of Christ onwards. That’s the purpose of Christ’s judgment of us – our future condition. As earthlings called, chosen, and granted eternal life, our futures never involve our going to hell, but the granting of laid up rewards from our faithfulness on earth. Those rewards make life in the here-after different for each of us.

 2) Hebrews 3:6 – The topic here is Christ [the house-builder] and us [believers, His material]. The point here is that we are part of that house if we are present, available, and have been used when He finishes His house. If we are not, at its completion He will have used other material. For His glorious house to be finished it must be complete. Our part in being of His house requires that “.. we hold fast our confidence and the boast of our hope firm until the [‘our’ – ed.] end.” Paul lived his life with the knowledge that he was in a race – 1 Cor. 9:24-27.

 3) Revelation 2:26 – Here, the keeping of “.. My deeds until the end” results in the reward of sharing with Jesus the rule over the Gentile nations during His reign in Jerusalem during the millennium. Fantastic! Those who ruled spiritually over [“possessed” – Luke 21:19] their souls during their earth-life, and helped other saints do the same, will be given earthly authority during the millennium. The point here is that we must not abdicate or surrender to the enemy. The end is always within sight and the strong man rejoices to run his course – Ps. 19:5(b). As the Jerusalem Translation puts it, “By your steadfastness and patient endurance you shall win the true life of our souls.” All believers will be in heaven, not hell, but some will run their race with such perseverance that they will win special prizes. So, “.. let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, fixing our eyes on Jesus ..” who did the same – Heb. 12:1-3.

Everyone won’t, but somebody will. Each of us is in our own end time.

21. This is an old Thought, and a recurrent one [thank you, Lord]. What is God’s purpose for me, you might ask. We were created to glorify God and to enjoy Him forever. Sin altered us, but not God or His plan. We were created for and by Him. We are His elect. But then there is the finding of His purpose in this world, long-term and short-term, for each of us. That is for us to search out, as little children excitedly gathered around our father trying to find which of His pockets holds our candy. Life has so little to be fretted over. He is the Lord. Nothing is by accident. All has His design and hand on it. Peace!

22. When Paul went to the synagogue in Corinth he encountered lots of opposition from the Jews so he went next door to the Gentiles, literally next door. Many of them turned to the Lord and were baptized. In that setting, the Lord spoke to Paul in a night vision saying, “Do not be afraid any longer, but go on speaking and do not be silent; for I am with you, and no man will attack you in order to harm you, *for I have many people in this city.”* So, Paul stayed there 18 months. But do your see what the Lord said in the present tense, about something that had not yet happened in world time? He said “I have many people in this city,” not “I will have many people in this city.” The promises [and plans] of God are yea and amen [yes and done] – 2 Cor. 1:20. When the Lord plans something, it is done and He looks at it that way. Perhaps we should be thanking Him for more things of the future instead of asking Him for them.

23. The book which we call the Bible is also known as God’s word, which it is. In that book of words, the word “church” only applies to the people whom He has called apart from/out of the world unto/into Himself. He never refers to the church as a building built by humans. His church of His people has been, is being, and will continue being built by Himself only. Our part? Trust Him, speak His word, love one another. In that setting [and many times without our help] He will grab the called ones and place His Spirit in them as we simply trust, speak, and love.

The buildings we construct and label as churches are useful but otherwise meaningless, whether we label them church, temple, tabernacle, or sanctuary. The Lord God is not in churches made with human hands. We may have deep religious and emotional ties with them, but the Spirit of God is not in them. That possession is reserved for His people. Stephen told that to God’s earthly people, those who wanted an earthly house for God built by themselves saying, “.. the Most High does not dwell in houses made by human hands ..” – Acts 7:48, and was stoned for saying it. Later, Paul said the same thing to some pagans who had constructed temples to each of their many gods, and they were interested enough to desire more of Paul’s story – Acts 17:24-25. They were rewarded eternally for their interest.

24. The last chapter of Hebrews is loaded with churchy advice, including in verse 17 the admonition to obey and submit to our leaders in the church. Who are those leaders? Are they clergy? Where are they in my church? What if they are wrong, even evil? Consider the well-known pedophilia/homosexuality in the leadership of the Roman Catholic church. We are so far away from that sort of life-giving relationship that our leaders probably could not understand or tolerate our obeying and submitting to them. Then there is the consideration of the character and quality of followers, as with the leaders.

A similar commandment is that the younger men be subject to their elders and that all of us clothe ourselves with humility – 1 Pet. 5:5. That sort of instruction is for those who want to grow in spiritual maturity in all ways, into the stature that is the fulness of Christ. That’s serious, Christ-centered stuff. After all, who is my elder(s)? Are there any spiritual elders these days? Do they know they are elders, and that they are my elders, and do they want anything to do with my sort of commitment? Are those older than me living any differently than the world? Do my elders have to be older than me?

Some of those questions are answered as we observe prospective elders. Elders have experienced a deeper work of the cross, have more practical and Christly wisdom, have more to teach others of the Way, and have that something that you want. If you are serious, the Lord will show you your elder(s). It’s good that you asked.