

Humility: Dying to Self, Feet First | The Importance of Character | Speaking the Truth in Love

THE SOWER

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FEATURE ARTICLES

4	Opening Letter
5	Humility – Dying to Self, Feet First – by Karen Theisen
8	The Contender – The Importance of Character – A Matter of the Heart - by Dan Gallagher
16	Partner Profile – Evonne Anglesey
17	Fuel for the Fire – Why Your Life’s Mission is Revealed on a Need-to-Know Basis – by Joshua Anderson
19	Figures of Speech – Homeopropheron (Alliteration) – by John W. Schoenheit
21	The Vine – Speaking the Truth in Love – Teaching, Preaching and Testimony – by Michael L. Patten
25	Dear Sower

Opening Letter

Godly Character

This issue of *The Sower* is about character. The world is paying less and less attention to good character. Greed, corruption, lying, double standards, and just plain evil are more and more the order of the day. This means that as Christians we have to pay close attention to our character, because we are not going to learn about godly character from the world around us.

Character is the sum total of our moral and ethical qualities, and it can be good or bad. Character is based in the heart, but it shines forth in what we say and do. What each Christian needs to firmly grasp is that he or she is responsible for developing, and maintaining, godly character. Anne Frank, a Jewish girl who died in the Nazi holocaust at age 15, was correct, and wise beyond her years, when she wrote: "...the final forming of a person's character lies in their own hands."

It should not surprise us that when it comes to character, God's way is different than the world's way. The way of the world is to sweep character under the rug and ignore it, while lauding and promoting a person's abilities and gifts. For example, if a person has a wonderful voice, but is mean-spirited, an alcoholic, and sexually immoral, the person's character is ignored while he or she is promoted as a great singer. Many Hollywood stars and popular sports figures make millions of dollars per year and are considered "celebrities," but are poor specimens of humanity. The world ignores their bad character because they are "so talented."

From God's perspective, all of our talents and abilities mean nothing if we are not going to do the hard work of developing godly character. After all, He was the one who gave us our talents, so they do not impress Him. Jesus expressed the heart of God very well when he said that on the Day of Judgment many would come and report the talented things they had done, like prophecy, mighty works, and casting out demons. Yet Jesus made it clear that if we do these things on our own, for our own gain, not out of humble obedience to God, he will say he never knew us (Matt. 7:21 and following).

From a practical standpoint, elevating character above talents and giftings can be very difficult. It may mean that the "best" singers are not allowed to sing at an event because a character flaw has surfaced that has temporarily disqualified them. Or the "most gifted" teacher may not be allowed to teach, or the most qualified leader may not get to lead, because character issues have disqualified them. However, we must each learn the lesson that developing and maintaining godly character is a top priority. It does not bother God if the "most gifted" person has to sit on the sidelines for a while and take time to work on godly character, and we should get to the point that it does not bother us either. God has always chosen His people by looking on the heart, and we must also. How can we love God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength if we have ungodly character? By definition, our ungodliness shows we are loving ourselves more than God or our neighbors.

Paul wrote that our goal should be to please Christ, and the only way to do that is to develop godly character. Even if we know the Word by heart, we will not be able to live what we know without good character. Developing and maintaining godly character requires constant and diligent effort, and, usually, the help of other people. No wonder the Bible encourages us to meet together as Christians and spur one another on to love and good deeds (Heb. 10:24). Let's not give ourselves a "pass" on our ungodly character traits. For Christ's sake, and his Body's sake, let's follow the example of the Apostle Paul, who kept the pressure on himself, and work on being more like Christ every day.

Constantly improving,

John W. Schoenheit

Humility

Dying to Self, Feet First

by Karen Theisen

Humility is a foundational character trait found in those who exemplify godliness and obedience, and numerous Old and New Testament believers manifest it. Humility, as defined by *Webster's Dictionary*¹, includes the quality of being “low,” that is “low” in our minds, which, interestingly, has often played out in history by people getting “low” to the ground; certainly lower than the one to whom they were demonstrating humility. When Abraham was 99 years old, he fell face down to worship God Almighty in response to God's covenant promise guaranteeing him countless descendants (Gen. 17:1-7). For thousands of years, cultures around the world have practiced prostration and bowing low to the ground to show respect for spiritual and even political leaders.

Nothing brings a human “lower” than death. At funerals I have witnessed grieving loved ones fall to the ground in a physical expression of their emotional distress. In most cultures, a corpse is lowered into a grave, the resting place of death. Our Jesus exemplified his willingness to submit himself to the most humiliating death, crucifixion, because he trusted in God's promise of resurrection:

Philippians 2:8-11

(8) And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death—even death on a cross!

(9) Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name,

(10) that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth,

(11) and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

In order to defeat the enemy of death, Jesus humbly lowered himself to death. Similarly, we Christians are called to die to self:

Romans 6:6-8 (NLT)²

(6) We know that our old sinful selves were crucified with Christ so that sin might lose its power in our lives. We are no longer slaves to sin.

(7) For when we died with Christ we were set free from the power of sin.

(8) And since we died with Christ, we know we will also live with him.

We can, with focused effort, subject our carnal sin nature to the liberating power of the holy spirit that lives within us. Romans 6:11 says, “In the same way, count yourselves dead to sin but alive to God in Christ Jesus.” Further, we are exhorted in Romans 6:13, “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.”

As we die to self, which is an expression of one's humility, we will naturally become other-focused. Our focus will first be on Jesus, and then on others. You may be wondering about the title of this article. What does

humility have to do with feet? Let's take a look at the life of one woman who role modeled the character trait of humility by choosing to die to self. This woman is only mentioned three times in Scripture, yet each time, she humbly positioned herself at our Lord's feet.

We are first introduced to Mary, sister of Lazarus and Martha, in Luke 10:38-42. It is likely she was either single or widowed, because we are told she lived with her brother. As a Hebrew woman, it is unlikely she would have known how to read or have been exposed to formal education. Yet, we find her at the Lord's feet while he teaches. The Living Word, Jesus, was explaining truths about the written Word and Mary was not about to miss this opportunity! Can you picture her at our Lord's feet? She made the decision to leave the kitchen and the physical preparations for a meal that likely would have included bread, a mainstay of the Jewish diet. Mary yearned to feast on spiritual truths taught by Jesus, the Bread of Life. Meanwhile, Mary's sister, Martha, chose to toil in the kitchen. Perhaps Martha judged Mary's decision to leave the kitchen as a lack of humility. How confident Martha must have been when she demanded Jesus reprove Mary for her choice to listen to Jesus teach while there was important work to be done! Jesus' response to Martha is a reminder for all believers. Spending time with the Bread of Life far outweighs the importance of preparation for physical bread. A key to dying to self is related to time management: humbly choose to spend time with Jesus daily. No other task or goal should take priority over spending time with our Lord in prayer and in Bible study.

The second time we see Mary is during a period of profound grief. Her brother, Lazarus, had died four days earlier and mourners filled her home. John 11:32 says, "When Mary reached the place where Jesus was and saw him, she fell at his feet and said, 'Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.' " Notice that in her distress, Mary again humbled herself and fell at Jesus' feet. This is the second key to dying to self: during life's confusing, painful trials, submit yourself to Jesus. The Great Physician is able to comfort and restore you. I love that she freely spoke her mind. Our Jesus desires to hear about our concerns. We need not edit our emotions or concerns. Mary in essence was challenging Jesus with, Where were you when I needed you most? Jesus is alive, and we can be completely honest in our prayers and communication with him.

The final time Scripture mention this simple woman occurred at a dinner party. John 12:1-8 describes this touching event. Mary, again at Jesus' feet, brought a precious earthly possession, nard. A rare and costly perfume, her flask of nard was worth an entire year's income! Jesus had returned to Bethany for Passover, where he would be crucified. The family who had been so touched and helped by resurrection power hosted a dinner in honor of Jesus. Mary wanted to acknowledge her gratefulness to her hero and Lord by planning a special act of service. Can you picture how the expensive fragrance filled the entire home as Mary tenderly anointed Jesus' feet with her very own hair? In that culture, a woman's hair was considered her glory. Culturally, this was a very significant act of humility, motivated by love and thanksgiving. Another key to dying to self is to recognize our Jesus as worthy of that which is most precious and costly to us, including our time, money, material goods, and our spiritual giftings.

One final note related to character and humility: John 12:4-6 records that Mary was severely criticized for her service to Jesus. We can expect the same. Yet in the record there is no indication that Mary got indignant, fought back, or tried to justify what she had done. Her action was not a show for recognition or self-promotion. It was a heartfelt and humble action to elevate Jesus Christ. If others criticized her, that only revealed their heart, it did not impugn hers. Not surprisingly, Jesus immediately spoke up on Mary's behalf, and publicly commended her labor of love. Similarly, just as we can expect criticism like Mary received, we can also expect that Jesus will one day speak up for us. As we die to self and fully embrace the good works that the Lord has

prepared for us to do, we can look forward to one day hearing, "...Well done, [my] good and faithful servant..."

Notes:

1. Webster, Noah. *American Dictionary of the English Language*. Foundation for American Christian Education, San Francisco, CA, 1828.

2. Scripture quotations marked (NLT) are taken from the Holy Bible, *New Living Translation*, © 1996. Used by permission of Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., Wheaton, IL 60189.

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The Contender

The Importance of Character

A Matter of the Heart

by Dan Gallagher

Numerous men and women throughout history have spoken at length about the importance of having an upright character, especially for those who serve in any type of leadership capacity. A simple search on the topic of character and leadership yields thousands of books, speeches, and quotes. Character is so important to us that we even recognize it as one of the principal requirements of trust, and trust is the essential prerequisite for all meaningful relationships.

Most people would never consider following someone with a past filled with dubious moral or ethical choices. Unfortunately, there appears to be a general incongruity in our society between what we say we value, and what people actually allow. Far too often the media is filled with sordid stories about the ignoble actions of people who are our society's supposed "role models." The daily media seems filled with scandalous stories that involve major sports figures, political leaders, religious leaders, and business executives. Stories such as a highly talented (and well paid) football player involved in illegal dog-fighting, a state governor accused of trying to sell a seat in the Senate, and even the former chairman of the NASDAQ stock exchange pleading guilty to stealing billions of dollars from thousands of investors in a "ponzi" style scheme. Even the highest office of our land is not exempt from disrepute when a sitting President of the United States admits to sexual improprieties with a young intern. Sadly, we far too often learn of sexual misdeeds and other immoral actions by Christian leaders once again resulting in discredit to the Body of Christ. It is almost as if the unspoken message has become, "It's okay to do what you want as long as you don't get caught." Every one of the activities cited above is really nothing more than a character issue.

What is Character?

A person's character is who they really are. We all think about a lot of things that are not godly, and things we would be ashamed of if they were available for all to know. Abraham Lincoln once said, "Character is like a tree and reputation like its shadow. The shadow is what we think of it; the tree is the real thing." My reputation is what others think of me, which may or may not be true, but my character is who I really am. Your character is the real you in the sense that you cannot separate what you do from who you are.

Everyone has a "public" face and a "private" face. Most of us tend to act with better behavior around others than we do in private. The other day I was at a major retail store when I noticed sophisticated video surveillance equipment. It's not that I was going to do anything wrong, but just knowing the cameras were there resulted in my thinking, "I need to watch what I am doing because someone could be watching me." Stories abound of people being caught on camera committing rueful acts. It is sad but true that video cameras reveal what we all know: that a person's real character is who they are when they think no one is looking. The British writer and politician Thomas Macaulay (1800-1859) once said, "The measure of a man's character is what he would do if he knew he never would be found out."

Character is the aggregate of a person's ethical and moral qualities, and it is demonstrated through the choices we make. So a person of good character is someone who *acts* morally and ethically upright.

Undoubtedly, we are all a mixture of both good and bad, so we are not saying that to have “good” character a person never makes any missteps. Rather, he is someone who is always striving to take the moral high road and, when he recognizes he has done something wrong, does what is necessary to get back on track.

The list of “high value” character traits (those virtues we esteem) is extensive, and includes such things as integrity, courage, honor, honesty, and fortitude. In addition to the many noble traits there are, we Christians would also want to make sure that we are pursuing those virtues that God espouses. Certainly this list for us would incorporate the distinguishing qualities of love, grace, mercy, forgiveness, and humility. In fact, it has been said that the fruit of the spirit mentioned in Galatians 5:22 and 23 represent the character of Christ.

Galatians 5:22 and 23a

(22) But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness,
(23a) gentleness and self-control...

The type of character you have is your choice. This is why it was once said that, “Your character is the sum total of your life choices.” If you make poor choices, such as stealing, lying, or laziness, then you have poor character. I may not have a choice regarding the situations I am confronted with, but I always have a choice concerning how I respond to those situations. When dealing with frustrating or disappointing circumstances, I can respond with anger or with patience. The choice is always mine to make, so my character is always a matter of my choice, and thus it is my responsibility.¹

What does God Say about Character?

God absolutely cares about character, so much so that it could be said that the Bible is a character textbook. It is filled with instructions on what it means to live righteously, that is, in a “godly” and upright manner. The Bible is also filled with stories of men and women who have done it right, and many who have not. These are for our learning so we can benefit from the examples of others.

One of the very first records in the Bible is about a man (Adam) who failed to heed God’s instructions, resulting in calamity and pain that is reverberating even to this day.

Romans 5:12

Therefore, just as sin entered the world through one man [Adam], and death through sin, and in this way death came to all men, because all sinned-

Adam’s story is filled with numerous character lessons. When he sinned, Adam’s character demonstrated rebellion and rejection of God. Although Adam was created physically and morally perfect, he chose to disobey God, and character is always the result of choices. Adam’s actions included disobedience, and a lack of submitting to God, which is what we call P-R-I-D-E. One of the most important traits of godly character is humility, which is the polar opposite of pride. The words of the prophet Obadiah, written thousands of years later, ring as true for Adam as they do for us today.

Obadiah 1:3

The pride of your heart has deceived you...

Since that day of moral failure, God has been directing man back to the path of moral high ground through various means. The Ten Commandments include directives that show people what to do to have godly

character. These include, “Thou shall not” lie, steal, commit adultery, covet, or murder (Exod. 20:7-17). Clearly, God’s Word is filled with instructions concerning how a person with godly character is to both think and act.

In the New Testament Paul instructed the first century Christians to put off their ungodly pagan lifestyles and “...become blameless and pure, children of God without fault in a crooked and depraved generation...” (Phil. 2:15). It is not news that the world will always be in conflict with God’s ways. God even tells us that “...friendship with the world is hatred toward God...” and “...Anyone who chooses to be a friend of the world becomes an enemy of God” (James 4:4).

In contrast to the way of the world, we are to pursue the higher and nobler path.

Philippians 4:8

Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things.

And, not only are we to think about these things, we are to put them into practice, that is, to *do* them, and character always involves the *doing!*

Philippians 4:9

Whatever you have learned or received or heard from me, or seen in me—put it into practice. And the God of peace will be with you.

In the Old Testament, Boaz, speaking about Ruth, the great-grandmother of King David, said she was a woman of “noble character” (Ruth 3:11). The word translated “noble character” in this verse is the Hebrew word “*chayil*” which generally refers to strength and might. In this instance it applies to her inner strength of character. From the record about this wonderful woman we learn many character lessons from her interactions with her mother-in-law. Ruth shows herself to be faithful, kind, merciful, steadfast, industrious, and humble, all of which are wonderful and godly character traits.

Just as there are examples of people with great character in the Bible, there are also records of those who did not do quite so well. King Saul, although looking like the right choice as a king, had some serious character flaws. The prophet Samuel delivered some great promises that should have inspired and encouraged him. Yet despite this, from early in his kingly career he demonstrated fear. In one of the first accounts about him we find that “...he did not tell his uncle what Samuel had said about the kingship” and then later that “...he has hidden himself among the baggage” (1 Sam. 10:16 and 22). Saul’s failure to address this deep issue of his heart continues to show up throughout his royal career, resulting in numerous acts of disobedience, murder, deceit, and pride.

The life of Christ teaches us great practical character lessons. In spite of difficult circumstances and times of severe difficulty, he always responded in a godly manner. He was the epitome of love, kindness, and gentleness. Yet, at the very same time, he was a man of great passion, strength, and fearlessness. And now, we too are told that this is how we can, and should, live.

Character, a Matter of the Heart

One of the great lessons Jesus taught his followers is that a man's or woman's character is always a matter of what is in his or her heart. If a person commits adultery it is because that is what he has living in his heart, and a person's heart is always his responsibility. This is why God tells us that we are to guard our hearts, to protect them with the greatest of care.

Proverbs 4:23

Above all else, guard your heart, for it is the wellspring of life.

A wellspring is a source of water that bubbles up and comes forth from the ground. In a similar way, what we do is the result of what we hold and think upon in our hearts, the wellspring, or source, of our actions. When I lie, steal, or act immorally, it is because that is what I have fostered and nurtured in my heart. God will not only judge us concerning whether we do wrong or evil deeds, but also if there is wickedness in our hearts. A person may choose not to actually commit a wrong only because the evil in the heart merely lacks the opportunity to express itself. A person may have adultery in his heart, but lacking the opportunity, may never have been able to act upon it. This is why Jesus told his disciples that a man committed adultery even if he lusted after a woman in his heart.

Matthew 5:27 and 28

(27) "You have heard that it was said, 'Do not commit adultery.'

(28) But I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart.

If a person with evil in his heart is presented with the opportunity, he will act on it. This is why we are often surprised and dismayed when we hear of someone doing a serious wrong, having no idea that he was that "*type of person.*" It is because we had no cognizance of the "evil" that was in his heart. Sinful behavior often happens because people fail to guard their hearts, so when presented with the opportunity to sin, the temptation is too strong for them to resist. They have not trained their hearts to do good, but have instead harbored evil. *Above all else*, we must guard our hearts because it is our hearts that will be judged.

Proverbs 21:2

All a man's ways seem right to him, but the LORD weighs the heart.

1 Corinthians 4:5b

...He will bring to light what is hidden in darkness and will expose the motives of men's hearts...

In the parable of the sower in Luke 8, Jesus makes the point that the "good soil" stands for those with a noble and good heart. A person who has a noble and good heart is a person with upright character. Throughout the Scriptures there are hundreds of lessons about a person's heart because it is our hearts, our character, which will be examined before his throne, judged and rewarded accordingly.

With the exception of random thoughts and instinctive reactions, everything a person thinks about and does is an issue of the heart. When we speak (which is an action) we are merely vocalizing a thought, and our character is always a matter of our thoughts and actions.

Matthew 15:18 and 19

(18) But the things that come out of the mouth come from the heart, and these make a man 'unclean.'

(19) For **out of the heart come evil thoughts**, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false testimony, slander.

Every evil action Jesus listed above is a character issue, which is why God weighs (will judge) our hearts. Each of us will stand before the judgment seat of Christ, where our hearts, our character (all of our thoughts and deeds), will be exposed.

2 Corinthians 5:10

For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, that each one may receive what is due him for the things done while in the body, whether good or bad.

We do not believe, as some teach, that Christians will only appear at the judgment seat to receive rewards.² Rather, the word "appear", which is "*phaneroo*" in the Greek text, should properly be translated "made visible" or "exposed" here. What will be exposed? Our heart, our character, will be revealed and known for what they are. This is why it is so important for us to guard and *purify* our hearts (James 4:8).

The great news is that because character is a choice, you can choose to change it! I have a younger sister who once said, "If you don't like who you are, then reinvent yourself." That struck a chord deep inside me the minute she said it. There was a time in my life that I made some seriously wrong choices. As I reflect back on those times, I realize now that bitterness and other nasty things were brooding in my heart. I decided I did not like who I was, so I began to address the issues of my heart, and changed. The transformation did not happen overnight, and it was not easy, but I changed, one step at a time. I held a picture in my mind of the kind of person I wanted to be and then I began to behave in a manner consistent with that picture. Over time I changed my heart, and my character. Helen Keller once said, "Character cannot be developed in ease and quiet. Only through experience of trial and suffering can the soul be strengthened, vision cleared, ambition inspired, and success achieved." We can change our character, but it takes work (effort), a lot of hard work (persistence), and time (perseverance).

Create in Me a Perfect Heart

No one has a perfect heart. We all make mistakes all the time. The question is never whether or not we make mistakes, but, "Are we deliberately sinning, acting pridefully, insisting on doing things our way, and not walking in humble submission to God and others?" Everyone is a mixed bag of both good and bad; we are a complex mixture of thoughts, motives, and actions. We all sin and will continue to do so, most probably on a daily basis (Rom. 3:23 and 5:12).³ Because of Adam's rebellion against God⁴, the struggle against sin and ungodly character is something that all mankind is cursed with, and will be until the day of our redemption.⁵ In Romans chapter 7 Paul describes the struggle that wars within him between his carnal self, and the new spiritual man inside him.

Romans 7:15-24

(15) I do not understand what I do. For what I want to do I do not do, but what I hate I do.

(16) And if I do what I do not want to do, I agree that the law is good.

(17) As it is, it is no longer I myself who do it, but it is sin living in me.

(18) I know that nothing good lives in me, that is, in my sinful nature. For I have the desire to

do what is good, but I cannot carry it out.

(19) For what I do is not the good I want to do; no, the evil I do not want to do—this I keep on doing.

(20) Now if I do what I do not want to do, it is no longer I who do it, but it is sin living in me that does it.

(21) So I find this law at work: When I want to do good, evil is right there with me.

(22) For in my inner being I delight in God's law;

(23) but I see another law at work in the members of my body, waging war against the law of my mind and making me a prisoner of the law of sin at work within my members.

(24) What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death?

The gift of holy spirit literally provides us with a new spiritual nature. We received it as a gift from God, so now it becomes our responsibility to act in a way that conforms to this new holy nature. We are to transform our character so it mimics the character of Christ. We actually have an obligation, a moral responsibility, to change our character so that it is aligned with the reality of the spiritual holiness that we now have.

Romans 8:11 and 12

(11) And if the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead is living in you, he who raised Christ from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through his Spirit, who lives in you.

(12) Therefore, brothers, we have an **obligation**—but it is not to the sinful nature, to live according to it.

Most people remember King David for his valiant exploits, like his defeat of the giant Goliath, or his profound sins, such as his adultery with Bathsheba. Like King Saul, David had some serious sins including lust, adultery, deceit, manipulation, murder, cover-up, pride, and hypocrisy. Yet the testimony about David is that he was a man after God's very heart. How can this be? It is not because David was perfect, or never did wrong, but rather, that when he did sin, he repented, changed, and corrected his heart.

Acts 13:22b

'...I have found David son of Jesse a man after my own heart; **he will do everything I want him to do.**'

David recognized his sinfulness, yet he passionately pursued God with his whole heart.

Psalm 51:5, 6 and 10a

(5) Surely I was sinful at birth, sinful from the time my mother conceived me.

(6) Surely you desire truth in the inner parts; you teach me wisdom in the inmost place.

(10a) Create in me a **pure heart**, O God,...

As the king of Israel, God placed David in a position of tremendous importance. He was undoubtedly gifted in many ways and had an important calling on his life. Yet David, like us, will not be rewarded for his gift or the position he held, rather he will be rewarded for what he did with those things. In other words, he will be rewarded for his character.

David's son, Solomon, was also very gifted, specifically with wisdom, yet it was Solomon's character

deficiencies that allowed him to disobey God by taking many foreign wives, amassing great personal wealth, and going to Egypt to build up his army with horses and chariots. God specially forbade the kings of Israel to do those things (Deut. 17:16 and 17). Solomon's character was wrong and the record of the Bible shows that his heart was turned from God.

1 Kings 11:4

As Solomon grew old, his wives **turned his heart** after other gods, and **his heart was not fully devoted to the LORD** his God, as the heart of David his father had been.

1 Kings 11:9

The LORD became angry with Solomon because **his heart had turned away from the LORD**, the God of Israel, who had appeared to him twice.

Despite Solomon's great gifting, it was his character flaws that caused his downfall. This should serve as a sober reminder to everyone that we must put our focus on our character, and not on our gifts and callings. The fact is we have all received gifts of grace (Rom. 12:6a), but what is important is what we *do* with those gifts (and our doing always flows out from our character), not that we have the gift. The record of Scripture shows that God never promotes a gifting over a person's character. This is in direct contrast to the way the world works. In the world, people with great giftings get promoted, become "superstars," and often rise to the top of their area of expertise, despite their character. A person can be mean-spirited, a substance abuser, sexually immoral, a thief, a liar, and more, but if they are good at what they do, the world still promotes them. Not so with God.

Our giftings are just that—gifts from God, and they do not impress Him. What impresses God, and thus what should impress Christians, is when someone has godly character. We must remember that we are not rewarded for our gifts, but for our character. We can be sure that good character is what will count at the Judgment.

God tells us that He will discipline us like a father. He disciplines us because He wants us to correct our character. He is referred to as the Gardener who seeks to prune us so we can be more fruitful. He prunes us by removing the things in our lives that interfere with our godliness, so that He can make us more fruitful.

In many ways our lives are like a garden plot. God has given us the plot (our life) and it includes our gifts and talents. We had no choice in what we were given (the location of the land, or the quality of the soil), just like we had no part in the gifts and talents we received. We can think of God as the sun because "God is light," and like the sunlight, it is the source of all life. His Word is the good seed that will grow if the soil is right, and the gift of holy spirit is the water. My garden will grow wonderfully if I continue to do the work necessary to make it good, fertile soil. But, just like my life, I have a choice about the soil. I can ignore my heart and let it become devoid of nutrients, or I can fill it with weeds by not guarding it from worldly influences. It is my choice to do the hard work of weeding (discipline), and cultivating the soil. Farming, like character development, takes a lot of time and effort. As author Stephen Covey says, "Could you ever "cram" on the farm—forget to plant in the spring, play all summer, and then race in the fall to bring in the harvest? No, because the farm is a natural system. You must pay the price and follow the process. You reap what you sow, there is no short cut."⁶ No matter what I choose to do, the day will come when the soil will have produced a crop, and if I have done my work well, the fruit that is reaped will be godly fruit.

God is always attempting to get us to change our character. We must do what we can today to conform to His image, the image of Jesus Christ. Our character is important because it is a demonstration of our heart, and just like my garden, I will reap a bountiful harvest of righteousness on The Day if I tend to my character. It is always a matter of the heart!

Character Quotes to Consider:

“Live your life in such a way that when you die they can give your pet parrot to the town gossip.” Will Rogers, humorist.

“Fame is a vapor, popularity an accident, riches take wing, and only character endures.” Horace Greeley (1811-1872) -- New York newspaper editor.

Notes:

1. We assert that God is not “in control” of what happens on planet Earth. Many things that occur are not His will. According to 1 Timothy 2:2-4, He wants all people to be saved, but most will not; He wants people to live godly lives, but most will not. For further study visit TruthOrTradition.com/control

2. Some people wrongly believe that Christians will appear before Christ’s judgment seat only to receive rewards. Their understanding is based on the improper understanding of the Greek word “*bema*,” translated, “judgment seat,” because it was a place where athletic rewards were handed out. Although this is true, the “*bema*” was much more than an awards platform. It was a place of judgment and dispensation of governmental orders. In the case of Paul, the Jews took him to the judgment seat, “*bema*” in Corinth, hoping to get a judgment against him from Gallio, the Proconsul, (Acts 18:12-16).

3. Romans 3:23 reads: “for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God...”, and Romans 5:12, “...and in this way death came to all men, *because all sinned*—”.

4. Romans 5:12 states: “Therefore, just as sin entered the world through one man [Adam], and death through sin, and in this way death came to all men, because all sinned—”

5. Ephesians 4:30 says: “And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, with whom you were sealed for *the day of redemption*.” It is our position that the actual Day of Redemption will occur when Christ “raptures” his Church as described in 1 Thessalonians 4:13-17. For more information on this subject see our book, *The Christian’s Hope- The Anchor of the Soul*. For further study on the Rapture visit TruthOrTradition.com/rapture

6. Stephen Covey, *Principle-Centered Leadership* (Simon and Schuster, New York, 1992), p. 58.

**Available online at
TruthOrTradition.com/character**

Partner Profile

Evonne Anglesey

Psalm 27:8

My heart says of you, "Seek his face!" Your face, LORD, I will seek.

These words have become gloriously significant as I consider the journey into God's heart that I have been taking over these last 72 years. As a child, God was a distant but constant concept. He existed only because my mother had said that He wanted me to be good. As for a religious upbringing, that was pretty much it; at least until the age of ten. At that time, I learned about Jesus from a weekly radio program. It was enough to convince me that there was something about this God business that could tug at my curiosity, and even at my heart. I remember deciding that if there was a real Being who made us and cared about us, then I needed to know Him. You would think that this would not be difficult. After all, there were churches, preachers, and priests. As it went, I sought them out, first with high hopes and confidence, and then with confusion and disappointment.

Eventually, a lot of time and life passed as I kept trying to touch some truth that I felt surely existed. During a particularly low period in my life, I went to the gulf shore and stayed on the sandy beach for two days and nights, pleading with God to show me what I needed to know to stay living in a world that didn't know how to tell me who or why He was. I was mad at God, yet Father's mercy became clear when within a very short time, God showed Himself through people that He put in my path to teach me who He is and why He is. I know that as I sought His face He worked in me and provided me with men and women whose ministry it is to open the truths of His Word and will. I have known some of them for over 30 years now and I have learned to appreciate their integrity and overwhelming appreciation for the things of God and for our Savior, Jesus Christ.

In my life, this ministry has provided me with the means to continue to seek the face and the heart of the Father and His Son. The many tools that they have provided have helped me to study and understand the Bible for myself. In turn, this has strengthened my confidence, enabling me to better share this knowledge, comfort, and edification with other seekers of His face. In fellowshiping with such a ministry that provides so many learning tools, life continues to be an exciting, joyful, and adventurous journey. For all of it, I praise and thank God who took me from disappointment and doubt to confidence and joy. In gratitude, I am blessed to support Spirit & Truth Fellowship International with my love, heart, finances, and prayers.

God bless you,
Evonne Anglesey
Beaumont, TX

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Fuel for the Fire

Why Your Life's Mission is Revealed on a Need-to-Know Basis

by Joshua Anderson

Why can't Jesus just hand everyone a copy of his plan for their mission on earth as soon as they become a Christian? We often want the Lord to tell us exactly what to do next, but then, most of the time, it seems he doesn't do so right away. Sometimes we can feel a little lost, wondering what path to take; we may even pray about it, and still it seems like he will just not tell us clearly. We want Jesus to open up the heavens and proclaim our life's purpose from a swirling portal of light and glory, but instead, it seems we just have to wait.

We know God says He has plans for us, plans to prosper us and not to harm us, plans to give us hope and a future (Jer. 29:11). We are promised that if we acknowledge God in all our ways, He will direct our paths (Prov. 3:6 - KJV), and if we lack wisdom, we can ask and He will cheerfully give it to us (James 1:5). Yet sometimes we ask and, though we know He will guide us eventually, He wants us to simply wait on Him for the right time. But why do we have to wait? The answer, at least partly, lies in the spiritual war that we are involved in.

First of all, we have to change the way we approach this question. Often, the way we think about it assumes that the work of God is like building a shed, or something, and we're all standing around waiting to be told what to do next. In reality the work of God is nothing less than warfare. Jesus, God's first in command, is not the great shed-builder in the sky; he is a general, and we are at war. We have to take the spiritual war seriously, and when we do, we can understand why the Lord often works on a need-to-know basis. This makes perfect sense, because information is strictly guarded during wartime. The preparation of battle plans is accomplished in secret and the dispersion of information is carried out discreetly, because the element of surprise is key. The commanders are always concerned that the enemy gets no wind of the plans, lest they prepare their defenses, launch a counterattack, or otherwise foil our advances. The enemy must be kept in the dark long enough for our side to have the advantage. This is why no general just lays out his plans for everybody to see. Rather, he reveals them at just the right time.

So it is in the spiritual war. Jesus is a wise general who is advancing his troops, sending out his envoys, and employing the service of his saints in spiritual warfare. While we are here on Earth, we are behind enemy lines. Satan is the "god of this world" (2 Cor. 4:4 - KJV) and the whole world lies in his power (1 John 5:19 - NRSV¹), so our mindset about receiving our orders should reflect this reality. No infantry soldier would march into the command center, demanding to know all the battle plans and exactly how he fit into them. Just as the soldier would wait patiently for his orders, so we too must trust the Lord and faithfully wait on him.

The Lord has drawn you into his battle plans. He has a distinct, up-and-coming mission for you, and he wants to give you the marching orders that you eagerly desire to receive. But it may be that, like Special Forces troops awaiting deployment in a cold room, you also must wait until the very last minute to know exactly where you are going and what your mission is. The reason you may have to wait is that if word gets out too soon, the enemy will be more prepared to try to thwart the Lord's plans for your life. If Satan knew exactly where you would be deployed, he could send his own forces there, or try to make your work harder in some

way. We see this in Scripture where *the secret and hidden wisdom of God* was kept from the demonic forces so that “None of the rulers of this age knew it, for if they had known it, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory” (1 Cor. 2:7 and 8 - HCSB²). And Jesus taught as much when he said, “...know this, that if the master of the house had known in what part of the night the thief was coming, he would have stayed awake and would not have let his house be broken into” (Matt. 24:43 - ESV³). Hence, during wartime there is a necessity for a certain amount of “radio silence.”

When we forget that we are in a spiritual battle, we may interpret this “radio silence” as Jesus holding out on us; we just wish he would plainly delineate our whole life’s plan today. But remember, we are at war. And when at war, there are some things that come on a need-to-know basis. It would be foolish for the Lord to lay out all of his plans, and he is anything but foolish. He may give you bits and pieces at a time, like the Apostle Paul, who, when he became a Christian asked, “What shall I do?” and Jesus responded, “‘Get up, ...’ and go into Damascus. There you will be told all that you have been assigned to do’” (Acts 22:10). So be patient; your marching orders will come in the Lord’s wise timing.

Notes:

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**If you would like to write a short article for Fuel for the Fire,
please contact us at STF@STFonline.org**

Figures of Speech

Homeopropheron (Alliteration)

by John W. Schoenheit

The ability to communicate with words is one thing that sets mankind apart from all other creatures. God is the Author of language, and no one has ever used language as precisely as God does in the Bible, including His use of figures of speech, of which there are more than 200 varieties in Scripture.¹ When most people say, “a figure of speech,” they are speaking in general terms of something that is not true to fact. However, genuine “figures of speech” are legitimate grammatical and lexical forms that add emphasis and feeling to what we say and write. In the Bible, God uses figures of speech to emphasize things that He wants us to see as important. Many people who read the Bible never think to ask themselves, “How do we know what God wants emphasized in His Word?” God uses figures of speech to put emphasis where He wants emphasis, so it is important that we recognize and properly interpret the figures of speech in the Bible. Knowing the figures of speech God uses in the Bible helps us to understand the true meaning of Scripture and enables us to more fully enjoy its richness.

The figure of speech *Homeopropheron*, which in English is called *Alliteration*, is important because it immediately grabs the attention of the reader. *Alliteration* is the repetition of the same letter or syllable, thus the same sound, at the beginning of two or more words in close succession. A study of languages shows that *Alliteration* has been used throughout history, and is used around the globe today. It is used both in prose and poetry.

The poem, *The Charge of the Light Brigade*, by Alfred, Lord Tennyson, has the following stanza, which is a wonderful *Homeopropheron*: “Storm’d at with shot and shell, While horse and hero fell....” *Homeopropheron* is used with especially good effect in newspaper and magazine article titles, advertisements, and business names. For example, if the Indianapolis Colts’ football team beat the Cleveland Browns by a wide margin, the sports headline might read: “Colts Clobber Cleveland,” a headline that would arrest the attention of the audience. Similarly, a disk-jockey for hire in a major Midwestern town calls his business, “Kroakin’ King Karaoke,” a catchy and colorful cognomen (name).

The problem with the *Homeopropherons* in biblical literature is that they occur in the original languages of Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek, and are exceedingly difficult to translate into English in a way that keeps the *Homeopropheron* intact. Judges 5, for example, the Song of Deborah after the Israelite victory over the Canaanites, is filled with *Homeopropherons* that cannot effectively be reproduced in English.

Psalm 14:7

Oh, that salvation for Israel would come out of Zion! When the LORD restores the fortunes of his people, let Jacob rejoice and Israel be glad!

In this verse in the Hebrew text, the phrase “salvation for Israel” is *yeshuah Yisra’el* and the phrase “restores the fortunes” is *shub sheubth*. The two *Homeopropherons* catch the ear of the reader and draw his attention to the verse.

Psalm 122:6

Pray for the peace of Jerusalem: “May those who love you be secure.

This verse has caught the attention of thousands of Christians around the globe, who regularly pray for the peace of Jerusalem. In Hebrew it is even more catchy than in English, for it is a wonderful *Homeopropheron*: *Shaal shalom ye-ru-sha-la-im* (Jerusalem) *shalah ahab*.

1 Thessalonians 1:2

We always thank God for all of you, mentioning you in our prayers.

The Greek text has a beautiful *Homeopropheron*, catching the reader’s attention and thus bringing back vivid memories of the good times the Thessalonians had with Paul. The Greek words are *pantote, peri panton*, which we might try to reproduce as, “We give thanks to God always about all of you.”

Hebrews 1:1

In the past God spoke to our forefathers through the prophets at many times and in various ways,

You would never know it from the English, but the Greek text begins with the words, *polumerōs kai polutropōs*, which we have to expand to even translate as “...in many times and in many ways.” The *Homeopropheron* powerfully punches the start of Hebrews, reminding people of God’s involvement in people’s lives in the past times.

There are times when a *Homeopropheron* in the Hebrew or Greek can be reproduced or partially reproduced in English, such as “**Pray** for the **peace** of Jerusalem,” but it would be wrong to twist the English translation and make it difficult to interpret in order to try to maintain the alliteration. A good translation that carries the meaning well is more important than a translation that is hard to understand but which captures the fact that there is an alliteration. For many more figures of speech in the Bible visit TruthOrTradition.com/figures

Note:

1. E. W. Bullinger, *Figures of Speech Used in the Bible* (Baker Book House, Grand Rapids, MI, reprinted 1968).

The Vine

Speaking the Truth in Love

Teaching, Preaching and Testimony

by Michael L. Patten

As Christians, each of us is an ambassador of the Lord Jesus Christ (2 Cor. 5:20), and God is working through each of His children to reconcile to Him those who are lost. Each one who is born again of God's spirit is enabled to speak words that will provide light to those whose lives are in darkness. Speaking the truth in love should be the aim of every follower of Jesus Christ.

Ephesians 4:15

Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will in all things grow up into him who is the Head, that is, Christ.

Clearly there are those in the Body of Christ who are called to teach and to preach the Scriptures in a public setting. A teacher of the Scriptures focuses upon communicating information to the hearer, and disseminating knowledge so as to increase understanding of God's Word. On the other hand, a preacher armed with an understanding of Scripture attempts to move his hearers toward action based upon knowledge.

While teaching and preaching are obvious ways that the truth can be spoken in love, God has not limited the Body of Christ to only these giftings. Each and every person born again of God's holy spirit has received individual gifts of His grace for service to others.

1 Peter 4:10

Each one should use whatever gift he has received to serve others, faithfully administering God's grace in its various forms.

There are a myriad of these gifts with a kaleidoscope of possible combinations. In my experience, each follower of Jesus Christ has two or more of these individual gifts with one usually dominant; however, each of the individual gifts one has received will compliment the others. We know the *Apostle* Paul also had the gifts of a *preacher* and *teacher* (2 Tim. 1:11).

Unfortunately, speaking to others on behalf of Christ often gets derailed in those who are otherwise committed to Christian discipleship. This may be the result of a paradigm that is limiting the Body of Christ. That is, the idea that only those with the gifts of preaching or teaching can effectively communicate the Word of God. This belief leaves everyone else with little or nothing to do. This paradigm is further reinforced by experience when church services or other fellowship opportunities are limited to only teaching and/or preaching of the Scriptures as a means of communicating God's truth.

While the Church has enjoyed great teaching and preaching, the avenue available to the vast majority in the Body of Christ is "testimony." Everyone can testify as an eyewitness to what Jesus has done for him or her personally. Many times being a "witness" for Jesus Christ has been reduced to quoting Scripture to would-be converts. Clearly, knowing the Holy Scriptures and being able to use them in conversation is a great tool in

bringing people to the light. However, individuals can be very effective witnesses for Christ through “testimony.” Understanding the importance of one’s personal testimony is indispensable as we seek to reach people’s hearts and bring them from darkness to light.

The analogy of a court of law is effective in relating the dynamic between witness, testifying, and testimony (the Greek word for “witness” is *martus*). Interestingly, it is where we get the English word “martyr,” because a martyr was one who gave up his or her life as a testimony to the truth instead of publicly recanting his or her beliefs. A witness (*martus*), is a person who is called to “testify” (speak) in court under oath about their personal involvement or expertise in a matter. So too, Christians are equivalent to the people called to speak under oath during a trial. An example is found in the first chapter of the book of Acts. One of the original twelve Apostles, Judas Iscariot, had committed suicide. Now another needed to be chosen to replace him.

Acts 1:21 and 22

(21) Therefore it is necessary to choose one of the men who have been with us the whole time the Lord Jesus went in and out among us,

(22) beginning from John’s baptism to the time when Jesus was taken up from us. For one of these must become a witness (*martus*) with us of his resurrection.”

He was personally present with the Lord from Jesus’ baptism to his resurrection, and the critical point is what he saw and heard. Christians are qualified as witnesses as a result of personal involvement with Jesus Christ. Once a person is called as a witness, speaking is the act of testifying (*martureo*).

John 1:15

John testifies (*martureo*) concerning him. He cries out, saying, “This was he of whom I said, ‘He who comes after me has surpassed me because he was before me.’”

John the Baptist crying out in the wilderness, the act of speaking apart from what he said, is his testifying (*martureo*). The content of what the witness says is the testimony. When a witness in a courtroom speaks, the content is then entered into the court record as evidence. We see this aspect occur in the trial of Jesus Christ.

Mark 14:55

The chief priests and the whole Sanhedrin were looking for evidence (*marturia*) against Jesus so that they could put him to death, but they did not find any.

These religious leaders wanted evidence with which they could convict Jesus Christ but they could not find any.

Mark 14:56-59

(56) Many testified (*martureo*) falsely against him, but their statements (*marturia*) did not agree.

(57) Then some stood up and gave this false testimony (*marturia*) against him:

(58) “We heard him say, ‘I will destroy this man-made temple and in three days will build another, not made by man.’ ”

(59) Yet even then their testimony (*marturia*) did not agree.

Peter and John gave their testimony regarding the lame man they had seen healed before their own eyes. They offered first hand evidence as to how this man was made whole.

Acts 4:9 and 10

(9) If we are being called to account today for an act of kindness shown to a cripple and are asked how he was healed,

(10) then know this, you and all the people of Israel: It is by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified but whom God raised from the dead, that this man stands before you healed.

The crux of what a testimony entails is summed up ten verses later. Peter and John were personally involved in this man's healing. They define for us what constitutes a personal testimony as simply something that we see or hear.

Acts 4:20

For we cannot help speaking about what we have seen and heard."

The book of Acts gives us several examples of personal testimony. The record in Acts chapter ten gives us the account of Cornelius and his household coming to the Lord. He was obedient to the instruction of the angel and sent for Peter. When Peter arrived Cornelius provided his testimony of what he had seen and heard.

Acts 10:30-33

(30) Cornelius answered: "Four days ago I was in my house praying at this hour, at three in the afternoon. Suddenly a man in shining clothes stood before me

(31) and said, 'Cornelius, God has heard your prayer and remembered your gifts to the poor.

(32) Send to Joppa for Simon who is called Peter. He is a guest in the home of Simon the tanner, who lives by the sea.'

(33) So I sent for you immediately, and it was good of you to come. Now we are all here in the presence of God to listen to everything the Lord has commanded you to tell us."

Cornelius was the expert with respect to this incident because he had first-hand knowledge of it, having personally experienced it. Likewise, when Peter returned to Jerusalem he was required to provide his testimony to the council of church leadership (Acts 11:4-15).

As we experience things in our walk with God, sharing that experience with others can be a great blessing for everyone involved. Speaking about our experience with God, of course, includes recounting the circumstances of our own conversion, just like Paul did before King Agrippa (Acts 26:9-23).

A relatively small percentage of individuals in the Body of Christ may have the gifts of teaching or preaching as dominant giftings, yet each and every follower of Jesus can speak authoritatively by sharing his or her own personal testimony of how they went from death unto life, and of how God is working with them day by day. As the years roll by these testimonies grow and become rich with examples of how God the Father and Jesus His Son have shown up in the lives of their families, drawing others to the light.

This is true fellowship, a full sharing, where each person has the opportunity to give testimony of the truth in his or her life. When our Christian gatherings accommodate for testimonies of God's grace in the lives of His people, the result will be joyous.

1 John 1:3 and 4

(3) We proclaim to you what we have seen and heard, so that you also may have fellowship with us. And our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ.

(4) We write this to make our joy complete.

As we grow in grace and undergo the process of transformation into the image of Christ, the fruit of the spirit becomes apparent in our lives. Our character becomes more like that of Christ (Gal. 5:22). The need to be the center of attention, and conversely, the fear of exposing our hearts, fade away and result in testimonies that are less about us and more about **him**.

**For more information visit
STFonline.org/network**

Dear Sower

The Birth of Christ

I cannot say enough about how blessed, proud, and excited Shelby and I are to be a part of this ministry. The November 2008 teaching of the month on “The Birth of Christ” was awesome. It makes so much sense that God’s son would be born in a loving situation and that Mary was not giving birth in a barn on hay (ouch!!)!

We hope you know how thankful we are for all you do. With love,

Joanne & Shelby Hoffman
Hammonton, NJ

Editor’s Note:

To listen to this teaching or read an article on the truth about the birth of Christ, visit TruthOrTradition.com/retelling

Websites Feedback

The web sites are looking great! John Schoenheit’s December 2008 teaching on the “Fundamentals of Being a Disciple” was so encouraging and clarifying. Thank you for all your work of love. God bless,

Vincent Rao
Rome City, IN

Editor’s Note:

To read what the Bible has to say about many different topics, visit TruthOrTradition.com/life

Self-Talk Article

I just wanted to say that I have just finished reading your article on “Self-Talk.” I wanted to tell you it is such a great article! I suffer on a daily basis from over thinking.

I am not a Christian but hope to be and suffer from thoughts of “ohhh you probably don’t believe it anyway” and thoughts that bring me down and make me unsure of myself.

Your article was such a blessing! It brought a new light into the picture!

Thank you so much!!!!
Joshua C.

Editor’s Note:

To read this article, listen to an audio teaching, or watch a video on Self-Talk, visit TruthOrTradition.com/selftalk

YouTube Channel Feedback

On a scale of 1 to 10 this teaching, [Individual Gifts of God's Grace by Mike Patten], and rightly dividing God's Word, relative to the subject of grace, rates a solid 11. Your genuine love and passion for God and His Word shines through out the entire teaching. I look forward to hearing more as you remain faithful, walking in that grace He has abundantly bestowed upon you.

(A subscriber to our new
YouTube.com channel)

Editor's Note:

To view short video teachings on many biblical topics go to
TruthOrTradition.com/youtube

10 Minute Video Teachings

Absolutely brilliant move to do ten-minute teachings. I will use them if I don't have another direction for my Sunday morning plans at Rikers Island prison in NYC. We only have 45 minutes to do worship and word, so everything must have an impact for the guys who show up for services. It's a real blessing to me to have this resource. Thank you, so much. Love you guys!

Bart & Frances Harris
Valley Stream, NY

Editor's Note:

To view short video teachings on many biblical topics go to
TruthOrTradition.com/youtube

Our MySpace Ministry

Your MySpace page is truly a great gift. I just watched "Don't Blame God." What a great teaching. I also have heard others say, including myself, why would God have done this to me? That is the most truthful answer...praise God! I am thrilled about having these Bible study tools at hand also.

Again, thank you so much for your MySpace page. God has truly used you and your MySpace page to do His will. I will keep in touch and let you know how I am progressing in my biblical understanding. I am sure, that with the help of God and your ministry it will all come together much more comprehensively. Keep up the good work! Much love to you and yours. Your brother in Christ

Dave Lilly,
Georgia

Editor's Note:

Check out our MySpace page at
TruthOrTradition.com/myspace

**We would love to hear from you!
Email us at STF@STFonline.org**