THOUGHTS OF APRIL, 2016

1. In its simplicity, the Lord’s second greatest commandment is easily applied to the saints in the workplace. We are to love and serve our neighbors as ourselves. Having been justified by faith, we are sent back into the world to our neighbors “just-as-if-I’d never sinned” [just-if-ied] and presented by the Lord as His life-giving servants. In the church house we learned to love and serve our brothers and sisters, and then were sent out to our neighbors -- the checker at the grocery counter, the emergency room patient, and the incidental contact in the elevator.

Accordingly, state government positions give those with legal authority [police, judges] the opportunity to minister God’s love and service to those under their legal authority. Theirs is the opportunity to transform the society’s understanding of authority, and that “work is not about me,” it’s about service to others and thus to the Lord.

Likewise, in business customers and coworkers are our neighbors. When we labor to be self-sufficient and to help others we can expect to stay in business. When our business approach is misfocused, materialism and self-centeredness erode our success, and the presentation of godly work is twisted.

The conclusion to this simple Thought is that Christians who live for the Lord promote God’s goodness for their neighbors. Jesus is hidden in our neighbors, but He is not to be hidden among us – Prov. 25:2.

2. For a blessing, look up Norman Borlaug [1914-2009]. He is called “the world’s greatest farmer,” and “the man who saved a billion lives.” If you already know of him, congratulations.

3. “Sometimes a player’s greatest challenge is coming to grips with his role on the team.” – Scottie Pippen [1965-present], American basketball player. A group of stars can be a team of losers. Jesus came to form a body, not parts like you can find aplenty at the automotive store. When those parts are put together as a body, each part has found its destiny, although some adjustments, lubrication, and tuning-up may be necessary for best results.

4. Another Thought on discerning the Lord’s course of action and following Him into it, vs. setting a good course and asking Him to bless it: We ask that His will in heaven be done on earth, not our will on earth be done on earth. In John 6 the disciples noted a problem, went to the Master with it, were told what to do, and they did it. He blessed their faithful obedience to His plan. That led to an unlimited supply in a seemingly impossible situation. Jesus already knew what He was going to do [verse 6], and He had disciples who were learning to walk-out His plan. Disciples watch, listen and obey; then they don’t sweat the results. They easily and confidently pray, “Not my will but Your will be done” because it is His kingdom, not ours.

Keep rank.

5. If you were the devil [you ladies will have to greatly stretch your imagination on this one], and wanted to cause the most possible trouble in the church, would you go after the wheat, stomping on it, pulling it up, etc., or would you plant tares among the wheat? No need to ponder that question too long; just look at the church and evaluate the devil’s work among us. At times it seems that he has stopped fighting us and has decided to join.

6. I am nothing as a cook, but I’m an appreciative eater. However, I do know that leaving the flour out of the bread recipe is worse than a disaster – it’s like leaving Jesus Christ out of a sermon or Bible lesson. And just a dash of flour is as bad as none. Speakers of God’s word find it easy to keep Jesus in focus when He is equally in their lives.

7. Every evidence of His Father’s presence [and perhaps even His actual presence] was removed from Jesus when He was on the cross. I think we can say that that will never happen to us as believers because Jesus said He will never leave us [His presence] nor forsake us [stop working on our behalf]. But there are times when every sense of His presence and actions are removed from us. Those are times when we are offered the opportunity to only believe.

Like Job’s life was being written in the books of heaven, so are ours being written. Every thing and every one around Job shouted that God had turned His back on and forsaken Job. Despite all of the unbelieving distractions, Job believed. He had nothing left but his choice to believe God. The more often and the deeper we get into that type of testing, the more we then have to offer to the Lord and to the world. We are examples of LIFE as we live through our crises.

8. Have you ever wanted the Lord to just leave you alone for awhile? Jesus was tempted in every way that we can be tempted, but did not take the bait. That means He was tempted to want a normal life as a teenager and adult, to want displays of powerful things from God so others would recognize Him for who He was, to want higher positions in life, to want private times when He was fatigued and pressed to give more of Himself, to want weekends and vacations off from the usual involvements of His life, and to have less or no emotional or physical pains. That is part of His and our humanity. It is part of His and our divinity to accept the unfolding of our Father’s life-plans for us as they come – mostly unexpected and many uncomfortable. But He is always present and working, never late, and perfectly customizing our every event.

Job would have preferred to have been left alone, also. But he knew he was in the hands of God and that all that was happening to him was of God. If asked, he would have wanted no part of his illness and other devastations [me too!]. The Author of Scripture worked the same stuff into David’s life and gave David the insightfulness needed to praise Him for his tests of the righteous along with the wicked – Gen. 22:1; Ps. 11:5; 34:19; James 1:12.

Lord, don’t leave us alone even for a while. You and your workings are a continual blessing, you are the Master of all things and events, and you are completely in charge. Ride on, Lord Jesus! We are yours and are your workmanship.

9. “Blessed are the meek [humble, gentle] for they shall inherit the earth” – Matt. 5:5. What is meekness, what is inheriting the earth, and when does the promised inheritance occur?

Meekness is 180 degrees removed from haughtiness and pride; so far removed that the meek one knows he is no better than the others. The knowledge of his own weaknesses and sins are enough to prevent the attitude that he is better than others. He may be a better worker, a better speaker, a better father, and a better everything of performance, but is not of better personal value than others. Meekness has power but not power of self. It has power of presence and of word, but not of personality, personal strength, or worldly position. It is power under control of love, without the poison of self-interest.

The earth is now and will be forever inherited by those meek ones. It is now inherited invisibly by them as they live among us. It will be inherited obviously by them in the millennium. It will be inherited fully by them when God on His throne comes onto the earth and reigns here forever [as far as we are given to know]. But, the meek are even now inheriting the earth. Enjoy your inheritance.

10. In everything, God went first. When He told us to treat people the same way we want them to treat us, He died for us. Now He wants us to die for Him. Why not?

11. Reaching back into the Old Testament record, we see that God’s people built altars to Him in special places. Then they built a tabernacle [portable fold-up “church”] with an altar, and then a non-portable, immovable temple with an altar. God’s plan was for all of those to be man-made and temporary.

As believers we have the Holy Spirit within us, making us temples of the Lord. And the Holy Spirit is permanently within us, going wherever we go. Plus, we have the altars of our hearts. What is missing? Answer: The living sacrifice of ourselves on our altars – Romans 12:1. Embracing our crosses supplies the missing, living sacrifice. In return for that daily sacrifice, we gain Christ – Philippians 3:8. As much as we continue promoting the old altars and temples, we miss the offering of ourselves on our crosses and show our contempt for the reality of faith. We become enemies of the cross – Philippians 3:18. For the believer the natural fades away, being replaced by the essence, which is real substance.

12. Here goes another attempt to label Christian types, just so we can think about a problem. This time it is Cultural Christians and Biblical Christians. Being careful of possible inaccuracy and aware of lurking judgmentalism is a bit of help, so let’s be kind to ourselves and others as we briefly wade in.

Cultural Christianity is a non-Kingdom of God presentation of Christianity. That does not mean that Cultural Christians are not Christians, but that they are living according to their ambient culture. They cannot be identified as being Christians by their lifestyle. Therefore they are impotent. Their focus is on a God of wrongly defined love, and not on His holiness. Holiness separates us from worldliness, so the Cultural Christian’s best focus is on personal righteousness, but not too excessively. That focus seeks God’s peace and prosperity, not giving and self-sacrifice.

To balance the comparison, Biblical Christians are not perfect, either. But their focus is on Jesus and His will; His living through them. Their lifestyles show their dedication. They march to a different drummer so are in many ways out of step with their ambient culture – depending upon the variable righteousness of the culture and of the Christian. The kingdom of God is easily manifest when those two variables are sufficiently distinct.

Biblical Christians have a presence with them. That presence is more obvious as some of them move into holiness, an intolerable condition to most cultures and to Cultural Christians. Giving and self-sacrifice are common among Biblical Christians.

13. In Acts 14:22 some saints’ personal paraphrases [but not translations] seem to read, “Through occasional and light tribulations some of us may have to pass in order to get to heaven.” Simple observation of life will correct that paraphrase if by chance we missed what Paul actually said. He said we must go through many tribulations. Be encouraged. Nothing happens by chance. The Creator is also the Architect and our Sustainer. He has designed the perfect route for us as we move onward toward more wonderful days in this life and the next. Joy unshakable and the fullness of glory are now with us, sometimes invisibly to others, but soon will be obvious to all. The process can be labeled: “I am decreasing and Christ is increasing in me.” Little tribulations seem to be adequate for some, but larger tribulations are required for others. All are in His hands. Rest in them.

14. How have you learned the sufficiency of God’s grace? C. B. learned God’s sufficiency by first experiencing his own insufficiency. That’s a tough route, but apparently the only route. It is well-traveled, so the sooner we give up, the better.

15. In October of 1517 the Roman Catholic monk, Martin Luther, tried to open conversation with the worldwide church about Ecclesiastical Correctness, somewhat like our problem with the global authoritarianism of Political Correctness. He saw that human tyranny in the form of the Pope, and others, was robbing the church of biblical authority. That’s all he wanted to do – start a conversation that would hopefully result in renewal of the church’s faithfulness to Scripture. Instead of a warm theological chat with church authorities he found that what was needed was a deep reformation of all its parts.

That’s where we are today, but worse [Luther would not agree that our condition is worse than his] because today we have to contend with five, not only one, elements of the religion of American and European secular humanism, those being entertainment, information, academic, political, and corporate. Those five are united into a firm ecumenical structure called and identified as secular humanism. In that church structure the Bible is out of date and dangerous. Its views of marriage, family, gender, and sexual behavior [to name a few] are to be accepted even if through the force of absolutism. They tolerate no neutrality.

The question is what to do. That was Luther’s question, also. The answer must be pursued in the fellowship of those who believe the Bible and see that our culture is deviant. It is about our unity.

About this unity I have often said that it is not necessary for us to change the names of our churches to one common name, or to change our doctrines so that we all agree doctrinally, but that we would need to love one another as Christ Jesus loved and loves us. That was His prayer and command on that last night.

 If we will love one another more than we love our doctrines; if we will love one another more than we love our independence, if we will love one another as we love ourselves -- we will not fret or stumble over our differences. That includes Pentecostals, Evangelicals, Catholics, Independents and, yes, Jews, to whom we owe so much. Any who has the love of God will be welcomed into this strategic ecumenism. No doubt many will decline such a functional unity. It will work only if the Lord is with us, and what can be wrong with that?!

16. The man we know as Jesus created the earth, walked around on it [shown many times in the Old Testament record], came to live on it for 33 years, went back to heaven, and will soon come back for a longer visit. He has never neglected His creation. He is the Beloved in whom we are acceptable – Eph. 1:6. Part of His ministry that has been given to us is that other believers are to be acceptable to us. If you draw lines, where do you draw the line between others being acceptable and non-acceptable to you? Is that Jesus’ line, too?

17. Are you comfortable when pronouncing an important “Yes” or “No,” or do you find yourself adding “I promise” or some other form of incidental, informal oath? Question: Why are you not comfortable with a direct and simple “Yes” or “No” in those times of more than usual oath-giving? My guess is that you are either dishonest [and know it] or are not accustomed to being believed [and know it]. Anyone who is at variance with your opinion of yourself will require an oath or some other security, according to the depth of their opinion or the value of the matter at hand.

God told His people that they already had and knew His instructions that they were to tell the truth always. He reminded them that if their truth was reinforced by an oath they were “especially” bound to fulfill their word. If they broke their oath they were condemned or punished in some way by man and God. Oath reinforcement was done by swearing on something considered greater than the one who was swearing, such as God, the temple, heaven, Jerusalem, or something else of importance.

Then Jesus told them to not swear by anything! He said that anything other than a “Yes” or “No” had an evil source or prompt. Their “No” had to be a full-force “No” and their “Yes” a full-force “Yes.” As always, He was again speaking from the position of perfection and authority, where-in one’s word is impeccable and effective. After all, He who was speaking was the Word of God who spoke all of creation into existence, who honors His word above all else of Himself, and who wants each of us to live our words the same way.

Those Jews to whom He was speaking had two classes of oaths. Any oath containing God’s name was absolutely binding. Any other oath was considered non-binding. Thus, they had a built in system that allowed for lying or other forms of failure of their word. Imagine the frailty that that introduced into their society; no man’s word was totally reliable unless sworn on God’s name, and often not even then. If no one could be believed without swearing, he was already considered a liar. Then came Jesus. He said that the truly good person would be known as such and his word would be sufficient. No additional guarantee would be necessary. When at times society is sufficiently righteous, a man’s word is his bond. When at other times society is scattered and unrighteous, a man’s word must be backed by oaths and other guarantees.

So here we are today. Do you find yourself backing up your word with some form of guarantee? Do your kids want you to “promise?”

18. Here is one of those Thoughts that must be handled carefully in regards to attitude. Inaccuracy is fine, but bad attitude is not. Question: How many [what percentage of] Christians in your social group call Jesus “Lord” but do not do as He says – Luke 6:46? Of course, no one is perfect but try to answer the question by their established, engraved-in-stone lifestyles, not their occasional failures. Then evaluate yourself. I suspect that the more spiritually sensitive saints among us will grade others up and themselves down.

It’s only a Thought, to experience doing 1 Corinthians 2:15 without doing Matthew 7:1.

19. One of the victories and proclamations of the cross is that in kingdom matters we do not gain by trying to get, but gain by freely and joyfully giving.

20. Anytime I review my walk with the Lord I am greatly relieved that He has never been No. 1 on my life’s priority list. He has never been No. 1 because He has never been on my priority list. He doesn’t want to be No. 1 on anyone’s priority list. He wants to be the totality of our attention and life. That’s His first and greatest commandment: “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all you mind.” His second commandment then relates us properly to mankind: “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.”

Then comes our priority list, ordinarily headed up by our spouse, children, etc. If you ever sit down to make out your list, don’t put the Lord on it, and remember to put near the top of your list those others who will cry at your funeral. All others go further down the list.

21. At the same time that the Lord was convincing me that He did not want to be on my priority list, He began delivering me from my identity as “DOCTOR Eckert.” My identity became “Bob, son of God, who does some doctoring.” Parallel to the development of my new identity in Him, and quietly at that, I began to find my identity as a member of the body of Christ. I was not an incidental or passing-by member of the body/congregation in which He embedded me. I was a living member of that body from the beginning, and found it easy to bring others into that unity.

22. Marketplace ministers are imperfect. Surprise! We are as imperfect and perfect as are our brothers, the ecclesiastical ministers. While reading, thinking, working and living along this grain, I have been given to understand that the love of money has been broadly deployed within the church, as part of the tares among the wheat that Jesus warned us about. Some say that the church has more love of money than it has money.

I was not surprised to learn that from the eleventh century onward in medieval Europe it was common for merchants to inscribe “For God and Profit” or “In the Name of God and Profit” in the upper corners of their accounting ledgers. That was neither cynicism nor materialism on their part, but a reflection of their conviction that pursuing profit in business and finances were ways of giving glory to God by helping to unfold the full potential of the universe He had created. Their business tasks were moral ones, as are ours.

When we read articles and reports on business and finances today it is easy to get the idea that, for some, generating wealth is the central focus. But doesn’t it seem that finances should be every bit as focused on ethics as is such as the field of medicine? That means that expediency and utility cannot be the basis for making any moral decisions. Christians know that there are exceptionless moral absolutes that are never to be violated, no matter how much social welfare such violations may promote. That means that we must also reflect on foreseeable consequences of our actions.

It is not acceptable to choose evil in order to realize good – Rom. 3:8. We cannot know the consequences of all actions or laws, but the biblically informed mind and a sensitivity to the Holy Spirit are great assurances to the righteous.

23. As Western nations have gradually [?] abandoned Christian principles that had undergirded our societies and institutions for centuries, we have diminished our ability to respond to almost all situations, including our many and increasing crises. I mean that our reasoning ability has really been shattered. That which had been simple has become insolvable. Personal and international relationships are without firm ground. There is no right or wrong, but simply what may work for today. We hear solutions like, “kick the can down the road again,” which is no solution.

Human rationality is grounded in our understanding of who God is, what is His nature, and what is His intent. It is ignorance of or separation from God that has led to our loss of reasoning. The way back is not through more education or more money, but through heartfelt repentance for our turning from the Lord.

24. Customs do not happen overnight. They have reason and consensus. Religion is often involved, and deeply at that. Of course, they can be good or bad customs, and even that can be debatable. As examples, in some countries casual nudity is customary. Our coed medical ministry in Mexico bathed with the locals in rivers with the two sexes less than a stone’s throw apart and in full view, and no one gawked at the other. [Our necessity was that we had to guard against the alligators.] Immodesty was not an issue, except at first experience. In many places, especially in third world nations, topless women in public are commonplace.

But those customs are considered entirely out of place in other cultures. In America we conceal our male-female differences, although that standard is being stretched. Our latest stretch is in the matter of whether men can use women’s bathrooms and shower among the women. It is amazing that such changes are being pushed in our culture. It comes under the heading of, “Who wuda thunk it?!”

25. For this Thought It is helpful to remember that the Old Testament is full of types, shadows and symbols, and the New Testament is the revelation/realization in faith of those types, shadows and symbols. Jesus as the sacrificial lamb is our outstanding example. The Old Testament lambs were types/shadows/symbols but Jesus became the real thing. Those who receive Him in lively faith know that truth, and no longer feel the need for animal sacrifices. We now live in His completed work by faith, appropriate His sacrifice immediately at any time by faith, and when we come together we celebrate His sacrifice in the Lord’s Supper by faith. More on that below.

How about the Old Testament shadow of water baptism, whether of individuals or of tribes and nations? Israel was baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea – 1 Cor. 10:2. The writers of the New Testament, being Jesus’ apostles, were inspired to write about water baptism of believers. They clearly saw that water baptism was more important than a symbolic ritual done in obedience to God. They saw water baptism as something of tremendous spiritual value and life-giving power. They knew that when done in lively faith, water baptism had a powerful spiritual impact from God’s point of view. To them, its symbolism belonged to the past but its realism is for now. They said, “Repent and be baptized,” not “Just receive Jesus.”

The same goes for the Lord’s Supper. Paul was personally taught by Jesus that the bread and the wine [and other food that may be taken on that occasion] were His body and blood when taken in living faith. They were/are to be taken in full fellowship with others of Christ’s family. To violate that fellowship covenant makes us unworthy of the Supper, the results being that many of us become weak, sick and die -- 1 Cor. 11:23-34. Eating and drinking of Him is not a symbol when taken in lively and obedient faith. Why settle for symbolism when the real thing is now offered us? There is real spiritual power for health and life in the body and blood of the Lord.

NOTE: For years I have enjoyed full participation in the Lord’s Supper with my Roman Catholic brothers who know I believe Jesus’ words when He said, “This is my body and this is my blood.” We simply have not bothered to stop and search out just exactly what we understand He meant by what He said. Since we agree on those words in the gospels, that has been enough for my full, brotherly participation at the Lord’s Table.

Jesus said those words and we accept what He said. Why do some make life and unity in the kingdom so difficult by defining exactly what He meant in those words, and requiring others to believe exactly the same? He said them; believe them. Unite.

26. The judgment seat of Christ, where each believer will be appearing before Jesus for judgment, is meant to be a time of rejoicing for us, not a time to be feared or to come away from with loss. Here are some bits of important news. First, the fear and loss will occur only if we show up there with unrepentant, unforsaken sin. One of the Holy Spirit’s jobs is to convict us of our current sin [nature] and sins [acts] so we can now be washed clean. Being sensitive and responsive to Him in this matter is of high importance to us and to the Lord. Our future time at Jesus’ judgment seat is meant to result in, “Well done, good and faithful one. Enter into my glory.” Sin is bad, and we all sin, but quickly get rid of it and its effects by repenting and confessing to the Lord. It is possible to appear before Him clean.

Secondly, in case you have the wrong understanding that Christ at your judgment will be a fierce or stern judge, I have more good news for you. Words in original languages are often not easy to translate perfectly into other languages. For example, love can be translated as God’s sacrificial love, our human brotherly love, or erotic love – all three being very different. In this case Christ as our judge at the judgment seat is not meant to be understood in the sense of our being hauled up before a harsh judge and getting our just punishments. The judgment seat of Christ is presented to us with judgment meaning “evaluation,” as in a job evaluation by a righteous superior. It is a much softer judgment than is often imagined, but still is a judgment where everything will be exposed and we will be rewarded with loss or gain. We are His kids, He loves us, we will be with Him forever, and/but there must be judgment.

Thirdly, going to heaven vs. hell will not be the topic at Christ’s judgment seat because only those who are believers will be at that judgment seat. Those believers have been “born again” by virtue of God having placed of Himself [His Spirit] within us while on earth, now in this earthlife. How good we have been, or how bad we have been, will not decide our eternal destination; only that we were born again. Our appearance at Jesus’ judgment seat will be to deal with our [believers’] badness and goodness, resulting in individually achieved rewards or losses. Heaven vs. hell will not be mentioned.

Those who go through life with little or no thought of God tend to think of meeting Him as a time of terror. If we go through life drawing closer and closer to Him, we tend to think of meeting Him as the greatest of all times. We are right.

27. Scripture contains many prophecies that speak of the Jews being the head of the nations, and the nations [Gentiles] being the tail. That has not yet happened. Before and during the church age of the past 2,000 years, Israel has continued being the tail. Those prophecies remain to be fulfilled. The church age is not fulfilling those prophecies, as is shown by Israel’s part of the church being so small, only the tail. And among nations, the nation of Israel is still the tail. It will be an eye-opener when Israel becomes head of the nations. That may not happen until the millennium.

28. Do you have God’s perspective on Muslim immigration into the Western world, and on America’s southern border being almost totally open to anyone who comes? Yes, no, maybe, I don’t know, I don’t care, no one knows, what immigration, etc.? As children of the light, must we live without God’s perspective and be as divided as is the remainder of humanity? To help us fulfill His commission, He has brought the most spiritually needy part of the world to us.

29. Do you want to understand why you are not more fruitful in Christ’s life and labors? I’ll give you a start, then leave you and the Holy Spirit to come to your own conclusion. It starts in John 12:24: “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit.” With Jesus Christ in us we are equipped with all sorts of spiritual blessings. If we die to ourselves [indicating that we are fertile soil for the Seed], that Seed will produce much fruit. It amounts to something like our own death, burial, and resurrection, doesn’t it. Like Christ’s.

30. When we allow ourselves to think that spiritual things are harder to discern than are natural things, we are deceiving ourselves. In Matthew 16:3 Jesus lightly shamed Israel’s religious leaders by pointing out that they could predict overnight weather but they could not predict the things of God in their times. He told them that signs of the times were more obvious than the indicators of the next day’s weather. That should encourage and convict us. Because we are sons of the light, we are to know the times better than the sons of Issachar [1 Chron. 12:32] and of the wise men of Persia [Esther 1:13].

31. Two little, simple, and powerful things to apply ourselves to: 1) Keep your peace – “A kind word turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger,” “When you are struck on one cheek, turn your other cheek,” “A wise woman builds her house; a foolish woman tears it down with her own hands,” and “.. live in peace; and the God of love and peace will be with you.” We are equipped to bring God’s peace into life’s situations. 2) Stay the course – when there is a stalemate, don’t split! Keep covenant. Don’t separate. Give yourself to be the solution, personally, even though you can’t join the other side in committing sin. Humbly hold your righteous ground and receive them when they repent.

Those two little efforts will change lives, beginning with us. You can live John 12:24. Dying to oneself is powerfully effective in Christ.

32. Instead of the usual route, we know how to take short cuts, and are thankful for them. Short cuts are the most direct route, the bee-line. There are many reasons for not always taking the short cut, including not knowing the territory, the way. To the point – why do we pray for peace, patience, joy, love, anointing, power, and other spiritual things? Seeking those good things is the “usual route.” But the short cut to them is going directly to Jesus. “For in Him dwells all the fullness of the Godhead bodily and you are complete in Him ..” – Col.2:9-10. Our Heavenly Father has poured Himself into His Son, Jesus, and we are to feed on Him. He has and is that which we want. Go directly to Him.

33. It’s good to know what is going on and what to do, but often we don’t, and searching can be unfruitful. Not knowing doesn’t need to be a problem; just abide on the Vine. The fruit will come.

34. The world’s and the worldly Christians’ rewards, and their prayers [if they pray], are for an easier life as with health, job, politics, etc. But the Christians’ rewards, and their prayers, are for grace to be found faithful as the Lord brings all manner of events into their lives. The more faithful we are today, the more abundant will be God’s grace for the next and bigger event, and greater our reward. He will deliver us from out of the fires, which means we must first be brought into the fires. When we have walked with Him into the fires, and have reached the end of ourselves, He delivers us. That process sets up this dark world for a grand revelation that “there is no other god who is able to deliver in this way” – Daniel 3:29.

Check out the persecuted Christians’ prayer in Acts 4:23-31. Notice that their approach to life was that they were going to go full-steam ahead despite the torpedoes and that, instead of asking the Lord to stop the persecution, they asked Him for more grace to move ahead faithfully and powerfully in the face of persecution. They knew that people could do only that which God’s hand and purpose had predestined. Our having been made in God’s image makes us perfectly suited for things of God [great insight there!] – of character, nature, works, thinking, praying, life focus, and eternity.

Paul knew that the Lord would bring him safely through all sorts of trials [2 Cor. 11:23-27] until it was God’s time to take him safely to His heavenly kingdom – 2 Timothy 4:18. Joseph knew that God devised his trials – Genesis 50:15-20. Daniel’s three friends also knew it – Daniel 3:15-18. Job and even Satan knew it – Job 1:10-12, 21-22; 2:4-6, 10. We cannot walk in deep, peaceful faith until we know that the Lord is the architect of every event that touches our lives, and that each of those events are designed to show His glory and to improve our individual futures forever.

35. The whole world is in a spiritual war. That war has already been won and its battles are winding down at a fast rate. The defeated enemy has nothing to lose by his last minute suicidal devastations. Out of the current carnage, the Lord is selecting people to become like Him and to be with Him forever. It pleases Him for us to be participants in the action once He has picked us, revealed Himself to us, and placed of Himself within us. Then the fight is on for us to rest [keep our peace], trust and obey Him, not run away but remain close to Him.

If we drift into self-centeredness we begin to lose control over the development and direction of our spiritual life. Confusion, strife, and conflict break out. Real loss of control can follow. In Proverb 25:28 it is written: “Like a city that is broken into and without walls is a man [any person – ed.] who has no control over his spirit.” Self-control is a fruit of the Spirit. It’s terrible to consider not controlling the life-process within us. If uncontrolled, we become double-minded, even into all of our ways – James 1:8, [and personal experience]. But when we continue submitting ourselves to the Lord we remain integrated and strong.

Our going in either direction, whether into harmony or discord, is contagious, especially with our children and others who look to us for example and formation. But the enemy cannot contaminate those onlookers when our walls are up. How to build our walls? Take responsibility for your sins; that includes not blaming the devil or your spouse. Practice what you preach; don’t be a hypocrite. Control your appetites; eat, play, work according to knowledge. Those sorts of wall builders are better known as character builders. They deliver us from sin’s dominion. God’s Holy Spirit within us overpowers the tempter as we draw close to the Lord.

Currently, a dear brother who has gone through lots of misery has found what it means to draw close to the Lord; to call out to Him; to put his mind on Jesus. Through the power of the Holy Spirit he is putting to death the deeds of his body, and is living – Romans 8:13.

36. In the field of Medicine we know that an unhealthy body requires much more medical care than does a healthy body. Good health through nutrition, activity, and lifestyle are basic to staying out of the doctor’s office and hospital. On the other hand, bad health requires more time, dollars, pain, and daily attention.

Compare that to the church, where [my observation and opinion] the pastoral/shepherd’s office is mostly occupied time-wise with administration [getting something done], even while labeling those labors as pastoral [which is seeing what God is doing in the flock, being available, leading sheep to maturity in Jesus, being family]. Little of typical church administration is pastoral, although it is caring for the flock.

But, so are the janitor’s job, and the building maintenance crew’s job, and the Sunday School teacher’s job, and the secretary’s job. The true pastoral ministry deals directly with the souls of the flock. Repeat: Deals Directly. When the pastor’s job is misdirected to administration the souls of the flock suffer, requiring more administrative activity which produces “pastoral” burnout. The shepherd then resorts to more arms-length engagement with the sheep instead of hands on. They don’t get to know one another except as scattered fires need to be extinguished.

The vast majority of the pastor’s time with the flock should be with individuals and families, and that should be during times of no fires. More quality shepherding reduces fire-fighting, long-distance shepherding and “pastoral” administration. When I tell overworked shepherds that they are extending themselves on administrative duties instead of pastoral duties, they don’t get it. They see their administrative labors as pastoral, which somewhat they are, but at such a distance from the sheep that they are pastorally unproductive.

I’m beginning to think that pastors do not know how to get close to their sheep, or don’t want to get close to them. Many have said that in pastoral training they were told to not get too close to their people. What?!! Pastors should be involved in the most intimate areas of life of their sheep, not just in group therapy every Sunday morning and when wildfires flare up. I have not seen a genuine pastoral burnout, but have seen many administrative fatigues and burnouts.

Lord, open the eyes of our pastors. You have opened their hearts, yet they don’t see with their eyes.

37. I know my readers. You are perceptive and honest, especially about yourselves. That means you already know that there are many things said in Scripture that you have not appropriated, that you have not even become serious about. That’s a tough self-evaluation. Let’s look at a tremendous verse, and evaluate ourselves – Colossians 2:9-10. It reads: “For in Him all the fullness of Diety dwells in bodily form, and in Him you have been made complete, and He is the head over all rule and authority.”

There are three sections to that sentence. Section one is hardly contested by faithful and knowledgeable Christians. Jesus of Nazareth was and is fully God. All of God was not in Him but the fullness of God was in Him. He lacked nothing of God. That thought/fact challenges us, because the same goes for everyone in whom the Lord has placed His Spirit, making us born again into His family forever. The fullness of God is in us also, but all of God is not in us.

Section two says that therefore we have been made complete like the man Jesus was made complete. Don’t look at yourself and doubt Him; look at God’s word and believe Him. Believing the truth adjusts us to truth. From the truth view we have Jesus’ 20/20 vision. We are in Jesus, our heavenly Father deals with us through Jesus, and we are “home free” in Jesus because of Him [to please Him and to be ready for the next step we do have some need of polishing before we arrive home].

Section three proclaims Jesus as the head over all who/that could touch our body, soul, treasures, family, nation, etc. We have real doubt there! There is a vast difference between living as a trusted steward of God’s people and stuff, and living as if those people and stuff are ***MINE!*** I think we don’t understand the difference because we have not been taught, and that when we begin to get a peek at the difference we quickly shut our eyes to the light. That’s the nature of sin, from which we have been freed, and the nature of our flesh, which does not want to be changed into the likeness of Jesus. Solution: recognize the problem, take personal responsibility for it [our sin], ask for help from God and man, and walk out of it by trusting and obeying the good news.

Jesus was and is completely man and completely God; we are equally complete, but only because of God’s arrangement of us in Jesus; and He is the Lord of all things and people -- Colossians 2:9-10 paraphrased. That’s a lot to walk in, and it starts with knowing it to be true. Colossians 2:9-10 is much more than two nice, feel-good verses that hopefully will some day become effective. It is for now. The One who has brought us into Christ through the narrow gate, and is leading us along the narrow path, is able and determined to finish what He has started. Everything you have and are going through is customized for that purpose for you. Believe the good news.

38. It is a feel-good moment when we know we cannot lose. We get that invincible feeling. Because the most important thing to most of us is our life, much of our worry would be dispelled if we knew in advance of a battle, of an operation, or of just tomorrow that we would survive. Our brother, Jeremiah, experienced that relief when first commissioned for dangerous service – Jeremiah 1:4-8. The Lord told him that if he served the Lord he would have tough times but in them his life would be preserved – anywhere, anytime, and in all situations!

Jesus knew that about Himself. He said that no one could take His human life from Him. He would have to lay it down, and He did. He was immortal until then, as are we. At the same time, we have a more grand promise that our lives cannot be taken from us. Our physical lives may be taken when it is God’s time, but we go on living forever. That will never be taken from us. When we walk in the Spirit, we don’t fear death. We can take care of our physical lives, but not draw back when we see that our Father’s leadership is about to call us to lay it down. There is no place for fear or despair; life only gets better the further we go.

 Keep your peace; don’t break and run.