

GODLINESS WITH CONTENTMENT

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1. THE MEANING OF DISCIPLESHIP

Luke 9:57-62 records the exchanges between Jesus and three prospective disciples. All of them carry defects in their commitment toward following Christ that would make true discipleship impossible.

As they were walking along the road, a man said to him, "I will follow you wherever you go." Jesus replied, "Foxes have holes and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has no place to lay his head."

He said to another man, "Follow me." But the man replied, "Lord, first let me go and bury my father." Jesus said to him, "Let the dead bury their own dead, but you go and proclaim the kingdom of God."

Still another said, "I will follow you, Lord; but first let me go back and say good-bye to my family." Jesus replied, "No one who puts his hand to the plow and looks back is fit for service in the kingdom of God."

The first comes to Jesus and says, "I will follow you wherever you go." In those days, people would seek out their own teachers or masters, and some philosophers would attempt "to repulse prospective disciples with enormous demands, for the purpose of testing them and acquiring the most worthy."¹ Since the Bible says that Jesus "knew all men" and that "he knew what was in a man," (John 2:24-25), we would expect his answer to address the greatest hurdle that prevents a person from offering genuine devotion.

For example, when a certain ruler approaches Jesus and asks, "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" (Luke 18:18), the Lord's reply reflects an ability to diagnose the exact condition of one's heart: "You still lack one thing. Sell everything you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me" (v. 22). But the man fails to obey: "When he heard this, he became very sad, because he was a man of great wealth" (v. 23).

So Jesus tells this first man, "Foxes have holes and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has no place to lay his head" (Luke 9:58). We do not know what this individual has in mind when he offers to follow Jesus, but it seems that he is not prepared to adopt the lifestyle that this entails at the time. Jesus says that he does not have a home of his own in his travels, but he depends on the hospitality and support of others. To become his follower would mean adopting this difficult way of life.

As Jesus says in another place, "I tell you the truth, you are looking for me, not because you saw miraculous signs but because you ate the loaves and had your fill. Do not work

¹ Craig S. Keener, *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: New Testament*; Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1993; p. 215.

for food that spoils, but for food that endures to eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you. On him God the Father has placed his seal of approval" (John 6:26-27). He realizes that the crowd follows him not "for food that endures to eternal life," but because he offered them bread produced by a miracle. However, true discipleship is such that one does not "work for food that spoils, but for food that endures to eternal life."

Knowing that many come to him with false expectations, Jesus warns, "Suppose one of you wants to build a tower. Will he not first sit down and estimate the cost to see if he has enough money to complete it? For if he lays the foundation and is not able to finish it, everyone who sees it will ridicule him, saying, 'This fellow began to build and was not able to finish.'...In the same way, any of you who does not give up everything he has cannot be my disciple" (Luke 14:28-30, 33). One who does not "give up everything" cannot be a disciple of Christ.

Jesus made clear his demands for those who would follow him; however, his words are often read with interest but in a manner that fails to challenge us. He means what he says – it is indeed impossible for one to violate his conditions and still be his disciple: "If anyone comes to me and does not hate his father and mother, his wife and children, his brothers and sisters – yes, even his own life – he cannot be my disciple. And anyone who does not carry his cross and follow me cannot be my disciple" (Luke 14:26-27). The Christian faith demands a commitment to total transformation in both thought and conduct.

This does not mean that discipleship must include certain kinds of suffering. Many Christians enjoy health and wealth according to God's word (Psalm 103:2-3, Matthew 8:16-17, 2 Corinthians 8:9, Philippians 4:19), while others daily risk martyrdom. The real issue is whether you know what you are saying when you pledge, "Lord, I will follow you wherever you go." Do you confess his lordship over your life, and dedicate yourself to his teachings? Or do you intend to use him to fulfill your own aspirations? Some people become disciples because they think that Christ will lead them to worldly glory and greatness.

Then, Jesus calls a second man to follow him. "But the man replied, 'Lord, first let me go and bury my father'" (Luke 9:59). If his father has just died, or if the family is in mourning, then he probably would not be out there speaking with Jesus in the first place. On the other hand, one year after the initial burial of the dead, after the flesh has rotted off the corpse, the son would rebury the bones in a slot in the tomb wall. Thus the man might be requesting up to a year's delay before he would follow Jesus. But if his father is still living and he is waiting for him to pass away, then he is asking for an indefinite delay.

The Jewish mind considers it the children's sacred duty to attend to the burial of their parents, and so this man would seem to demonstrate a note of filial piety that cannot be faulted. However, Jesus answers, "Let the dead bury their own dead, but you go and proclaim the kingdom of God" (v. 60). The statement contains a wordplay where the word "dead" is used with two different meanings.

The first "dead" is metaphorical. It may refer to indifference, lack of relationship, and hostility toward something, or it may indicate something's lack of influence over a person. The Prodigal Son provides an example: "For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found" (Luke 15:24). To be "dead" here means to be spiritually "lost." The second "dead" is literal, and refers to physical death, since the object of burial would be physically dead.

Therefore, we can paraphrase verse 60 to say, "Let the spiritually dead bury the physically dead, but you should go and preach about the kingdom of God." As Leon Morris writes, "Let those without spiritual insight perform the duties they can do so well; burial is very much in keeping for the spiritually dead. But the man who has seen the vision must not deny or delay his heavenly calling."²

The demand to place Jesus above a man's father would shock the Jewish mind, or any non-Christian mind as well. "The language, no less the demand is uncompromising to the point of offensiveness."³ Nevertheless, since Jesus requires it, this level of commitment should not be considered optional or extraordinary. Rather, it is a prerequisite to discipleship for a person to put Jesus first, even ahead of one's parents.

As Luke 14:26 says, "If anyone comes to me and does not hate his father and mother, his wife and children, his brothers and sisters – yes, even his own life – he cannot be my disciple." It does not say that he would be a poor disciple, but that he cannot be a disciple at all. Genuine faith is more than a superficial acknowledgment of Christ, but it is a sincere assent to the whole Christian message, confessing God's claim on the entire man. The failure to make an immediate and complete commitment to Christ indicates that there is no true faith in the gospel. However, it is often said that such commitment is unnecessary, and this false gospel has filled the church with false converts.

Professing Christians often delay offering their services to God. There are some obvious excuses, such as how they wish to first enjoy the world, although the satisfaction from sins are only "passing pleasures" (Hebrews 11:25, NASB). Then, there are those who concoct noble-sounding reasons for delaying their commitment to Christ. Some would declare that they can better serve God by producing wealth, so that they could contribute to the spreading of the gospel. Others invent similar excuses to justify their worldly ambitions.

They lie to themselves. They reason that the long-term effect will vindicate their current spiritual condition. They suppose that the end justifies the means such that even Jesus himself should tolerate, even approve, their negligence in prayer, their false doctrines, their unethical business practices, and their unhealthy social relations. They do not wish to renounce Jesus, but they refuse to offer him their all at this time, and they try to arrange an attractive front for their defiance by claiming that it will result in greater service toward him. However, if Jesus would not permit even a parent's burial to delay total commitment, then all other reasons are obvious excuses. Some might claim that they are serving him "in

² Leon Morris, *Luke (Tyndale New Testament Commentaries)*; Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1988; p. 197.

³ *New Bible Commentary*; Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1994; p. 915.

their own way," but Jesus says that "service in the kingdom of God" (v. 62) is to "proclaim the kingdom of God" (v. 60).

This does not mean that everyone must enter full-time ministry. Given most Christians' deplorable level of knowledge and spirituality, they are better off remaining where they are. In any case, it is possible to be a faithful disciple of Christ as a construction worker, a medical professional, or a Christian minister. The point is that many people are pursuing their personal agendas in the name of Christ. This takes on different forms, from business ventures to humanitarian projects. We must ask: Are our plans truly consistent with the cause of Christ? Do we really have in mind the short-term and long-term interests of his kingdom? Or do we ease our conscience by describing our selfish ambitions in Christian terms? Anyone who is not working on his faith and contributing to God's kingdom right now is not a disciple of Christ.

There are no good excuses. The "Let Jesus wait until I become rich and famous" excuse will not stand, even if one indeed offers most of the profits to God – "he is not served by human hands, as if he needed anything" (Acts 17:25). God approves only the way he prescribes. Give him what he demands, not what you think he should require. Those who imagine that Christ allows any flexibility on this matter are not his disciples.

After this, Jesus interacts with the third candidate: "Still another said, 'I will follow you, Lord; but first let me go back and say good-bye to my family.' Jesus replied, 'No one who puts his hand to the plow and looks back is fit for service in the kingdom of God'" (Luke 9:61-62). Commentators perceive an allusion to the calling of Elisha (1 Kings 19:19-21), but whereas Elijah permitted him to bid farewell to his family and friends, Jesus does not allow it.

Again, from the non-Christian perspective, the man offers what seems to be an acceptable reason for delaying full commitment to Jesus. However, by now we realize that nothing is acceptable that puts a "but first" before the Lord. When God calls a man, there is nothing that comes before it. There should be no "but first," because God's command is always first.

Jesus answers, "No one who puts his hand to the plow and looks back is fit for service in the kingdom of God." The hand-held plow mentioned here is made of wood, light in weight and often had an iron point. Its proper use requires uninterrupted attention from the plowman, guiding the plow with his left hand, while goading the oxen with the right. To look away while plowing would immediately result in a crooked furrow. Jesus also makes a reference to Lot's wife: "Remember Lot's wife! Whoever tries to keep his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life will preserve it" (Luke 17:32-33).

This is a metaphor for a man's soul. The issue is whether he hesitates to abandon his life in order to follow Christ. Paul writes, "What is more, I consider everything a loss compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them rubbish, that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having

a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ – the righteousness that comes from God and is by faith" (Philippians 3:8-9).

To have a righteousness "which is through faith in Christ" is not a goal to be reached after one has become a Christian, but it is what it means to become a Christian in the first place. Thus Paul is not referring to some kind of supreme spirituality, but the basic and common experience of every Christian. No one is saved by nodding at the gospel in superficial agreement, because that is not true agreement. Rather, to be a Christian at all is to "consider everything a loss compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus."

Many people have been deceived by a false gospel, that one may first become a Christian, and then later choose to become fully dedicated. Or, one may receive salvation as a "believer," and afterward become a "disciple." The Bible never teaches such a thing. True assent to the gospel demands conformity to all the demands inherent in the gospel message, and that is the acknowledgment of God's claim upon the whole person. If a radical change of disposition does not occur in the mind at the time of conversion, then there is really no conversion at all.

Look around your church. It is likely that most of the people are false believers, never been regenerated by God. They might even appear to be earnest in prayer, attentive to the sermon, or very moved by the worship, but if there has never been a transformation in their souls, then they are still headed for hellfire. How about you? Have you confessed your sins, believed in Jesus Christ, and committed your all to him? "Examine yourselves to see whether you are in the faith; test yourselves. Do you not realize that Christ Jesus is in you – unless, of course, you fail the test?" (2 Corinthians 13:5).

As Jesus declares, "Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. Many will say to me on that day, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and in your name drive out demons and perform many miracles?' Then I will tell them plainly, 'I never knew you. Away from me, you evildoers!'" (Matthew 7:21-23). Even these could be false disciples, but there are those who harden their hearts and who lack faith to prophesy and work miracles, and even persecute those who do these things, but still dare to call him "Lord"! So Paul commands, "continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling" (Philippians 2:12), but the chosen ones should not be overwhelmed with terror: "for it is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose" (v. 13). Jesus is "the author and perfecter of our faith" (Hebrews 12:2).

Dietrich Bonhoeffer observes, "The third would-be disciple...lands himself in a hopeless inconsistency, for although he is ready enough to throw in his lot with Jesus, he succeeds in putting up a barrier between himself and the Master...Discipleship to him is a possibility which can only be realized when certain conditions have been fulfilled...The disciple places himself at the Master's disposal, but at the same time retains the right to dictate his own terms. But then discipleship is no longer discipleship, but a programme of our own to be arranged to suit ourselves...The trouble with this third would-be disciple is that at the very moment he expresses his willingness to follow, he ceases to want to follow at

all...Discipleship means adherence to Jesus alone, and immediately."⁴ Those who dictate the conditions of discipleship cannot be his disciples.

A disciple never looks back. As the work of the plowman demands undivided attention, so one who "looks back" is disqualified from "service in the kingdom of God" (v. 62). Jesus does not say that one cannot excel as a disciple if he looks back, but that such a person cannot be his disciple at all. He means what he says. There is no room for hesitation, distraction, or regret. "How searching is this test to those who profess to be Christians!...Religion is everything, or nothing. He that is not willing to sacrifice everything for the cause of God, is really willing to sacrifice nothing."⁵ Religion must be all or nothing. It must dominate every part of thought and conduct; otherwise, our faith is not genuine.

There are those who think that religious differences should never damage our relationships. However, religious commitments are ultimate commitments, so that a relationship that is not affected by them must be a most superficial relationship. If one can have a deep relationship with another of a different religious commitment, it can only mean that they are not devoted to their faiths. Every part of a Christian's life is dominated by his faith, or he is not a Christian at all. Thus to have anything more than a superficial relationship with a non-Christian must necessarily mean that he has compromised his faith. This is because once the two venture beyond a superficial level of interaction, their two worldviews would bound to clash. And to have the deepest kind of relationship with such a person, such as marriage, is outright forbidden by the Bible.

As Jesus says, "Do not suppose that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I did not come to bring peace, but a sword. For I have come to turn a man against his father, a daughter against her mother, a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law – a man's enemies will be the members of his own household" (Matthew 10:34-36). There will be conflicts between Christians and non-Christians. Religious commitments are not something that can be put aside. The non-Christians who claim to be friendly and open-minded, and who desire fellowship with everyone, nevertheless refuse to convert to the Christian faith when we make it a requirement for fellowship. Thus even they acknowledge that religious commitments matter, and that what we believe about the ultimate issues is more important than peace and relationships. The difference is that they are self-righteous and hypocritical about this – they say that they value peace and relationships, but they ask us to put aside our Christian principles while they hold on to their own beliefs about religious and ultimate matters.

Only God has ever demanded total dedication from men and women in the way Jesus does. We must keep in mind that when we are dealing with Jesus Christ, we are dealing with God himself. Our readiness to follow him reflects our attitude toward God, because Jesus is God.

⁴ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*; New York: Touchstone, 1995; p. 61, 121.

⁵ Albert Barnes, *Barnes' Notes on the New Testament*; Grand Rapids, Michigan: Kregel Publications; p. 211.

How can we distinguish between true and false disciples? By what standard can we examine ourselves? Jesus declares, "If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples" (John 8:31). Christian discipleship is characterized by hearing and obeying the doctrines of God. One who follows the word of God will be saved by it, but one who rejects it will be destroyed by it. "The seed on good soil stands for those with a noble and good heart, who hear the word, retain it, and by persevering produce a crop" (Luke 8:15) – the disciple of Christ possesses a faith that obeys and endures. Therefore, let us never comfort ourselves with lies, but follow Christ without reservation, delay, or regret.

2. GODLINESS WITH CONTENTMENT

Among a long list of ungodly traits, Paul says that people would be "lovers of money" (2 Timothy 3:2). Elsewhere, he writes, "For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil" (1 Timothy 6:10).

The statement is often mistakenly cited as, "Money is the root of all evil," when in fact it says, "the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil." The Bible condemns the love of money, not money itself. The difference is significant. The love of money is an intellectual, psychological, or spiritual factor associated with money that is not inherent in money itself.

The deception that money itself is a root of evil leads to the idea that one must remain poor to shun evil. Another deception is that this root of evil is absent or weaker in those who are poor. However, since the love of money is a mental disposition, this means that one may love money and not have money. It is possible for anyone to love money and be possessed by this root of evil. On the other hand, it is possible for a rich man to love God, and be free from the love of money.

Evil begins in the mind. As Jesus says, "For from within, out of men's hearts, come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, greed, malice, deceit, lewdness, envy, slander, arrogance and folly" (Mark 7:21-22). He declares that evil comes forth from the heart, that is, the mind.

One false doctrine asserts a sharp distinction between the spirit and the soul of man. It identifies the heart with the spirit, and the mind with the soul. However, the *Exegetical Dictionary of the New Testament* defines "heart" (Greek: *kardia*) as "the inner person, the seat of understanding, knowledge, and will."¹ *Kittel* says, "The heart is the seat of understanding, the source of thought and reflection,"² and it affirms that "The NT use of the word agrees with the OT use."³ Unless it is referring to the physical organ, when the Bible refers to the "heart," it is speaking of the mind, while the context might stress a specific function.

Gordon Clark estimates that, "The term *heart* denotes emotion about ten or at the very most fifteen percent of the time. It denotes the will maybe thirty percent of the time; and it very clearly means the intellect sixty or seventy percent."⁴ He concludes, "Therefore when someone in the pews hears the preacher contrasting the head and the heart, he will realize

¹ *Exegetical Dictionary of the New Testament*, Vol. 2; Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1981; p. 250.

² Gerhard Kittel, ed., *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, Vol. 3; Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1999 (Original: 1965); p. 612.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 611.

⁴ Gordon H. Clark, *The Biblical Doctrine of Man*; Jefferson, Maryland: The Trinity Foundation, 1984; p. 82.

that the preacher either does not know or does not believe what the Bible says. That the gospel may be proclaimed in its purity and power, the churches should eliminate their Freudianism and other forms of contemporary psychology and return to God's Word."⁵

As Jonathan Edwards writes, "The mind, with regard to the exercises of this faculty, is often called the heart."⁶ And Thayer says, "*Kardia*...the soul or mind, as it is the fountain and seat of the thoughts, passions, desires, appetites, affections, purposes, endeavors...used of the understanding, the faculty and seat of the intelligence." The heart is the intellectual aspect of man. Therefore, the distinctions between head and heart faith, and head and heart knowledge, are unbiblical inventions. In fact, the head, or brain, is not the mind at all. We are not naturalists, evolutionists, or behaviorists. The mind of man is incorporeal, made in the image of God.

It is often said that the mind consists of the intellect, will, and emotion. However, this is a misrepresentation, since these are functions of the mind, and not different parts that combine to constitute the mind. Just as digestion is a function of the stomach and not a different organ from the stomach or a standalone organ that makes part of the stomach, the activities of the mind are not as parts within a man that are distinct from his mind. The mind thinks – it reasons, decides, feels, and so on. Even the "spirit" does not refer to a different part of the person, but only an aspect or function of the mind or soul. Therefore, the human person consists of mind and body. For all general purposes, we may consider the terms mind, soul, spirit, and heart as interchangeable.

Jesus teaches that "greed" is one of those things that come from men's minds (Mark 7:22). When Paul says that "the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil" (1 Timothy 6:10), the "love" refers to the thoughts, and the "money" refers to the content of the thoughts. Therefore, the "love of money" is a way of thinking about money that generates "all kinds of evil."

He says that the love of money is "a root of all kinds of evil" (NIV), and not "the root of all evil" (KJV). Many kinds and instances of evil occur due to the love of money, but not every kind and every instance of evil come from it. This is significant. Since the Bible does not blame all evil on the love of money, it would distort our view of reality if we attempt to trace every instance of evil to it.

The passage also defines the love of money: "People who want to get rich fall into temptation and a trap and into many foolish and harmful desires that plunge men into ruin and destruction. For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil. Some people, eager for money, have wandered from the faith and pierced themselves with many griefs" (1 Timothy 6:9-10). The "love of money" is equated with "eager for money," and it is evident in those who "want to get rich."

⁵ Ibid., p. 87-88.

⁶ *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*; Peabody, Massachusetts: Hendrickson Publishers, Inc., 2000 (Original: 1834); p. 237.

A lover of money is one who is eager for money, or one who wants to get rich. This is more than an acceptance of wealth, but it is a strong and enduring desire for it. The word translated "want" (Greek: *boulomai*) denotes a considered desire, and not an impulsive one: "This desire to be wealthy is not a passing emotional thing, but the result of a process of reasoning. Mature consideration has been given the matter of the acquisition of riches, with the result that that desire has become a settled and planned procedure."⁷ Many people, including some of those who claim to be Christians, regard the pursuit of wealth their highest goal. It is their conclusion that money is the most important thing. Then, they arrange their lives around this aim, and formulate strategies to obtain it. They are driven by the love of money.

Jesus contradicts this kind of thinking: "Watch out! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; a man's life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions" (Luke 12:15). Then, he teaches that "anyone who stores up things for himself but is not rich toward God" (v. 21) is called a fool (v. 20). The one who concludes that money is the most important thing, and then structures his whole life around this principle, is a stupid person. People value wealth too much are unintelligent.

However, we must make a crucial distinction. The Bible never opposes wealth itself, and it never opposes legitimate practices and occupations that produce wealth. As Proverbs 10:4 says, "Lazy hands make a man poor, but diligent hands bring wealth." In fact, God is one who gives his people "power to get wealth" (Deuteronomy 8:18, ESV). Paul writes that Christ suffered poverty so that we might become rich (2 Corinthians 8:9), and that God would supply our needs according to his glorious riches by Christ Jesus (Philippians 4:19).

Therefore, we denounce those who, in the process of refuting the so-called "prosperity gospel," blaspheme the word of God by their unbelief and tradition. Their rejection of God's promises is arguably more sinful and destructive than the love of money, because it entails a direct denial of Christ's atonement – the context of 2 Corinthians 8:9 is financial wealth, not spiritual wealth, just as Matthew 8:17 refers to physical healing, not spiritual healing. The atonement must include health and wealth, or we would remain sick and poor even in heaven. To deny this is to renounce Christ and the Christian faith.

Although the Bible says, "Forget not all his benefits" – that he both forgives all your sins and heals all your diseases (Psalm 103:2-3), faithless theologians and preachers make it a matter of orthodoxy to reject some of his benefits. They preach a different gospel. They refuse his benefits, and refuse to allow others to reach for them. They persecute those who teach God's people to have faith in his promises, and to depend on him for health and wealth. They spread unbelief and heresy, thinking that they are doing God a favor, but they have become the servants of demons.

Wealth is not the problem, but it is the mental factor – the love of money – that is reprehensible. As Proverbs 28:20 says, "A faithful man will be richly blessed, but one eager

⁷ Kenneth S. Wuest, *Wuest's Word Studies From the Greek New Testament, Vol. 2*; Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1999 (Original: 1952); p. 95.

to get rich will not go unpunished." Then, it is much worse to hate God's promises and to persecute those who teach on them and reach for them.

Although some are not possessed by an ambitious pursuit of wealth, if they are anxious about material things, they are still guilty of the worship of money:

No one can serve two masters. Either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and Money. Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink; or about your body, what you will wear.

Is not life more important than food, and the body more important than clothes? Look at the birds of the air; they do not sow or reap or store away in barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not much more valuable than they? Who of you by worrying can add a single hour to his life?

And why do you worry about clothes? See how the lilies of the field grow. They do not labor or spin. Yet I tell you that not even Solomon in all his splendor was dressed like one of these. If that is how God clothes the grass of the field, which is here today and tomorrow is thrown into the fire, will he not much more clothe you, O you of little faith?

So do not worry, saying, 'What shall we eat?' or 'What shall we drink?' or 'What shall we wear?' For the pagans run after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them. But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well. Therefore do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own. (Matthew 6:24-34)

Verse 24 does not make God and money mutually exclusive, but it makes service, love, and devotion toward God and money mutually exclusive. Although a person deals with both God and money in his life, he can serve, love, and devote himself to only one of the two, not both. Again, the issue is not whether he has money. It is possible for a rich man to love God and for a poor man to hate God.

Then, in verse 25, Jesus assigns service, love, and devotion to the intellectual realm: "Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink; or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more important than food, and the body more important than clothes?" The end of the verse echoes what he says in Luke 12:15: "A man's life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions."

Life is more than wealth and material possessions. The love or worship of money is a way of thinking that is inconsistent with this principle. One who appears innocent under Paul's description of the love of money, but who still thinks of money as the deciding factor in

life, is one who remains enslaved to it, and thus becomes as one who hates and despises God (v. 24).

Jesus stresses that service to God or money is defined by one's thoughts: "Who of you by worrying can add a single hour to his life?...And why do you worry about clothes?...So do not worry...Therefore do not worry." (v. 27-28, 31, 34). In another place, he states, "The one who received the seed that fell among the thorns is the man who hears the word, but the worries of this life and the deceitfulness of wealth choke it, making it unfruitful" (Matthew 13:22).

To worship God is to enthrone him in our thoughts: "May the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be pleasing in your sight, O LORD, my Rock and my Redeemer" (Psalm 19:14); "May my meditation be pleasing to him, as I rejoice in the LORD" (Psalm 104:34). On the other hand, to devote our thoughts to money is to serve it as a deity, and to be overly concerned about material things is to be enslaved to it. This excludes the worship of God and amounts to a denial of his supremacy.

Paul says that the love of money produces disastrous results: "People who want to get rich fall into temptation and a trap and into many foolish and harmful desires that plunge men into ruin and destruction. For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil. Some people, eager for money, have wandered from the faith and pierced themselves with many griefs" (1 Timothy 6:9-10). Those who want to be rich fall into many "foolish" desires, so that no matter how successful they are in attaining wealth, they are unintelligent people. They "pierce themselves with many griefs," and their desires "plunge men into ruin and destruction."

As Lenski writes, "Men who are set on being rich snatch at the tempting bait, are caught in the snare, are held by the lusts. So shrewd they thought themselves, but see into what they have fallen! They may get rich, may boast of their wealth, their business acumen, their successful deals. But look at the most successful among them – their lusts are 'reasonless,' such as a reasonable man must shun!"⁸ The word translated "foolish" means senseless, mindless, or unintelligent. After careful consideration, the lovers of money can do no better than to conclude that wealth is supreme. The Bible calls them stupid.

The most significant effect is that the love of money causes them to "wander from the faith." As Luke 9:25 says, "What good is it for a man to gain the whole world, and yet lose or forfeit his very self?" Destruction begins in the mind. When a man's priority is to make money instead of to know God, he strays from the faith that he professes. He starts to slip away from Christ.

Worship does not first consist of our songs and postures, but of our thoughts regarding the things of God. It is easy to put on the proper expressions, but it requires a true transformation of personality to consistently think sincere and reverent thoughts toward

⁸ R. C. H. Lenski, *Commentary on the New Testament: The Interpretation of St. Paul's Epistles to the Colossians, to the Thessalonians, to Timothy, to Titus, and to Philemon*; Peabody, Massachusetts: Hendrickson Publishers, Inc., 2001 (Original: 1937); p. 707-708.

God. As God says, "These people come near to me with their mouth and honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me" (Isaiah 29:13). The Bible makes no sharp distinction between the heart and the mind, but it distinguishes between the heart and the mouth. True worship is in the mind. Then, expressions of worship could proceed naturally from the mind, or could be performed in pretense and hypocrisy.

Therefore, a person who appears to worship God on the outside, but who is obsessed with money on the inside, is not a true worshiper of God. Unlike the hypocrites, "the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for they are the kind of worshipers the Father seeks" (John 4:23). We cannot escape our minds. Our thoughts define us, and God knows our thoughts: "You know when I sit and when I rise; you perceive my thoughts from afar" (Psalm 139:2; also Hebrews 4:12); "The LORD does not look at the things man looks at. Man looks at the outward appearance, but the LORD looks at the heart" (1 Samuel 16:7).

No one who loves money is at the same time a faithful Christian. Just as James writes, "Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says" (James 1:22), some who are eager for money also consider themselves superior believers, able to grasp a bigger vision for themselves and for the church. They deceive themselves, and it is possible that many of them are not believers at all. Jesus makes it clear that although God and money could coexist in one's life, the worship of God and money are mutually exclusive, and worship first has to do with our thoughts, our obsessions.

Later in 1 Timothy 6, Paul continues, "Command those who are rich in this present world not to be arrogant nor to put their hope in wealth, which is so uncertain, but to put their hope in God, who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment. Command them to do good, to be rich in good deeds, and to be generous and willing to share. In this way they will lay up treasure for themselves as a firm foundation for the coming age, so that they may take hold of the life that is truly life" (1 Timothy 6:17-19).

Since the world measures success in terms of wealth, it is easy for those who have money to become proud. The Bible warns about the temptation to take credit for financial prosperity: "You may say to yourself, 'My power and the strength of my hands have produced this wealth for me.' But remember the LORD your God, for it is he who gives you the ability to produce wealth" (Deuteronomy 8:17-18).

God is the one who grants the "power to get wealth" (Deuteronomy 8:18, KJV), and who "richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment" (1 Timothy 6:17). He gives us material things even "for our enjoyment," and not only for charity and ministry. The Bible indeed teaches a gospel of prosperity – God has blessed his people with wealth throughout history, and Jesus purchased prosperity for us as he suffered poverty in our stead (2 Corinthians 8:9). There are those who reject this out of their unbelief, hypocrisy, and self-righteousness. They identify faith in God for prosperity with love for money, and condemn both of them. Their position opposes God's attributes, God's actions, God's promises, and Christ's atonement. They are the enemies of God's people and the Christian faith.

The problem is not money, but an unwillingness to suffer hardship and persecution for the sake of Christ. The problem is not a prosperity message, but an ungodly desire for wealth. Nevertheless, unbelief is the greatest problem of all, because without faith, a person will get nowhere with God without faith. The high-minded phony that criticizes faith in God for prosperity is no better than the one who is obsessed with wealth, but the critic is the bigger hypocrite, because he uses the faults of others to camouflage his own unbelief and cynicism.

In any case, the rich should not think too highly of themselves, and they should not rest their hope in the wealth they possess, because material riches form an unreliable foundation for their present and future life. Money can offer some comforts for their earthly existence, but unless it is used to promote the gospel (Luke 16:9), its power cannot extend to the life to come: "For we brought nothing into the world, and we can take nothing out of it" (1 Timothy 6:7).

Wealth provides no guarantee even for the present life, as God says in one of the parables, "You fool! This very night your life will be demanded from you. Then who will get what you have prepared for yourself?" (Luke 12:20). Anyone who loves and depends on money is a stupid person. The difference in intelligence between one who trusts in God and one who relies on wealth is like the difference in power between the Almighty God and feeble Mammon.

Timothy is to "Command them to do good, to be rich in good deeds, and to be generous and willing to share" (1 Timothy 6:18). As they obey this, they will gain peace and security that money cannot buy: "In this way they will lay up treasure for themselves as a firm foundation for the coming age, so that they may take hold of the life that is truly life" (v. 19). No matter how much a person covets and enjoys a life of wealth, it is not "truly life" until he takes hold of the life that comes only through Jesus Christ, who says, "I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full" (John 10:10).

In contrast to the love of money, the Christian mentality is one of godliness with contentment: "But godliness with contentment is great gain. For we brought nothing into the world, and we can take nothing out of it. But if we have food and clothing, we will be content with that" (1 Timothy 6:6-8). To appreciate what he means by contentment, we need to examine the verses that lead up to this.

Verses 1-5 say, "If anyone teaches false doctrines and does not agree to the sound instruction of our Lord Jesus Christ and to godly teaching, he is conceited and understands nothing. He has an unhealthy interest in controversies and quarrels about words that result in envy, strife, malicious talk, evil suspicions and constant friction between men of corrupt mind, who have been robbed of the truth and who think that godliness is a means to financial gain."

False doctrines are related to the misconception that "godliness is a means to financial gain." All false ideas are traceable to false theology, because religious convictions constitute the presuppositions that govern all other beliefs. The false doctrines mentioned

allow for the kind of thinking that fosters the love of money. To explain the transition from verses 1-5 to verses 6-8, we should consider the last phrase in verse 5.

These people who have been "robbed of the truth" think that "godliness is a means to financial gain." The word "robbed" suggests that they once had the truth, but it has been taken away from them, so that they have become "men of corrupt mind." The word "godliness" could confuse some readers, especially when the words "godliness" and "gain" are used with slightly different meanings in the next verse. In verse 5, Paul is not opposing the biblical teaching that God would bless those who believe and worship him, often with financial prosperity. Then, although there is an erroneous teaching that equates a person's spirituality with his level of wealth, this verse also does not target this idea.

In addition to the immediate context (6:3), at the beginning of the letter, Paul also writes that he has left Timothy at Ephesus so that he would "command certain men not to teach false doctrines any longer" (1:3). Thus 1 Timothy 6:5 is written as part of an attack against teachers of false doctrines. Paul clearly does not think that these people possess true godliness and that they at the same time consider such piety as a way to make money. J. B. Phillips conveys the correct sense of the verse, that these "men of warped minds...have lost their real hold on the truth but hope to make some profit out of the Christian religion."⁹

The issue is not that these teachers have a false view of God's blessings, but that they are not thinking about his blessings at all. Rather, they wish to profit from teaching their distorted version of the Christian faith. They wish to make a business out of religion. Titus 1:11 describes a similar problem: "They must be silenced, because they are ruining whole households by teaching things they ought not to teach – and that for the sake of dishonest gain."

Nevertheless, Paul explains that godliness is indeed "great gain" (v. 6) in a sense. Since true godliness is characterized by "contentment," he is referring to something different from the false teachers. While they are motivated by "the love of money" (v. 10), Paul teaches a godliness that pursues "righteousness, godliness, faith, love, endurance and gentleness" (v. 11).

Earlier in the letter, he writes, "For physical training is of some value, but godliness has value for all things, holding promise for both the present life and the life to come" (1 Timothy 4:8). It betrays a lack of foresight to pursue the things of this world instead of faith, holiness, and spiritual maturity. People are impressed with their own abilities to advance in their careers and to make profitable business investments, but they lack insight into what comes after death. They may ignore the issue, or believe all kinds of false ideas about it. But godliness holds promise for both the present life and the life to come.

As for contentment, Paul speaks to both the rich and the poor, and so it has little to do with the amount of a person's wealth. It is an intellectual factor, and an attitude or mentality. It

⁹ J. B. Phillips, *The New Testament in Modern English*; New York: Touchstone, 1988 edition. Similarly, William Barclay: "They are characteristic of men who regard their religion as a profit-making concern"; *The New Testament*; Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 1999 edition.

is a serious error to think that an attack on greed is an attack on wealth, and that to promote contentment is to promote poverty. Christians can be "rich in this present world" (v. 17) and live in godliness at the same time, that is, if they will take care to "put their hope in God...and to be generous and willing to share" (v. 17-18).

The word "contentment" (Greek: *autarkeia*) had been used to denote a prime virtue from the time of Socrates, and especially by Stoic and Cynic thought, referring to an inward self-sufficiency. "The demand is that man should be content with the goods allotted to him by fate or by God...who thus becomes an independent man sufficient to himself and in need of none else."¹⁰ Barclay writes, "This was one of the great watchwords of the Stoic philosophers. By it they meant a complete self-sufficiency. They meant a frame of mind which was completely independent of all outward things, and which carried the secret of happiness within itself."¹¹

This self-sufficiency is "a frame of mind," and does not directly refer to the skills and knowledge needed for survival. It is more of an indifference to circumstances than the ability to provide for one's own necessities. A Stoic "will not groan under torture; and in general he will suppress emotion as irrational."¹²

There is a famous story about Epictetus, the slave. As his master was torturing his leg, he said with great composure, "You will certainly break my leg." When the bone broke, he continued in the same tone of voice, "Did I not tell you that you would break it?" The good life, therefore, does not consist of externalities, but it is an inward state, a strength of will, and self-control.¹³

Paul uses the language of Stoicism, not to borrow from its system, but for the sake of communication. He takes advantage of its laden meaning so that he could be easily understood, just as other biblical texts employ terms from Greek philosophy and the Roman military.

Christian contentment indeed exhibits an indifference to circumstances and a suspicion of emotions, while it highly prizes rational thinking and inward satisfaction, but Stoic contentment is in fact an imitation of Christian contentment, and it cannot establish it upon a factual and rational foundation. Stoicism perceives a virtue that it cannot explain and that it cannot attain. But the Christian fulfills this virtue as he finds satisfaction in God through Jesus Christ.

The love of money is antithetical to the Christian faith, and religion should not be pursued for financial gain. Nevertheless, true godliness is indeed profitable, holding promise for this life and the life to come. As Jesus says, "And everyone who has left houses or brothers

¹⁰ Kittel, Vol. 1; p. 464, 466.

¹¹ William Barclay, *The Letters to Timothy, Titus, and Philemon*; Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 1975; p. 128.

¹² Gordon H. Clark, *Ancient Philosophy*; The Trinity Foundation, 1997; p. 307.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 308.

or sisters or father or mother or children or fields for my sake will receive a hundred times as much and will inherit eternal life" (Matthew 19:29). True godliness, the kind that does not lust after money but that exhibits profound contentment, is more profitable than the love of money.

Christian contentment is not an elimination of all desire, but it is an intensification of one's desire toward God to a point where all other things become insignificant. Psalm 42:1 says, "As the deer pants for streams of water, so my soul pants for you, O God." And Paul denounces his earthly credentials in order to pursue Christ: "But whatever was to my profit I now consider loss for the sake of Christ. What is more, I consider everything a loss compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them rubbish, that I may gain Christ" (Philippians 3:7-8).

Physical things are not corrupt in themselves, but God's creation can be enjoyed with thanksgiving. The body is not evil in itself, but it is the mind that sins through it. Likewise, material possessions are not evil, but it is the mind that produces sinful thoughts about them. As a state of mind, Christian contentment so finds its satisfaction in God that it naturally results in a relative indifference toward circumstances and material riches.

There is a confusion that identifies "self-denial" with asceticism. While Jesus says, "If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me" (Matthew 16:24), the Christian faith is not an ascetic religion. Paul rejects the slogan, "Do not handle! Do not taste! Do not touch!" (Colossians 2:21). He defines the contentment he has in mind, and the source of this virtue: "I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances. I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want. I can do everything through him who gives me strength" (Philippians 4:11-13).

The virtue of contentment consists in satisfaction "in any and every situation," regardless of the circumstances. However, it is not Christian contentment unless it is established on Jesus Christ. As Paul says, "I can do everything through him who gives me strength." Whereas Stoicism teaches the sufficiency of oneself, it is something that the person puts on, and it is not founded on reason and ability. On the other hand, Christian contentment is founded on divine revelation, and it comes from the sufficiency of God, as he infuses us with the power of Jesus Christ.

A Christian can be content in various circumstances because God has strengthened his soul. Thus contentment is never a sign of weakness or resignation, but one of spiritual strength and maturity. A lover of money lacks this inner power, and so he is feeble, immature, and ignorant. Contentment does not hinder success in one's career or business – we must not assume that lust and dissatisfaction are the only effective motivations for prosperity. Christian contentment indeed eliminates profit as the main objective, and so it will not sacrifice God and family for the sake of success, but there are biblical precepts that provide ample reasons for diligence.

A believer is motivated by the virtues of piety. He desires to honor God in all things, to provide for his family, and to finance the gospel. He considers factors such as the omnipresence and omniscience of God, the present and future rewards, and the duty and delight of obedience. He labors in order to fellowship with God, and not to earn favor with men, so that he becomes a conscientious worker who strives for excellence even without supervision and the threat of punishment. Thus Christian contentment does not diminish the motivation to achieve; rather, it produces the ideal worker.

The Bible's doctrine of contentment contradicts certain ministry theories and models. The power of "team work" has been heavily touted. The assertion is that an isolated believer is weak, always feeble and in danger, but he becomes valuable and protected when joined with other people who would be just as pathetic and powerless as individuals. The "lone ranger" mentality is condemned, and the numerous biblical examples to the contrary are dismissed as exceptions. Another expression of this occurs in Christian spirituality, where it would insist that every believer requires doctrinal balance and emotional support from others, or he would almost certainly fail. However, this view does not come from the Bible, but it resembles theories in popular psychology and business management. It distorts biblical teachings on Christian community and mutual edification to the point of committing blasphemy against the sufficiency of Christ.

The Bible indeed teaches mutual edification and team ministry, but it never represents these things as always necessary. God can so instruct and strengthen a Christian that he becomes sufficient as a believer and a minister. The verses that we have been considering indicate that it is our duty to attain this inward strength and stability. In fact, there is usually a practical need to limit team ministry. Since most people are incompetent and unspiritual, it is often more effective to appoint one able worker for a task or reduce the people involved (Judges 7:1-7). Most people are deficient, and many are reluctant to learn.

Biblical passages have been distorted in order to assert an unqualified necessity of corporate spirituality. For example, 1 Corinthians 12-14 teaches that Christians need one another and that one man cannot do it all. However, the passage refers only to the context of the church and public assembly. It never says that an individual will fail as a believer or in his own ministry if left by himself.

Although it is true that most Christians cannot stand as individuals, this false doctrine of the necessity of corporate spirituality does nothing to correct this, but it is in fact part of the problem. It legitimizes the weakness and encourages it to persist. Instead of introducing the strength of Christ as the solution, it deceives the people into thinking that the Bible teaches an unhealthy dependence on men. The truth is that God's grace is sufficient to enable Christians to thrive as individuals, and then to multiply their effectiveness when they come together as powerful and independent believers. Their sufficiency is in Christ alone.

Paul writes, "What then shall we say, brothers? When you come together, everyone has a hymn, or a word of instruction, a revelation, a tongue or an interpretation. All of these must be done for the strengthening of the church" (1 Corinthians 14:26). This is how God thinks

of a church. It is foolish to deny the independence of each person, and it is hypocritical to urge the idea of a team, but reject the power that each member is supposed to bring.

The one who brings a revelation brings it by himself, and the one who brings a tongue brings it by himself. They do not need each other in order to bring the revelation or the tongue – their individual ministries could operate in relative independence – but the one who has the revelation would also benefit from the one who has the tongue, and vice versa. It is never said that they would be useless by themselves, but that together they could make a more complete contribution to the church.

If the church does not even believe in the Spirit's manifestations, so that no one could bring a revelation or a prophecy, there is really no team ministry – there is a team, but no ministry. In fact, when compared to the biblical description of church, a congregation who rejects the Spirit's power probably should not be called a church in the first place – it is pretending to be a church. It is self-condemning to reply that the preaching of the word is what makes a church, because if the church preaches the word, it would preach on what the Bible says on healing, prophecy, and all kinds of miracles that the Spirit performs through his people; otherwise, it is a trap to ensnare people in unbelief, tradition, and hypocrisy. It is a house of death.

Therefore, to have a team does not always mean there is going to be any "team ministry" or "team work." The same is true in business – there may be a team at the office, but very little work is done, because the people are incompetent as individuals, so that they drag down and leech on one another when they come together. For there to be team ministry, the members must be independently sufficient and strong, and they must operate in God's various gifts, such as teaching, healing, prophecy, and so on.

Those who advocate team ministry and the impotence of the individual might use the verse, "If one falls down, his friend can help him up. But pity the man who falls and has no one to help him up!" (Ecclesiastes 4:10). Good! I answer with Jude 24-25: "*To him* who is able to *keep you from falling* and to present you before his glorious presence without fault and with great joy – to the only God our Savior be glory, majesty, power and authority, through Jesus Christ our Lord, before all ages, now and forevermore! Amen." Of course the Christian needs help, but if these people assume that it must always come from men, then their doctrine is false, destructive, and blasphemous. It is better to perish as a faithful individual than to join a team of idolaters whose trust is in one another and not in God.

They often argue that Paul worked with a team, but they cover up passages where he stood steadfastly even when he was alone: "At my first defense, no one came to my support, but everyone deserted me. May it not be held against them. But the Lord stood at my side and gave me strength, so that through me the message might be fully proclaimed and all the Gentiles might hear it. And I was delivered from the lion's mouth. The Lord will rescue me from every evil attack and will bring me safely to his heavenly kingdom. To him be glory for ever and ever. Amen" (2 Timothy 4:16-18). When pressure comes, men might abandon us, and those who stress the weakness of individuals will be the ones who flee first. Since they lack strength in themselves, they cannot stand with others in the face of danger. Even

when all men abandoned Paul, the Lord remained with him. This lesson is infinitely more important than team ministry, and it is in fact the proper foundation for team ministry.

The argument that Jesus worked with a team is also deceptive, because the disciples often hindered him more than they helped him. Jesus was the one who helped them. They were a constant annoyance, slow to believe and slow to understand. The Lord was visibly irritated with them a number of times. He did not need them, but they needed him. Then some say that even Jesus asked the disciples to pray with him before his arrest. However, they did not help him – they fell asleep! Perhaps these people also fell asleep when they read the Bible, desperately searching for something to justify their theory, their weakness, and their unbelief.

Jesus demonstrated an inward strength and sufficiency: "But a time is coming, and has come, when you will be scattered, each to his own home. You will leave me all alone. Yet I am not alone, for my Father is with me" (John 16:32). If we have "received the Spirit of sonship. And by him we cry, 'Abba, Father'" (Romans 8:15), then we can also say, "You will leave me all alone. Yet I am not alone, for my Father is with me." It is indeed biblical to serve God as a community, combining our spiritual gifts and resources. However, an incorrect or exaggerated emphasis on team ministry becomes a dangerous doctrine that attacks the sufficiency of God. Unbelief makes people dependent on men, and hypocrisy turns it into their creed.

Paul says, "I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances" (Philippians 4:11). It means "to be completely detached from circumstances."¹⁴ It is a manifestation of knowledge and maturity. It is a complete spiritual independence and sufficiency sustained by the power of God. He indicates that it is something that could be learned. A Christian who is independent and sufficient is not necessarily arrogant and obnoxious. He might be eager to cooperate with others to achieve common goals, but he does not *need* them to function as a person and as a disciple.

This inward sufficiency liberates the Christian from the love of money. As God remains in him by faith, he also remains in a state of satisfaction, and he no longer lusts for material riches. He exhibits a serenity and calmness unmatched by any non-Christian. Nevertheless, he continues to succeed in his career or business, because he also pursues the virtue of excellence and believes in God's promises of prosperity.

¹⁴ *Practical Word Studies in the New Testament, Vol. 1*; Chattanooga, Tennessee: Leadership Ministries Worldwide, 1998; p. 401.

3. BIBLICAL GUIDANCE AND DECISION-MAKING

"The will of God" may refer to two different things. The Bible says, "The secret things belong to the LORD our God, but the things revealed belong to us and to our children forever, that we may follow all the words of this law" (Deuteronomy 29:29).

First, the "will" of God could refer to his decretive will. This is what God has sovereignly decided to cause. Since the Bible teaches that God has foreordained all things, this means that all events, including human decisions, come under this category. God's decretive will determines all that happens, and it is not influenced by any factor external to God himself.

God's decretive will becomes known to us when the things determined have happened, or when he reveals the things that will happen either in biblical prophecies or by supernatural revelation. We learn about his decrees either after the fact, or he tells us beforehand. Most of God's decretive will remains hidden from us, and we usually come to know it only after the fact, and so it is not the basis on which we make our everyday decisions. Due to its nature, it is called his sovereign, hidden, or secret will. It refers to God's determination of what he would cause.

Second, the "will" of God could refer to his preceptive will. Our verse mentions that "the things revealed belong to us," and the "things revealed" are "all the words of this law." While the first refers to God's decrees as to what he will cause to happen, the second refers to God's precepts as to what we must believe and do. The latter is often called his revealed, preceptive, or moral will. Since it is revealed in the words of the Bible and can be studied, God's preceptive will is the basis on which we make our decisions. It refers to God's definition of right and wrong, of how we should behave.

Some theologians conclude that there are two "wills" in God, but this is foolish and blasphemous. The confusion exists because the same term is used to refer to two very different things. But when a term refers to two different things, it is always possible to use two different words instead. A divine decree is a determination as to what would happen, and a divine precept is a definition as to what is right or wrong. I could use the term "table" to refer to a desk and a chart, but it would take a very stupid man – or a theologian – to say that therefore I have two tables. No, I have one desk, and I have one chart. There is the divine decree, and there is the divine precept. Regardless of the words used to refer to them, they are different.

God's hidden decrees belong to him alone, and we must not speculate about them when we make our decisions, but we should conform our thinking and behavior to "the things revealed to us," or the words of the Bible. To illustrate, God has determined the exact financial and political climate of this nation ten years from now, but unless he has revealed it to you, it is impossible for you to make plans based on his decrees about this, since you

do not know these decrees. Rather, you must make decisions according to the precepts of the Bible.

In the Bible, the "will of God" often refers to his precepts: "It is God's will that you should be sanctified: that you should avoid sexual immorality" (1 Thessalonians 4:3); "Be joyful always; pray continually; give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus" (1 Thessalonians 5:16-18); "For it is God's will that by doing good you should silence the ignorant talk of foolish men" (1 Peter 2:15). So it is the "will of God" that we should avoid sexual sins, be joyful, be fervent in prayer, give thanks, and do good.

There are those who neglect this meaning of the "will of God," but they use the term to denote God's preference regarding the details of our lives, such as our residence and vocation, and even whether to evangelize a person, what to order in a restaurant, or where to go for vacation. It is assumed that the Bible does not directly address these decisions, so that they require extra-biblical revelation in every instance where such guidance is desired.

As they consistently speak of the "will of God" in this sense, they tend to overlook the biblical usage of the expression. So for them to live in the will of God would mean that they should be constantly listening for extra-biblical revelations, but the Bible teaches that to live in the will of God means that we should be constantly progressing in sanctification in Christ, to live as those separated for God's glory and make wise decisions that comport with his righteousness.

Paul tells the Colossians that he is "asking God to fill you with the knowledge of his will through all spiritual wisdom and understanding" (Colossians 1:9). He does not mean that he wants them to receive revelations in the form of prophecies, visions, and dreams in order for them to make decisions in accordance with God's decrees. Rather, he is asking God to give them "wisdom and understanding" regarding spiritual things so that they would intellectually grasp God's precepts as stated in the Bible. The desired result is that they would live in a way that pleases God: "And we pray this in order that you may live a life worthy of the Lord and may please him in every way: bearing fruit in every good work, growing in the knowledge of God" (v. 10). Those who do not know Christian theology cannot know God's will and cannot please him, no matter how many visions and dreams they see.

The Bible says that such things as thanksgiving and sexual purity are the "will of God." If we are not growing in knowledge and holiness, then we are already in violation of God's will, even if we seem to be working the right jobs, living in the right place, or wearing the right clothes. The truth is that most people do not care about knowledge and holiness, but they wish to be in God's "will" to find success and to avoid suffering. They want to be in the right place at the right time and meet the right people. They wish to make profitable investments and stay out of harm's way. These desires are not wrong, but it is wrong to care nothing about right beliefs and holy conduct.

Nevertheless, there are indeed biblical promises that pertain to health and wealth, and prophetic and miraculous powers. Those who deny these promises are in sin and unbelief

– they are selective in their faith toward God just as much as those who want only success and comfort. In their own way, they do not care about what God says, but they will allow only a religion that agrees with their human tradition, and their own view on what constitutes holiness. Then, they persecute those who have faith to receive God's blessings. Thus they refuse to enter into God's promises, and they forbid others to enter. This is the spirit of the Pharisees. This is the spirit that opposed and murdered Jesus Christ.

He is a liar who claims to desire God's will, who seeks prophecies, visions, and dreams, but refuses to do the things that God commands in the Bible. As Jesus says, "Why do you call me, 'Lord, Lord,' and do not do what I say?" (Luke 6:46). He does not truly want to please God. Christians are often worried that they are out of the "will of God," and so they constantly seek special revelations about God's specific directions for their lives. But most of them need not wonder about this – since they do not study and obey the Bible's teachings, they can be certain that they are already out of the will of God. More visions and dreams will not help them, but they need to devote more attention to doctrines.

When the "will of God" refers to God's decrees, it is talking about something that will surely happen. When the "will of God" refers to God's precepts, it is talking about his laws and commands, and these are often violated by men. God's decrees will always occur, but his precepts are often broken. And when his precepts are broken, it is because his decrees cause this to happen. Thus God often decrees for his precepts to be transgressed by men, who are then held accountable for their sins. This is explicitly and repeatedly exemplified in the Bible (1 Samuel 2:25; 2 Samuel 24:1)¹

Consider an illustration. Suppose Tim thinks about killing John. God has already determined whether or not he will do it, but since Tim does not know the divine decree on this matter, it is impossible for him to base his decision on it. He will discover the content of this hidden decree after the fact. Whatever he ends up doing is what God has already decided. God's decree is hidden from Tim, so it cannot guide his thinking as he decides. On the other hand, God's precept declares, "You shall not murder" (Exodus 20:13), and this is a clear guide for him in this situation.

If this is a simple case of murder, then that commandment is sufficient. However, in other cases, it does not necessarily mean that Tim should not kill John. Tim might need to take into account additional biblical precepts to arrive at the correct decision. Since murder is the termination of human life without biblical justification, then if John has committed a crime that deserves the death penalty, and if Tim happens to be the executioner, then it is not murder for Tim to kill John. There is biblical justification to do it. In fact, it would be his moral obligation to kill him.

Even in a case that involves killing a man, the Bible offers clear instructions. Tim has sufficient information to make a decision that is in accordance with the "will of God" without any knowledge of what God has foreordained. Whether Tim obeys God's precepts on the matter has been determined by God's decrees. The correct course of action is clear, but unless God reveals it beforehand, we cannot know what will happen before the fact.

¹ See Vincent Cheung, *The Author of Sin*.

When we make a decision according to the Bible's procedure, we first eliminate those options that the Bible declares to be sinful, and then we discard those that the Bible declares to be unwise. In addition to ruling out wrong choices, the Bible prescribes motives and actions such as diligence, compassion, evangelism, praying for the sick, and so on. We should always prefer the options that are most spiritually beneficial to ourselves and the church. Once there is some familiarity with the Bible, all of this can be processed in an instant with most decisions. We are usually left with very few options, and often only one choice remains. If multiple options still exist, then the Bible allows us to choose based on convenience or preference (Psalm 37:4). What we choose at this point will be acceptable to God.

God controls a person's thoughts, desires, and circumstances, so that as the man applies the Bible's precepts to the situation, his decision will correspond to God's unique plan for his life. God could indeed grant prophecies, visions, and dreams to lead the man to the correct decision, but it is possible for God to accomplish the same specific "will" without the use of special guidance. We can trust that the Bible is always sufficient.

We know that the apostles received numerous revelations, prophecies, visions, and dreams, but they still made most of their everyday and ministry decisions by following God's precepts.

Paul writes, "God, whom I serve with my whole heart in preaching the gospel of his Son, is my witness how constantly I remember you in my prayers at all times; and I pray that now at last by God's will the way may be opened for me to come to you" (Romans 1:9-10). He does not say that God told him to visit them, but he prays that he could go "by God's will" (God's decree).

The reason for his desire to visit is not divine revelation, but he says, "I long to see you so that I may impart to you some spiritual gift to make you strong – that is, that you and I may be mutually encouraged by each other's faith" (v. 11-12). He wishes to build up the Christians, which of course is in line with biblical precepts.

He continues, "I do not want you to be unaware, brothers, that I planned many times to come to you (but have been prevented from doing so until now) in order that I might have a harvest among you, just as I have had among the other Gentiles" (v. 13). He "planned many times" to visit, but has been hindered. He does not say that God told him to go, and he does not know if he would be hindered again. On this matter he is not operating by special revelation, but by an application of biblical precepts with sober reasoning.

Then, in 2 Corinthians 2:12-13, he writes, "Now when I went to Troas to preach the gospel of Christ and found that the Lord had opened a door for me, I still had no peace of mind, because I did not find my brother Titus there. So I said good-bye to them and went on to Macedonia." Paul says that the Lord had opened a door for him to preach, but because Titus, who had agreed to meet Paul, did not appear, the apostle turned away from this opportunity and went to Macedonia. Did God tell him to leave? Paul says that it was the

Lord who opened the door there. He left not because of special revelation, but simply because "I did not find my brother Titus there."

Therefore, although the early disciples were blessed with many miracles and revelations, and these things have never ceased, they did not depend on them alone, but they applied God's precepts and reasoned to their decisions.

As Haddon Robinson writes, "Many people look back at the first century as a time of unique spiritual unity between God and man. Some see God mysteriously directing each action of the early believers and their congregations. But when we look at most of the decisions the apostles made, we find a surprising thing; they made decisions the way we make them. They looked at their circumstances and came up with the best solution available."²

God indeed has an individual will for each person, and his plans for the chosen ones are always good (Romans 8:28). However, the details are not always revealed to us, and we cannot make decisions based on information that we do not possess. Rather, we must live according to his precepts in the Bible.

As James Boice writes, "God does indeed have a specific (though usually hidden) will for us...God does sometimes reveal that will in special situations...We may not know what that specific will is. We do not need to be under pressure to 'discover' it, fearing that if we miss it, somehow we will be doomed to a life outside the center of God's will or to his 'second best.' We are free to make decisions with what light and wisdom we possess. Nevertheless, we can know that God does have a perfect will for us, that the Holy Spirit is praying for us in accordance with that will, and that this will of God for us will be done – because God has decreed it and because the Holy Spirit is praying for us in this area."³

We must affirm the Bible's doctrine of God's absolute sovereignty in order to have the confidence that his plans will be perfectly fulfilled in our lives. Those who emphasize divine guidance but who reject divine sovereignty often speak of the possibility of failing to receive or follow God's revelation, and thus become trapped in his secondary or "permissive" will.

However, there is no such thing as God's permissive will – he does not bargain with us. A decision either agrees with holiness and righteousness, so that it is pleasing to him, or it violates his precepts for our thought and conduct, and is therefore sinful. God does not "permit" anything, but he decrees and causes all that occurs. As our decisions and actions happen according to these decrees, they are either sinful or they are not.

Those who insist on human autonomy, the reason for the fall of our first parents, resist this doctrine. But they could not even protest against God's sovereignty except by the power of

² Haddon W. Robinson, *Decision-Making by the Book*; Grand Rapids, Michigan: Discovery House Publishers, 1998; p. 123.

³ James Montgomery Boice, *Renewing Your Mind in a Mindless World*; Grand Rapids, Michigan: Kregel Publications, 1993; p. 124-125.

his decree. On the other hand, the chosen ones delight in it, and say, "Hallelujah! For our Lord God Almighty reigns" (Revelation 19:6).

Some people are reluctant to accept the biblical approach because they do not believe that the Bible has sufficient information for them to make the "right" decisions. There are several things we can say in reply.

First, when these people desire to know the "will of God," they often have in mind the route by which they could achieve success according to worldly standards. Their main interest is not to discover the way of obedience that leads to God's pleasure, but rather the path that brings them to comfort, fame, and wealth. To them, the "right" decision in business is not only one that is holy and wise, but it must also be one that maximizes their profits. One that ends in losses is assumed to be "wrong," even when it does not violate God's precepts. Since they think this way, they are not satisfied with an approach that operates mainly on precepts of integrity and wisdom.

Nevertheless, since the Bible teaches that when we obey God's precepts, we will be making decisions that are not only righteous but also wise, this will often result in success and prosperity (Joshua 1:8; Psalm 1). The Bible indeed contains many promises that pertain to health and wealth, and those preachers and theologians who undermine this in the name of orthodoxy in fact advocate a different gospel. Rather, our point is that unworthy motives should not influence the definition of a "right" decision, and material success should not be regarded as its necessary product. A decision that agrees with God's precepts is one that pleases him.

Second, the Bible itself claims to be sufficient for all of life; therefore, anyone who denies that it is sufficient speaks against God's word and commits blasphemy. As Paul writes, "All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work" (2 Timothy 3:16-17). And Peter says, "His divine power has given us everything we need for life and godliness through our knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and goodness" (2 Peter 1:3). Since we can be "equipped for every good work," and have "everything we need for life and godliness" through the knowledge the Bible provides, it follows that as long as our decisions agree with the Bible, they are the correct decisions, and ones that agree with the "will of God."

Third, unless those who consider the Bible insufficient possess an exhaustive knowledge of it, we can answer that the deficiency is not in the Bible, but in the people. The claim that the Bible does not contain sufficient information is unjustified. It is a conclusion that stems from ineptitude and ignorance.

Some might suggest that we still need prophecies, visions, and dreams because no one knows all of the Bible. However, this is irrelevant, because the truth is that these things continue even if everyone knows all of the Bible, since God intends for them to continue. He declares that prophecies, visions, dreams, and all kinds of signs and wonders happen

because he has poured out his Spirit – it has nothing to do with whether we have the whole Bible or whether we know the whole Bible (Acts 2:16-21).

The Bible has been completed, but this has nothing to do with whether prophecies, visions, and dreams continue. The Bible is complete, and all this means is that the Bible is complete. The heretical doctrine that the completion of the Bible means the cessation of spiritual manifestations is an arbitrary invention and a lazy shortcut to enforce the canon. It follows the spirit of the Pharisees, who invented traditions to supposedly enforce God's laws, when in so doing they transgressed God's laws more than anyone else. This is the demonic heritage of cessationism.

Nevertheless, the fact that prophecies, visions, and dreams continue should not become an excuse for ignorance of the Bible. We must strive for more biblical knowledge. It would make no sense for us to have the Bible, so that we could base our doctrines and decisions on it, and then neglect it and turn to some other form of guidance simply because we do not know what it says. If we do not know what it says, the solution is to find out what it says. All decisions, from what one should have for dinner to what he should take up as his vocation, are to be made in accordance with the Bible's precepts. This is true even when we receive prophecies, visions, and dreams, since these things are also judged by the Bible.

God's voice is heard most clearly in the Bible, since it consists of written documents that are open to examination. Any individual can read it, or an entire community of people can come together to study and discuss the text, and to learn God's teachings and instructions from it.

Exodus 15:26 says, "If you listen carefully to the voice of the LORD your God and do what is right in his eyes, if you pay attention to his commands and keep all his decrees, I will not bring on you any of the diseases I brought on the Egyptians, for I am the LORD, who heals you." God revealed his commands by an audible voice, and they remain his "voice" when they are recorded in writing. They are the same commands. The Bible is God's voice to us. To heed the voice of God is to believe the Bible's doctrines and to follow the Bible's commands.

Then, John 10:27 says, "My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me." Jesus refers to coming to God for salvation. He says that a person can come to God only through him, and God's chosen ones (his sheep) will hear his voice, and come to salvation by faith in him. The "voice" has more to do with the preaching of the gospel than the spiritual manifestations of prophecies, visions, and dreams. To heed the voice of Christ is to believe his message and follow his commands as recorded in the Bible.

Christians are sometimes instructed to seek specific guidance from God even in cases where the Bible tells us to decide according to its principles. For example, the Bible says, "Each man should give what he has decided in his heart to give, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver" (2 Corinthians 9:7). But some ministers would tell the congregation, "Let the Holy Spirit tell you how much to give." This does not mean that whatever a person chooses to give would be correct, since there are biblical precepts

that govern giving. Among other things, Paul emphasizes cheerfulness (9:7), generosity (v. 11), and gratitude (v. 11). If he is selfish and reluctant, then he is already out of the "will of God" – there is no need for special guidance to tell us this.

Proverbs 3:5 is a favorite verse for those who claim that we should seek specific guidance on a regular basis: "Trust in the LORD with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding." According to them, this teaches us not to trust our own knowledge and reasoning, and instead of thinking about what constitutes a moral and wise course of action, we should quiet our minds and listen to God for special guidance, often received in the form of an inner impression. However, there is nothing in this verse that indicates this. In the context of Proverbs, the verse means that instead of making decisions without regard to biblical precepts, we should reason according to God's words – such as what is written in Proverbs itself.

Later, we read, "Pay attention and listen to the sayings of the wise; apply your heart to what I teach, for it is pleasing when you keep them in your heart and have all of them ready on your lips. So that your trust may be in the LORD, I teach you today, even you. Have I not written thirty sayings for you, sayings of counsel and knowledge, teaching you true and reliable words, so that you can give sound answers to him who sent you?" (22:17-21). As we pay attention and listen to the sayings of the wise, and become so proficient with them that we have all of them ready on our lips, our trust will then be in the Lord. Therefore, the admonition to trust in the Lord means to depend on the words of Scripture and think in accordance with them.

The false teaching that prayer should always be a dialogue, a two-way communication with God, has contributed to misunderstandings on our topic. Those who promote this view claim that God speaks most often when we pray, so that we should expect it to be a conversation and listen for his voice. However, the Bible never teaches that prayer is a dialogue. It can indeed become a dialogue if God speaks while we pray, but the Bible does not say that it is a dialogue by its very nature. When prayer is taught or recorded in the Bible, it is most often a monologue, where one addresses God with no response from him in the form of a speech or vision.

In the Bible, God sometimes speaks to people when they pray, but there seems to be no direct and necessary relationship between prayer and hearing God. It is not true that he speaks most often when they pray. He also speaks while people are working, sleeping, and doing other things. In fact, it appears that the reverse is true – in most cases, God is the one who initiates, and not while the person is praying or requesting to hear from him. God indeed speaks, and he sometimes speaks when someone is praying, just as he also speaks when the person is doing other things. The point is that prayer is not a dialogue by its very nature, but it consists of man's address to God.

It is said that if God is our Father, then prayer should be a dialogue. When one speaks to his earthly father, it is never a monologue, but a dialogue in which the two speak back and forth. However, a naïve use of analogies often confuses doctrinal discussions. An analogy

from human life is appropriate only when it illustrates something that we see the Bible teaches, and not when it is used to form a doctrine or to assert what the Bible must mean.

God is indeed a father, and when one speaks to an earthly father, it is indeed a conversation. However, a man does not fall down to worship his earthly father, and he does not sing songs of praise to him. His earthly father does not write down his commandments in a book, or instruct prophets to write it. Moreover, the son does not approach his earthly father through a mediator who has suffered the father's wrath so that the son would not be punished. Our relationship with God is remarkably different from our relationship with earthly fathers.

When an analogy is used to assert something to be true and not used to merely illustrate something known to be true, it falls apart, and could even produce ridiculous and blasphemous implications. Those who indiscriminately apply the analogy either have a defective relationship with God, or a perverse, strange, and idolatrous relationship with their earthly fathers. Or, they themselves do not live as their analogy implies, but it is a lie used to manipulate doctrine.

One side effect of the false teaching is the pressure it places upon God's people to hear him speak when they pray. Then, when God does not speak, they either imagine that he does and so come under delusion, or they become disappointed or worried about their relationship with God, although there might be nothing wrong with their spiritual condition except for the common deficiencies Christians have as they mature.

Those who teach that we should constantly listen for God's voice often also portray it as difficult to hear, or as subject to numerous hindrances and distractions. They would say, "God is speaking, but we do not always recognize his voice," or "God is speaking, but we are not always listening." However, the Bible does not teach that we should constantly listen for God's voice. We should indeed expect him to speak in prophecies, visions, and dreams according to passages like Acts 2:16-21, but there is no need to make an effort to listen. God's voice is never described as faint, requiring stillness and concentration to hear. He speaks with clarity and power, and when he speaks, he overcomes the distortion and resistance in our minds so that we grasp the message he communicates.

Psalm 46:10 says, "Be still and know that I am God." This verse has been misconstrued to mean that God's voice is faint, and that Christians should become still so that they can hear it. However, the context prevents this interpretation: "Come and see the works of the LORD, the desolations he has brought on the earth. He makes wars cease to the ends of the earth; he breaks the bow and shatters the spear, he burns the shields with fire. 'Be still, and know that I am God; I will be exalted among the nations, I will be exalted in the earth.' The LORD Almighty is with us; the God of Jacob is our fortress" (Psalm 46:8-11). Verse 10 does not say, "Be quiet so that you may hear from God," but it means something like, "Shut up! Realize that I am God and I am in charge!" The NLT translates, "Be silent, and know that I am God!" And the GNT has it as, "Stop fighting and know that I am God." The verse does not refer to prayer or to hearing God's voice.

It is said that God frequently speaks through the "inward witness" (an inner impression or intuition), and the "still small voice" (an inner, inaudible voice). One of the verses used to teach the "inward witness" says, "The Spirit itself beareth witness with our spirit, that we are the children of God" (Romans 8:16, KJV). The verse refers to an assurance of salvation or adoption, and might not offer a basis to establish a way of hearing God for all of life. Moreover, it is not restricted to an inner knowing, because to bear witness to something could involve many hours of verbal testimony.

As for the "still small voice," the teaching comes from Elijah's experience: "And he said, Go forth, and stand upon the mount before the LORD. And, behold, the LORD passed by, and a great and strong wind rent the mountains, and brake in pieces the rocks before the LORD; but the LORD was not in the wind: and after the wind an earthquake; but the LORD was not in the earthquake: And after the earthquake a fire; but the LORD was not in the fire: and after the fire a still small voice. And it was so, when Elijah heard it, that he wrapped his face in his mantle, and went out, and stood in the entering in of the cave. And, behold, there came a voice unto him, and said, What doest thou here, Elijah?" (1 Kings 19:11-13, KJV).

The passage does not suggest that God spoke in the form of an inner impression or an inaudible inner voice. The most natural interpretation is that it refers to an audible voice, only that it is small, especially compared to the wind, earthquake, and fire. Verse 13 states that "a voice" spoke to Elijah – it was clear and distinct. This becomes more obvious when we read from two other translations: "And after the earthquake a fire, but the LORD was not in the fire; and after the fire a sound of a gentle blowing" (NASB); "After the earthquake came a fire, but the LORD was not in the fire. And after the fire came a gentle whisper" (NIV). There is no reason to think that Elijah received a mere impression or a faint inner voice.

A common difficulty with those who teach that "God is speaking, but we might not be listening" is that the biblical passages that they use in fact refer to stronger spiritual manifestations than the kinds they attempt to promote. So in challenging their teaching, I do not deny that God speaks in words, visions, dreams, and the like, but I deny that his voice is easy to miss and that we need to strain ourselves to hear it. Rather, I encourage faith to believe that God can speak at any time, not only during prayer, and that when he speaks, we will hear it. This is because when he speaks, he is the one who wishes to communicate, and when he wishes to do something, he gets it done. The Bible teaches us to expect prophecies, visions, and dreams (Acts 2:16-21), and when these things come, they will be clear and not faint.

4. THE DEATH OF A CHRISTIAN

Speaking of the Lord Jesus, the Bible says in Hebrews 2:14-15, "Since the children have flesh and blood, he too shared in their humanity so that by his death he might destroy him who holds the power of death – that is, the devil – and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by their fear of death." Non-Christians are enslaved by the fear of death. They pretend to be indifferent or courageous, but they are afraid. They do not want to admit this, and so they harden their hearts, and refuse to lay aside their pride and dignity. Yet this fear haunts them, and it is the driving force behind many of their beliefs and actions, and their religions, philosophies, and sciences. On the other hand, Jesus Christ liberates Christians from spiritual bondage, from slavery to the fear of death.

Christ has purchased redemption for his chosen ones, but the application of redemption is not yet complete. Therefore, although immortality belongs to all Christians, they continue to experience death at this time. The Bible calls death "the last enemy" (1 Corinthians 15:26) even when it says that Christ has conquered everything through his death and resurrection. Hebrews 9:27 says, "Man is destined to die once, and after that to face judgment." James also reminds us of our mortality: "Now listen, you who say, 'Today or tomorrow we will go to this or that city, spend a year there, carry on business and make money.' Why, you do not even know what will happen tomorrow. What is your life? You are a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes. Instead, you ought to say, 'If it is the Lord's will, we will live and do this or that'" (James 4:13-15).

Physical death is the result of sin: "Therefore, just as sin entered the world through one man, and death through sin, and in this way death came to all men, because all sinned" (Romans 5:12). However, Jesus Christ has saved the Christian from sin, and he has so altered the meaning of death for him that it cannot be considered the same experience as the death of a non-Christian. Death has no oppressive power in the Christian's mind, so that his outlook is no longer influenced by the fear of death. His life takes on lasting value, and his priorities and expectations are drastically enhanced. This is because death is no longer final or damning, and life is no longer fleeting and meaningless.

Although the Christian is still waiting to receive physical immortality, he has eternal life at the moment of conversion: "I tell you the truth, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life and will not be condemned; he has crossed over from death to life" (John 5:24); "Do not offer the parts of your body to sin, as instruments of wickedness, but rather offer yourselves to God, as those who have been brought from death to life; and offer the parts of your body to him as instruments of righteousness" (Romans 6:13); "We know that we have passed from death to life, because we love our brothers. Anyone who does not love remains in death" (1 John 3:14).

Christians have passed from death to life through faith in Jesus Christ. We have eternal life now, and we have been made alive in Christ. For us, the kind of "death" that refers to

spiritual separation and estrangement from God has been abolished. We have fellowship with God now. The complete application of redemption to our bodies will occur at the resurrection, when Christ returns. Meanwhile, God heals our bodies (James 5:15) as a token of better things to come.

Some Christians will never experience death, since they will be alive when Christ returns, and they "who are still alive and are left will be caught up" (1 Thessalonians 4:17) to meet the Lord. Their bodies will become immortal. As Paul writes, "Listen, I tell you a mystery: We will not all sleep, but we will all be changed – in a flash, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed. For the perishable must clothe itself with the imperishable, and the mortal with immortality" (1 Corinthians 15:51-53).

In another place, he explains, "Now we know that if the earthly tent we live in is destroyed, we have a building from God, an eternal house in heaven, not built by human hands. Meanwhile we groan, longing to be clothed with our heavenly dwelling, because when we are clothed, we will not be found naked. For while we are in this tent, we groan and are burdened, because we do not wish to be unclothed but to be clothed with our heavenly dwelling, so that what is mortal may be swallowed up by life" (2 Corinthians 5:1-4). In a sense, we will retain the same body, but it will be transformed into one of indestructible substance, no longer subject to sin and decay. Our mortality will be "swallowed up by life," and we will be clothed "with the imperishable."

Those who have died will not be at a disadvantage when Christ returns: "Brothers, we do not want you to be ignorant about those who fall asleep, or to grieve like the rest of men, who have no hope. We believe that Jesus died and rose again and so we believe that God will bring with Jesus those who have fallen asleep in him. According to the Lord's own word, we tell you that we who are still alive, who are left till the coming of the Lord, will certainly not precede those who have fallen asleep. For the Lord himself will come down from heaven, with a loud command, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet call of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first" (1 Thessalonians 4:13-16). They will be resurrected first, and those who are alive will follow.

The Bible teaches that Christ' resurrection is the guarantee that those who believe in him will also be resurrected. Since Christ was raised, we know that it is possible, that it has been done, and God has promised the same thing to those who have faith in his Son. We could still lament the loss of Christian friends, but we know that they have not perished, and that our separation is temporary. Therefore, although we may grieve, it is unlike the experience of "the rest of men, who have no hope." Our sorrow is infused with hope and a sweetness that is beyond the grasp of non-Christians. "Therefore encourage each other with these words" (1 Thessalonians 4:18).

In contrast, the non-Christian's death is tragic and final. God will throw him into hellfire, and inflict extreme and endless punishment on him. The non-Christian will long for his own annihilation in order to escape the suffering, but even though in this life he holds to the delusion that he is the captain of his own soul and the master of his own fate, now he

cannot even destroy himself. God will not allow the non-Christian to disappear, but he will torture him in hell forever.

For the Christian, death is no longer a punishment. As Paul says, "For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain" (Philippians 1:21). To "go on living in the body...will mean fruitful labor" (v. 22), while "to depart and be with Christ...is better by far" (v. 23). Therefore, the death of a Christian is not inconsistent with the redemptive sacrifice of Christ. Death hands over the non-Christian to a permanent state of torture and agony, but for the Christian, it is simply the means by which God translates him to a permanent state of joy and rest. Revelation 14:13 says, "Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord...they will rest from their labor, for their deeds will follow them."

We have not fully assimilated the gospel message as long as fear lingers in our minds and produces the desire to endlessly delay death. If "to die is gain" for the Christian, then this means that a believer should eventually want to die after a life of fruitful labor for Christ. As 2 Corinthians 5:5-8 says, "Now it is God who has made us for this very purpose and has given us the Spirit as a deposit, guaranteeing what is to come. Therefore we are always confident and know that as long as we are at home in the body we are away from the Lord. We live by faith, not by sight. We are confident, I say, and would prefer to be away from the body and at home with the Lord." Nevertheless, we would not want to die before the time God chooses, because we belong to him, and we treasure the opportunity for prayer, ministry, and all kinds of good works in this life.

Death is not something to be avoided at all costs. The weakness of our frame might cause us to shrink from pain and danger, but as our confidence in God increases, his promises anchor our minds in peace – "We live by faith, not by sight." When the time comes, the Christian should embrace death as the means to take him immediately to Christ. Now we enjoy the freedom to fulfill our purpose on this earth, serving him with our all, and then to look forward to be with him. Jesus has conquered death. Death is good – very good – if you are a Christian.

Although the Christian should consider death as good, he must not hurry death, and he must not violate God's precepts to make it happen. The Christian faith is against suicide, because a man's life does not belong to himself but to God. In any case, since the Christian's life has been infused with purpose by God, it is natural that he should desire to live out its full duration in service to God.

Unless Jesus comes before the time, we will experience death one day, but either way, our time in this life is limited. Therefore, we must heed what Jesus says: "As long as it is day, we must do the work of him who sent me. Night is coming, when no one can work" (John 9:4). Most people do not think like this, and they will die with their sins: "The ground of a certain rich man produced a good crop. He thought to himself, 'What shall I do? I have no place to store my crops.' Then he said, 'This is what I'll do. I will tear down my barns and build bigger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods. And I'll say to myself, 'You have plenty of good things laid up for many years. Take life easy; eat, drink and be

merry.' But God said to him, 'You fool! This very night your life will be demanded from you. Then who will get what you have prepared for yourself?'" (Luke 12:16-20).

Some think that religion is for old and retired people to consider, but those who are young should pursue wealth, greatness, and relationships. If they have all of these, they should get more. But Jesus says that anyone can die *today*, if this is what God decides. All the non-Christian's works and plans end in futility. He is entirely worthless. His life amounts to nothing. Jesus concludes, "This is how it will be with anyone who stores up things for himself but is not rich toward God" (v. 21). Since death is inevitable, and since we continue to exist after death, we better make it our aim to become rich toward God. Our understanding of death determines how we live now.

Jesus warns, "Watch out! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; a man's life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions...Life is more than food, and the body more than clothes" (v. 15, 23). In his fierce pursuit for social status and financial riches, the modern man does not stop to think about life and death, and he does not understand these ultimate issues. All he knows is to build bigger barns. God says this person is stupid. His failure to consider his mortality and the spiritual dimension of life has blinded him to what really matters. He has no answers to the ultimate questions that everyone must ask and settle. He is supposed to be a rational creature, but he lives like a beast, taken up with the lowly concerns of an animal.

On the other hand, Christians "have life, and have it to the full" (John 10:10), so that as we abide in Christ, we are able to live with a divine perspective that renders the present time meaningful, while preparing our hearts to meet the Lord when it ends. As Paul says, "But you, brothers, are not in darkness...But since we belong to the day, let us be self-controlled, putting on faith and love as a breastplate, and the hope of salvation as a helmet. For God did not appoint us to suffer wrath but to receive salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ. He died for us so that, whether we are awake or asleep, we may live together with him" (1 Thessalonians 5:4, 8-10).

Let us be sober-minded, and pray that God would "Teach us to number our days aright, that we may gain a heart of wisdom" (Psalm 90:12). Christians need to contemplate death; it is wise to do so. However, we do not reflect on our mortality in a morbid manner, because Christ has set us free from the fear of death (Hebrews 2:15). Death does not drive us to despair, for "to die is gain" (Philippians 1:21). Although death is no longer oppressive, it reminds us that our time is limited in this life, and every moment lived in rebellion to God is a moment lost, gone forever.

The KJV has led some to infer a false doctrine on this issue. It says in Ephesians 5:16, "Redeeming the time, because the days are evil," and in Colossians 4:5, "Walk in wisdom toward them that are without, redeeming the time." There is a teaching that God would enable a person who has wasted his life to "buy back" lost time, and through wisdom reach the place where he would have been if he had not squandered past moments.

The doctrine makes no sense, because it seems to suggest that if I had not wasted time, then God would not have given me wisdom to speed my progress. However, God is even more willing to offer his wisdom to the obedient. I could receive God's wisdom to make the best use of my time from the start, and if so, this must mean that I would be further along in my progress than if I had wasted time and then receive God's wisdom to return to the right path. We should stop deceiving ourselves – lost time is lost forever. By God's usual operation, a person who strives after the faith and knowledge of Jesus Christ will always be more spiritually advanced than if he languishes in sin. Nevertheless, God is full of mercy, and so we probably never suffer the full effect of our negligence.

The false teaching might not have come about if someone had examined other translations. The NASB says, "Making the most of your time, because the days are evil" (Ephesians 5:16), and "Conduct yourselves with wisdom toward outsiders, making the most of the opportunity" (Colossians 4:5). Likewise, the NIV translates, "Be wise in the way you act toward outsiders; make the most of every opportunity" (Colossians 4:5). Paul is not saying that God will help the readers make up for lost time, but seeing that they have become Christians, he is saying, "Walk in wisdom! Make the most of your time now!" This is an evil generation; therefore, do not be stupid like the non-Christians, but know and obey the teachings of the Lord (Ephesians 5:15-17). This is what it means to live in wisdom, and to make the most of our time.

Perhaps some would think that since we will live with God forever once we die, it is reasonable to focus on material things now, and only turn to spiritual matters as we near death. We must favor the opposite conclusion – since our existence continues after death, and since we cannot carry our material possessions to the next life (Job 1:21), we ought to focus on spiritual matters and accumulate spiritual riches. The Bible also indicates that there will be a judgment when we transition to the next life, and what we do in this life will influence our station in the next (Matthew 25:14-30; 1 Corinthians 3:11-15).

Therefore, let us become wise and live before the face of God – now, not later. Christians are deceiving themselves if they think that they could live as unbelievers now, and then live the faith that they profess only after they have achieved some carnal goal, reached some worldly plateau, or become close to death. This kind of thinking shows that they are not Christians, and the life of God is not in them. God might grant them true conversion at a later time (2 Timothy 2:25), but meanwhile they remain condemned by the words of Christ: "For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also" (Matthew 6:21). Thus the conclusion of the whole matter is this: "Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the whole duty of man. For God will bring every deed into judgment, including every hidden thing, whether it is good or evil" (Ecclesiastes 12:13-14).