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### SPIRITUAL ACCOUNTABILITY: A MEASURE OF OUR PRACTICE OF SPIRITUAL DISCIPLINES

The middle-aged man walking down the hall toward me looked friendly. He was wearing a simple black clerical robe and carried a file of papers under his arm. He walked directly to me and said, “His Holiness will see you now.” As he peeked into the file, I recognized the documents I had sent ahead to brief his boss, the Patriarch of the Russian Orthodox Church. We walked down the hall together toward the office of Alexy II as the man explained the protocol for our meeting. “This will be a very unusual audience in that you will meet alone to discuss these sensitive matters. You should feel free to speak candidly on the issues because the information you forwarded has been carefully reviewed. You may use your own translator, and your colleague (David, a board member of our foundation) may attend. You can expect the meeting to last ten to fifteen minutes. Anything longer will be at his option.”

The most significant aspect of this meeting was that it should have been completely unnecessary. We had been working on an important project with one of the church’s most respected priests, and had discovered his attempt to convert designated assets to his own purposes. We had remodeled an old building into a warehouse and training facility with fortress-like security that was intended to receive and distribute humanitarian medicines and train medical personnel from across the city. But the priest had secretly been

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using our eighteen-wheel truck and trailer to make commercial deliveries and had been keeping two sets of books. Our routine audits, which no one expected to be made of such a revered man's work, fortunately had exposed the infraction in time for us to preserve the assets. His actions were so clearly wrong that when we met with the bookkeepers, one of them—an honest woman who respected our mission—handed us a stack of papers she had prepared with all the information we needed.

When we confronted the priest, we explained that we were coming as brothers in Christ and fellow ministers, not as legal adversaries, even though his actions had betrayed our trust, his vows, and the law. We wanted to settle the matter amicably and work out a plan to restore his moral authority, but to our surprise, he demonstrated virtually no conscience about his deeds and denied the validity of our charges. We had no choice but to limit his activities and begin the arduous process of trying to hold him accountable through the church's hierarchy. It took months to work through the various procedures of the Diocese, without result. The man's only response was to instigate a slanderous campaign against both our project and me. He never expected us to persevere to the highest levels and was depending upon religious politics to protect him.

The Patriarch greeted us warmly and I quickly outlined our problem and asked him to exercise his authority in the matter. We engaged in a thorough debate for almost an hour, not as opponents, but as colleagues seeking a common purpose. This was a man whose institutional authority was unmatched in Russia, but his ability to bring reconciliation was limited to the priest's willingness to be truthful. It was quite a dilemma because he clearly wanted to preserve our working relationship, even though there were political risks for him in ruling against one of the church's well-known leaders. The highly structured religious institution he led had pockets of corruption and he knew it. His authority only worked when a man feared the Lord or the Russian Orthodox Church. In this case the misguided priest apparently feared neither.

We were able to work out a business-like arrangement and I returned to St. Petersburg with an official order handwritten in my presence by the Patriarch. Although we had preserved the project

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and maneuvered the errant priest safely out of authority into a politically correct position, what our process had proven was that only a man who fears the Lord can truly be held accountable. If the priest had practiced spiritual accountability, he would never have committed the initial act of dishonesty. Or at the very least, he would have repented and reconciled himself to the truth at some point in our discussions. Sadly, the only thing institutional authority was able to do was provide him with organized opportunities to accept correction. But a man whose heart is truly set on obeying the Lord will have little need for such formalities.

1 Peter 2:9 reminds us that the followers of Jesus Christ are a “chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God.” That means every person can come before God as a priest, offering prayers, and receiving the wisdom required for each day. But to fully benefit from our “priesthood,” we must have an obedient heart, and be easily governed by the conviction of the Holy Spirit. When we depend on external rules and institutions to guide us, we may find ourselves just going through the motions of obedience. Instead we should become like Caleb who was spoken of by God as one who “has a different spirit and follows Me wholeheartedly” (Numbers 14:24).

*Spiritual accountability is a measure of our practice of spiritual disciplines.* With all the demands on us, at home and at work, we need to choose wisely between competing agendas and bring our responsibilities into harmony with the Scriptures. To do so, we must seek the Lord’s will in every part of our life; and as the caretaker of our family, prayerfully “represent them in matters related to God” (Hebrews 5:1). Fulfilling these duties effectively will require that we become proficient in:

- 1) Reading and studying the Bible, so that we can apply it accurately and understand the will of God in life’s many circumstances.

- 2) Praying prayers of repentance and forgiveness, so that we can cleanse our souls of sin-guilt and use our faith for His purposes.

- 3) Being filled with the Holy Spirit, so that we can learn to hear His voice, sense Him nudging us toward His will, and yield our behaviors to Him.

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4) Using God's authority to bless others, intercede for them in prayer, and engage in spiritual warfare against the powers of evil.

I have seen far too many men trying to lead at home and at work without putting these fundamentals solidly in place. They busy themselves in other things and neglect spending the time to develop the spiritual disciplines they really need. Without intending to, they are rejecting the call of the Lord to properly steward their responsibilities. In Jeremiah 32:33 God says, "They turned their backs to me and not their faces; though I taught them again and again, they would not listen or respond to discipline."

For some men, bearing the weight of life's expectations feels like too much to manage. The pressures of work, family, or personal problems can overwhelm us and cause us to want to avoid them. Even the things we normally love to do can begin to irritate us. Mistakes and conflicts can stimulate feelings of hopelessness and anger to the point that we find ourselves avoiding our responsibilities. Even if we have not said it, what man has not thought at least once, "My inheritance has become to me like a lion in the forest; she has roared against me; therefore I have come to hate her" (Jeremiah 12:8).

Tortured feelings can be lodged so deeply in our soul that we almost forget we have them and become spiritually paralyzed, unable to fully give ourselves to the Lord. We can begin to rationalize our ineffectiveness, allowing our relationship with God to take the form of partial obedience with church meetings and religious activities becoming a substitute for our spiritual disciplines. But as Samuel asked King Saul, "Does the Lord delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices as much as in obeying the voice of the Lord? To obey is better than sacrifice, and to heed is better than the fat of rams" (1 Samuel 15:22).

The week before I became a follower of Christ I signed a contract to represent a major insurance company. Although I had a solid background in insurance sales, I was a little nervous about balancing the requirements of my new contract with my other interests. I had made a very large production commitment for the first six months of our arrangement and was concerned that I might have made an unreasonable obligation. But I kept telling myself it could be done.

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The deal had been sweetened with some unusual perks, and if I reached my goal, I would gain recognition that would help me negotiate an even better contract.

On Monday, the first day of my new contract, I began making telephone calls to a list of prospects I had developed from my previous business contacts. Actually some of the names on the list were people I would call, without a referral, to ask if they were satisfied with their insurance services. To my surprise, on the very first call the man I spoke with started asking questions about the product I wanted to discuss. Within a few hours I had visited his office and left with a sizeable application. I was energized. I got back on the phone and started making calls. Before the end of the day I had made several appointments, and the first customer called back to double his order. It was one of those amazing weeks when everything worked. By Friday afternoon I had delivered applications and checks to the insurance company's regional office that exceeded my six month's obligation, and established records that lasted for many years.

When I returned home to tell my wife about my success, she was standing at the kitchen sink washing lettuce. I told her that I had just accomplished something that had never been done before. I had broken records and made a bundle of money in the first week of my new contract. But for some reason, I had an empty feeling inside. She seemed unmoved as she turned to me with a cool, "That's nice, I am very happy for you." Little did I know that as she had been preparing dinner she was contemplating divorce. I had met my obligations at work, but not at home, and I had no idea how badly I was failing. A man can be deceived by the importance of the efforts he is making in one area of his life while another may be slipping out of control. That empty feeling I had was the mercy of the Lord calling me to realize that some important things were not right in my life. And there was my wife, ready to tell me what some of them were.

She told me that my biggest problem was that I was not a follower of Christ, and, with brutal detail, described how that caused pain and suffering in the family. I was honestly stunned and shocked. But since becoming a follower of Christ, I've had other such encounters with the Lord and my wife. I have discovered that even

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as a dedicated believer, a man can ignore important fundamentals and defend himself with rationalizations that are embarrassingly thin. It is one thing to give up overtly sinful behaviors. It is quite another to become faithful in the disciplines required to function as a husband and father. Proverbs 18:9 tells us that “One who is slack in his work is brother to one who destroys.” That includes all of our work—the work we do to make a living, the work we do to lead our family, and especially the work we do to discipline ourselves in spiritual fundamentals.

Fortunately, “We do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet was without sin” (Hebrews 4:15). Every day with the Lord can be a new beginning. All a man has to do is say, “O Lord, correct me, but with justice; not in Your anger, lest You bring me to nothing” (Jeremiah 10:24 NKJ). The Lord is so faithful to this kind of prayer. He is always available to a man who will humble himself and ask for His help, whether as a new believer or a veteran who has fallen behind in his disciplines. His promise to each of us is, “Call to Me, and I will answer you, and show you great and mighty things, which you do not know” (Jeremiah 33:3 NKJ). All He requires is that we become diligent to His Word and “produce fruit in keeping with repentance” (Matthew 3:8).

### **Read and Study the Bible**

I realized the importance of studying the Bible for myself, rather than depending on preachers to digest it for me, before I became a follower of Christ. I was attending a small congregation with my wife who had grown up in a close-knit group of Bible purists. The people were friendly and I felt comfortable attending their meetings, even though I was not very interested in reading the Bible or becoming more involved in the activities of the congregation. Their meetings were tightly ordered and there was always an emphasis on accuracy in discussing the Bible. Although I didn't understand all of their rules, their guiding concept of closely obeying the Bible seemed right to me. If you were going to teach people how to follow the mandates of God, it made sense to be careful how you did it.

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Their teacher had begun a series on Paul's first epistle to the Corinthians. He had provided some good examples that helped me listen and his presentations appeared to be logical and believable. So, after attending for several weeks, I decided to read the Bible before I went to class. I began reading in 1 Corinthians 12, as that was the next chapter to be discussed, and I read several chapters ahead. The following Sunday I was actually eager to go to church. To my surprise, the teacher dramatically picked up the pace of the class. He described and discussed Chapters 12, 13 and 14, all in one meeting. I noticed that he was not nearly as fascinated by these chapters as I had become. I thought they contained so much practical information that I assumed he might take several weeks as he had on other chapters. But instead, he was summarizing the chapters and moving quickly through them. Then he quoted 1 Corinthians 13:10 (KJV), which says, "But when that which is perfect is come, then that which is in part shall be done away." He said that this verse explained why the things that were written in Chapters 12 and 14 were no longer valid. I was stunned by the teacher's assertion because I had become morally persuaded to "believe" as I read those chapters. But his torturous and illogical explanation left me feeling confused and disappointed.

When the meeting ended, my wife explained to me that there were all kinds of controversial things in the Bible about healing, prophecy, speaking in tongues, and other topics, which the leaders of their church had concluded were not for today. But I was not so much interested in defending or explaining any of the controversies, as I was in being able to understand the kind of logic required to come to those conclusions. Why would there be such a vague phrase in the middle of this "letter" that invalidated many of the verses directly preceding and following it. This was completely inconsistent with the kind of order and purpose that was so clearly outlined in the two chapters the teacher had so presumptuously dismissed. My concerns were simple. If the words of the Bible were really that tricky and subjective, it could not possibly be depended upon as instruction for living. And if it were true that, "All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness; that the man of God may

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be adequate, equipped for every good work” (2 Timothy 3:16-17 NAS), then why would anyone take the risk of altering what it says?

Although it didn't help me much at the time, the lesson I had learned was a good one. What people have to say about the Bible can be helpful, but it can also put a limit on the grace of God in our lives. Ultimately, we must read and study the Bible to gain understanding for ourselves. 2 Timothy 2:15 (NAS) says every person should “be diligent to present yourself approved to God as a workman who does not need to be ashamed, handling accurately the word of truth.”

No one answered the tough questions for me back then, so I left the church. Years later, after finally making a serious commitment to become a follower of Christ, I visited a local bookstore with my wife to buy a new Bible. I had decided to apply myself to learning what the Bible said, so I could properly respond to the Lord and lead my family. I didn't know there were so many different kinds of Bibles or that some of them had commentaries to help the reader understand various passages. My wife pointed out that a commentary was really just someone's opinion, which could be helpful or harmful depending on his point of view. That reminded me of my previous church experience, so I decided to buy one without commentaries and read it several times myself, before I asked anyone else for their opinion. I wanted to learn and be influenced by the literal words of the Bible. I could always turn to others when I needed help finding or understanding something.

I started reading the Bible every day for several hours. I carried one in my car and even listened to the Bible on cassette tapes. Between appointments I saturated my life with the Word and quickly learned some key strategic points. One of them was that God had arranged a new covenant with His people through His Son Jesus. In Hebrews 8:10-11 it says,

This is the covenant I will make with the house of Israel after that time,” declares the Lord. “I will put my laws in their minds and write them on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people. No longer will a man teach his neighbor,



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or a man his brother, saying, 'Know the Lord,'  
because they will all know me, from the least of them  
to the greatest.

It was wonderful to know that there was no special class of ministers who got to communicate with God. Every believer had access and everyone could read and understand the Bible. In fact, God had gone to the trouble of putting his laws in our minds and writing them on our hearts, probably so that we could have a conscience about what we see and hear. And not only that, in John 14:26 (NKJ) Jesus said, "the Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in My name, He will teach you all things, and bring to your remembrance all things that I said to you."

The story of Jesus' temptation by the devil in Matthew 4 shows us how important it is to know the Scriptures. Jesus had fasted for forty days and nights when the devil tempted him several times. Apparently trying to take advantage of His physical weakness and hunger, the devil said to Him, "If you are the Son of God, command that these stones become bread" (Matthew 4:3 NKJ). But Jesus answered and said, "It is written, 'Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God'" (vs. 4). This is a strategically important statement, especially since men are notoriously guided by their appetites. Each time Jesus was tempted He responded with what had been "written" in the Old Testament (vs. 4, 7, 10). He knew the Scriptures. In fact, He was the "living Word of God" (John 1:1-14 NKJ) and when temptation came, He responded with the words and wisdom of the Bible. That's what studying the Bible should produce in us—a comfortable knowledge of how to follow Christ, resist temptation, and live and work successfully. Here are three important things to remember about Bible study:

1) Studying the Bible is not just about gathering information. It is a way of gaining revelation about ourselves and the world that will lead to actions of faith. "The word of God is living and active. Sharper than any double edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart" (Hebrews 4:12). When we read the Scriptures

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we enter into fellowship with God through His Holy Spirit. “And He, when He comes, will convict the world concerning sin, and righteousness, and judgment” (John 16:8 NAS). This work of the Holy Spirit is intended to help us conform to His will in our daily lives and be “transformed into his likeness with ever increasing glory” (2 Corinthians 3:17-18). When we read the Bible, He is able to open our hearts and minds to receive the truth we need, and to see the sinful behaviors that entangle us.

As we study the Scriptures, we can have the same experience as the men on the road to Emmaus (a village near Jerusalem) when Jesus joined them on their walk. As they walked along together and He explained what the Scriptures had to say about Himself, they did not recognize Him (Luke 24:13-32). Later, after they realized who He was, they said to each other, “Were not our hearts burning within us while He talked with us on the road and opened the Scriptures to us?” (vs. 32). This is the privilege of a follower of Christ. As He walks with us by the presence of His Spirit, His words come alive and burn within us as the transforming power of truth. Jesus said, “If you abide in My Word, then you are truly disciples of Mine; and you shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free” (John 8:31-32 NAS).

2) There is no mystery to Bible study. When I was a pastor, a retired Naval Officer came to my office for a visit. He was a man who had commanded huge ships with thousands of sailors, and as a leader he was accustomed to diligently seeking the answers to critical questions. He had been struggling with a personal problem and told me that he was not satisfied with his study of the Bible on the topic. I opened my Bible to the passage he was reading and then pulled my concordance from the shelf beside us. I began to show him how to identify key words and how the concordance provides the literal meaning of the word (in the O.T. Hebrew or N.T. Greek) along with every Scripture verse in which it appears. We read some of the Scriptures together and he quickly realized how reading several Scriptures with the same key word gave us a better understanding of what it meant.

Suddenly, he looked up and said, “Is this how you guys prepare your sermons?” I said, “Yes, this is basically it.” He responded,

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“Well, why aren’t you teaching us how to do this from the pulpit every week? All the rest of us need this information, too. This is important stuff!” I was dumbfounded by his honesty. As he hurried to the bookstore to buy his own concordance, I pondered again how fundamental the study of the Bible is to our lives and how accessible it is. Anyone who has a question and wants to know how the Lord feels about it needs only to study the Bible. And it’s available in so many forms. There are single computer disks that contain several versions of the Bible, their corresponding concordances, and all kinds of indexes. These tools make serious Bible study practical for the man who knows that “the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom, and the knowledge of the Holy One is understanding (Proverbs 9:10 NKJ).

3) I am often asked how much time we should spend studying the Bible. The answer is very simple—enough! It depends on many factors including: how much you already know, what responsibilities or problems you are dealing with, how much sin is in your life, how easily you learn, and how motivated you are. Jesus said in John 6:63 (NKJ), “It is the Spirit who gives life; the flesh profits nothing. The words that I speak to you are spirit, and they are life.” Each person must make his own decision before God about how much time to dedicate to spiritual things. I believe a man should urgently study the Scriptures until he attains a practical, working knowledge. Then he can set a reasonable pace for the rest of his life. Proverbs 4:20-22 exhorts us, “My son, pay attention to what I say; listen closely to my words. Do not let them out of your sight, keep them within your heart; for they are life to those who find them and health to a man’s whole body.”

### **Continue to Repent and Forgive**

Repentance and forgiveness are directly linked to each other. They affect not only our prayer life, but also our ability to mature in the Lord. Hebrews 12:1 exhorts us to “throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles, and let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us.” This is a simple mandate to rid ourselves of all sinful behaviors that prevent us from fully obeying the Lord. When we continue to repent of our own sins

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and forgive those who have sinned against us, we are progressively set free to become obedient in all areas of our lives. James 1:22-25 says,

Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says. Anyone who listens to the word but does not do what it says is like a man who looks at his face in a mirror and, after looking at himself, goes away and immediately forgets what he looks like. But the man who looks intently into the perfect law that gives freedom, and continues to do this, not forgetting what he has heard, but doing it—he will be blessed in what he does.

It is impossible to regularly read the Bible and not become aware of both the sins we have committed and the sins that have been committed against us. As we read and meditate, one thought can lead to another and we can be taken back in time to remember a sinful event and understand its affect on our life. A revelation of our own sin calls us to repentance. A revelation of sins against us calls us to forgive the ones who have harmed us. Revelation always comes for a reason, so we must be careful not to “show contempt for the riches of his kindness, tolerance, and patience,” but realize “that God’s kindness leads you toward repentance” (Romans 2:4). It causes us to turn away from what we did that was sinful and forgive the things that were done to us. These fundamental acts of faith can set us free from regrets about our past and help us live our lives without the hindrance of unwanted behaviors.

In Matthew 6 (NKJ) we find what is commonly known as the “Lord’s Prayer.” It is preceded by several comments that Jesus makes about prayer in general. He exhorts us not to pray “to be seen by men” (vs. 5) and not to pray using “vain repetitions as the heathen do” (or as the NIV says, “babbling like pagans”) who “think they will be heard for their many words” (vs. 7). He goes on to say, “Your Father knows the things you have need of before you ask Him. In this manner, therefore, pray” (vs. 8-9). He then prays a simple, yet profoundly strategic prayer as an example for His disciples.

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Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us today our daily bread. Forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one.

Matthew 6:9-13

In effect, He is showing His disciples that their prayers can be short, to the point, and real, knowing that their prayers are to God, not man, a God who knows what they are going to say before they say it. With that in mind, it is interesting to see how much of His prayer is devoted to the topic of dealing with sin and evil.

In verse 12 He prays, “And forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors.” And then in verse 13, “And do not lead us into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one.” Then, immediately following His prayer, His focus returns to instructing the disciples. As if to remind them of the importance of what He has prayed, He says in verses 14 and 15, “For if you forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.” Jesus was saying that receiving forgiveness for the sins you have committed and granting forgiveness for the sins committed against you, are linked together. You cannot have God’s forgiveness of sin if you are not willing to forgive those who have sinned against you. This means that a prayer of repentance about a sinful behavior in our life is virtually a “vain repetition” unless it is accompanied by specific forgiveness for anyone who may be associated with that behavior. To be free, we must forgive the people who have sinned against us, caused us to sin, or led us into temptation.

I can think of many times when another person’s sin has caused me to sin. My sin was the anger, bitterness, and resentment I held against the people who hurt me. But I rebelliously justified my own sin by focusing attention on the injustice or unfairness of the harm the person caused me. This is a place where many men stumble. When we think of sinful behaviors in our lives, we might honestly have godly remorse and repent of them, but not fully obey

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God's revelation about the sin. When we remember when, where, and how we began sinning, and who might have been involved, we should not be looking for an excuse or someone else to blame for our sins. Instead, we should be searching for how we can take ownership of our sins and who to forgive. Then we can receive cleansing from the "sin that so easily entangles" (Hebrews 12:1).

Mark 11:23-25 (NKJ) is an example of the relationship between the effectiveness of our prayers and our willingness to forgive. Jesus said,

For assuredly, I say to you, whoever says to this mountain, "Be removed and be cast into the sea," and does not doubt in his heart, but believes that those things he says will come to pass, he will have whatever he says. Therefore I say to you, whatever things you ask when you pray, believe that you receive them, and you will have them. And whenever you stand praying, if you have anything against anyone, forgive him, that your Father in heaven may also forgive you your trespasses.

Here again, as He instructs His disciples about faith, Jesus takes time to emphasize the importance of forgiving another person's sins. This is a tremendous example of an act of faith. I cannot imagine commanding a real mountain to be cast into the sea. I am sure, though, that if I did so in the Name of Jesus and did not doubt in my heart, it would happen. I believe it because I have actually commanded mountains of sinful behaviors to leave my life and know that they have left me. I had absolutely no doubt in my heart because I had thoroughly repented of my sins, forgiven those people associated with them, and rejected the sinful behavior from my will. I knew that the mountain of sin was gone after I prayed, because I no longer struggled with it as before.

I have also tried to unload sinful behaviors, by the authority of Christ, when I had failed to fully repent of the sins involved or to forgive others. The difference in the two experiences was remarkable. When the mountain of sin failed to move, I knew it. I didn't have

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to wait until the old temptation surfaced again to know that something was incomplete following my prayer. But as surely as I knew in my heart that it was not gone, the sinful behavior remained. Yes, there was doubt. Any person, who has not fully repented of his sin and forgiven others, will doubt his own faith to cast away a mountain of sin. That doubting feeling is a cue to more completely and accurately repent or forgive.

In Matthew 18:23-35 (NKJ) Jesus tells his disciples a parable to again emphasize the need to forgive the sins of others.

Therefore the kingdom of heaven is like a certain king who wanted to settle accounts with his servants. And when he had begun to settle accounts, one was brought to him who owed him ten thousand talents. But as he was not able to pay, his master commanded that he be sold, with his wife and children and all that he had, and that payment be made. The servant therefore fell down before him, saying, "Master, have patience with me, and I will pay you all." Then the master of that servant was moved with compassion, released him, and forgave him the debt. But that servant went out and found one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred denarii; and he laid hands on him and took him by the throat, saying, "Pay me what you owe!" So his fellow servant fell down at his feet and begged him, saying, "Have patience with me, and I will pay you all." And he would not, but went and threw him into prison till he should pay the debt. So when his fellow servants saw what had been done, they were very grieved, and came and told their master all that had been done. Then his master, after he had called him, said to him, "You wicked servant! I forgave you all that debt because you begged me. Should you not also have had compassion on your fellow servant, just as I had pity on you?" And his master was angry, and delivered him to the torturers until he should pay all that was

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due to him. So My heavenly Father also will do to you if each of you, from his heart, does not forgive his brother his trespasses.

This parable presents a clear picture of a person who has become a follower of Christ and has been forgiven a great debt only to be tortured in his daily life because of his unwillingness to forgive another brother. This is a very common theme among men who struggle with addictions, compulsions, obsessions, and other torturing behaviors. No matter how much they try to repent of their sins, they cannot find freedom from them until they forgive the people associated with their sins. They often say as Paul said in Romans 7:15-17, “I do not understand what I do. For what I want to do I do not do, but what I hate I do. And if I do what I do not want to do, I agree that the law is good. As it is, it is no longer I myself who do it, but it is sin living in me.” The sin of unforgiveness can be a powerful and tormenting force living within us. To be free, we must be prepared to repent and forgive the people who have harmed us.

Repentance and forgiveness should be practiced as routine disciplines of prayer. By asking the Lord to show us the sins we are committing and whom we might forgive, we are aligning ourselves with the most fundamental acts of faith. As the prophet Hosea said in Hosea 10:12, “Sow for yourselves righteousness, reap the fruit of unfailing love, and break up your unplowed ground; for it is time to seek the Lord, until he comes and showers righteousness on you.”

### **Yield to the Holy Spirit**

One of the primary objectives for a follower of Christ is to progressively eliminate sinful behaviors from his life and to yield himself more and more to the Holy Spirit. Jesus said in John 14:15-17,

If you love me, you will obey what I command. And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Counselor to be with you forever – the Spirit of truth. The world cannot accept him, because it



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neither sees him nor knows him. But you know him, for he lives with you and will be in you.

Then, in John 16:13-14, He said, “When he, the Spirit of truth, comes, he will guide you into all truth. He will not speak on his own; he will speak only what he hears, and he will tell you what is yet to come. He will bring glory to me by taking from what is mine and making it known to you.” This is an amazing relationship. God’s Spirit comes to live within us, to help us obey His Word and to become more like Him.

In 1 Corinthians 6:17 (NAS) we are told that, “One who joins himself to the Lord is one spirit with Him.” There are also a number of places in the Scriptures which refer to being “filled with the Spirit.” Acts 13:52 says, “The disciples were filled with joy and with the Holy Spirit.” And then in Ephesians 3:19, the Apostle Paul prays that “you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God.” In Paul’s letter to the Ephesians (5:18-20) he says, “Do not get drunk on wine, which leads to debauchery. Instead, be filled with the Spirit. Speak to one another with psalms, hymns and spiritual songs. Sing and make music in your heart to the Lord, always giving thanks to God the Father for everything, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.”

Then there are many references to the Holy Spirit coming “upon” people or people being “baptized in” or “with” the Holy Spirit. In Luke 1:35, the Holy Spirit came “upon” Mary the mother of Jesus. In Luke 3:22 He came “upon” Jesus in “bodily form” as He was being baptized. John the Baptist speaking of Jesus in Luke 3:16 said, “He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire.” Using a concordance you can find several Scriptures that fall into each of these categories. It is clearly God’s will that the Holy Spirit be actively involved in the life of a follower of Christ. So we should welcome the Holy Spirit to come upon us, to live in us, fill us, and baptize us; in other words, to saturate us with His presence and to have free access to our lives.

In Matthew 13:33 Jesus said, “The kingdom of heaven is like yeast that a woman took and mixed into a large amount of flour until it worked all through the dough.” Just like yeast is worked

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into every part of the dough, the Holy Spirit begins working His way into every part of our lives as soon as we become followers of Christ. Dough gets squeezed, folded, and pressed; and with each kneading the yeast is spread throughout the dough. The same thing happens in the life of a disciple. As the events of life squeeze and press us, we have opportunities to behave like we did before or to allow the Holy Spirit to change how we think and act. In each situation we must make a decision whether or not we are going to continue in our old ways or yield to the Holy Spirit so that He can make us more like Christ. In James 1:2-4 we are told to “Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance. Perseverance must finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything.”

Some aspects of our behaviors are easier to bring into obedience to the Scriptures, while others are not so yielding. I can remember praying for help in some difficult financial situations I was facing just after I became a follower of Christ. When I picked up my Bible and began reading, this is what I found:

Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have gained access by faith into this grace in which we now stand. And we rejoice in the hope of the glory of God. Not only so, but we also rejoice in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope. And hope does not disappoint us, because God has poured out his love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, whom he has given us.

Romans 5:1-5

I liked the first part of this passage about having peace with God, but I really did not like the implications of the other verses. I felt like God was telling me that I was not going to be let out of my troubles quickly and that I should somehow rejoice in the process

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as I persevered. Since I was facing the possibility of losing our home, I could not understand how I should be rejoicing. I was so caught up in my own perspective of my problems, I completely overlooked the part that said, "And hope does not disappoint, because God has poured out his love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit."

God can reach us with just the right picture or metaphor to help us make sense of our circumstances. During one of my trials, He let me see myself as a sponge, an image that has really stayed with me. The word sponge is used only once in the Bible and it is in the account of Jesus' crucifixion. In Matthew 27:48 it says, "Immediately one of them ran and got a sponge. He filled it with wine vinegar, put it on a stick, and offered it to Jesus to drink." This picture of Jesus being comforted by a wine-soaked sponge is a beautiful picture of the Holy Spirit helping and comforting us in our tribulations. But the sponge the Lord had shown me was not a soft and pliable one that could be easily filled with wine and offered to anyone as help or comfort. It was hard and crusty like the one sitting on the bench in my garage.

The Lord showed me that when I came to know Him, it was as though someone filled a syringe full of wine, placed it deep in the middle of the sponge and emptied it. But the sponge was too brittle to absorb much of the wine. For the most part I was still crusty and dry, unable to act consistently with the Lord's will. But I had His Spirit deep inside of me waiting for me to yield every area of my life to Him. Each trial or decision gave me the opportunity to consider my ways versus His ways. As the pressures of life squeezed me, I felt convicted about things that were wrong and I repented of them. Each time this happened and I yielded my thoughts and actions to the Holy Spirit, He filled the hard crusty areas with Himself and the sponge grew less and less brittle. But I was not always so eager to give up my will and yield to the Lord. In some cases I was sincerely convinced of the righteousness of my own ways and was not open to consider how wrong I might be. In those cases the Lord picked up the entire sponge and gripped it firmly in His hand, crushing the outer layers of hardness and releasing His Spirit into those areas I had protected.

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For a long time I did not understand the Lord's mercy in this process. I noticed that I kept having trials and challenges that were more and more difficult. And after each one passed I could also see some improvement in my life. Nonetheless, I didn't appreciate getting battered around by what I had always thought were other people's shortcomings. Finally, after many years of complaining, I began to see that God was directly involved. The normal processes of life always supplied plenty of problems, but it became clear to me that the Lord was deliberately leading me into situations that were designed to break down my pride and soften my hardened, unyielding will. The pressures they produced at home and at work caused me to feel helpless and desperate for the Lord's intervention. It was during those times when I humbled myself to seek His help that He was able to get me to reconsider sins I had previously defended, and repent.

But what was His purpose in all of this? Jesus said to His disciples in Acts 1:8, "You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth." If we are to be His witness, we must be able to minister both the fruit and gifts of His Spirit to those who need help and comfort. The fruit of the Holy Spirit grows in our lives as we yield our will and our ways to His. Jesus said, "I am the true vine, and my Father is the gardener. He cuts off every branch in me that bears no fruit, while every branch that does bear fruit he prunes so that it will be even more fruitful" (John 15:1-5). So where there are unproductive sinful parts of our lives, He will prune them. Where there are productive areas in which we are obedient, He will prune them, too. His pruning does not mean He is upset with us. In His faithfulness, "God disciplines us for our good, that we may share in his holiness" (Hebrews 12:10). He wants us to manifest the fruit of the Holy Spirit, which is: "love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self control" (Galatians 5:22-23 NAS). The more we are pruned, the more fruit we produce.

Yielding to the Holy Spirit requires a level of openness and intimacy that many men think will make them feel uncomfortable. But yielding control of your life to the Holy Spirit is not the same

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as becoming weak and mindless. To the contrary, it requires us to humble ourselves to someone who has superior power and authority, and holds the strategic advantage; something we routinely do to receive a paycheck and other things we want badly enough. However, with the Lord, we must not only humble ourselves on the outside; but in our hearts. “Therefore, just as the Holy Spirit says, ‘Today if you hear His voice, do not harden your hearts’” (Hebrews 3:7-8 NAS); “Devote yourselves to prayer, keeping alert in it with an attitude of thanksgiving” (Colossians 4:2 NAS); For He “is able to do exceeding abundantly beyond all that we ask or think, according to the power that works within us” (Ephesians 3:20 NAS).

### **Pray for Your Family and Friends**

The job description of a priest is outlined in 1 Chronicles 23:13. It says, “Aaron was set apart, he and his descendants forever, to consecrate the most holy things, to offer sacrifices before the Lord, to minister before him and to pronounce blessings in his name forever.” And then, in Deuteronomy 21:5 it says, “The priests, the sons of Levi, shall step forward, for the Lord your God has chosen them to minister and to pronounce blessings in the name of the Lord and to decide all cases of dispute and assault.” Realizing that as followers of Christ we are all priests, these Scriptures lay out a daunting agenda for us at home and at work. Obviously, this job description would require a man to be actively in relationship with God through prayer and the study of the Scriptures in order to know what to consecrate, how to judge complicated issues between people, and to whom and for what purposes to pronounce blessings.

As priests, our job includes standing between God and people interceding for them in prayer, and standing between people to help reconcile personal conflicts. These potentially intense responsibilities emphasize the need for knowing the will of God and what actions to take in many situations. Our best example is Jesus who said in John 5:19, 30 (NAS), “Truly, truly, I say to you, the Son can do nothing of Himself, unless it is something He sees the Father doing; for whatever the Father does, these things the Son also does in like manner. I can do nothing on My own initiative. As I hear, I judge;

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and My judgment is just, because I do not seek My own will, but the will of Him who sent Me.” To follow this example, a man must be able to accurately apply the Word of God, and be ever yielding to the Holy Spirit.

An important part of our intercession for people is to pronounce blessings. To bless means to pronounce a benediction upon someone. In the Hebrew, the word translated as blessing (#1293) implies a specific benefit or prosperity to the recipient. When we pronounce a blessing upon someone, we are speaking favorable and prosperous things about them as a person or invoking good things into their life or future. There are many examples in the Bible of blessings being pronounced such as:

By Melchizedek upon Abraham. “And he blessed Abram, saying, ‘Blessed be Abram by God Most High, Creator of heaven and earth.’”

Genesis 14:19

By Moses upon the tribes of Israel. In Deuteronomy Chapter 33, he speaks a blessing over each of the tribes of Israel.

By David upon the people of Israel. “After he had finished sacrificing the burnt offerings and fellowship offerings, he blessed the people in the name of the Lord Almighty.”

2 Samuel 6:18

By Solomon upon the people of Israel. “May the Lord our God be with us as he was with our fathers; may he never leave us nor forsake us. May he turn our hearts to him, to walk in all his ways and to keep the commands, decrees and regulations he gave our fathers.”

1 Kings 8:57-58

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By Isaac upon Jacob. “May God give you of heaven’s dew and of earth’s richness—an abundance of grain and new wine. May nations serve you and peoples bow down to you. Be lord over your brothers, and may the sons of your mother bow down to you. May those who curse you be cursed and those who bless you be blessed.”

Genesis 27:28-29

By Naomi upon Ruth and Orpah, her two daughters-in-law. “Go back, each of you, to your mother’s home. May the Lord show kindness to you, as you have shown to your dead and to me. May the Lord grant that each of you will find rest in the home of another husband.”

Ruth 1:8-9

A blessing is not just something we make up out of our own imagination. The will and Spirit of God guide it. These are things we can know only through the study of the Scriptures and personal fellowship with Him. When we bless someone, we intercede (or stand between) him and God, and bless him in His Name. We can also stand between God and someone who has sinned, blessing him with a favorable judgment as the Levite priests did for the nation of Israel, and as Abraham attempted to do with Sodom and Gomorrah in Genesis Chapter 18. Unfortunately, Abraham’s deal with God required ten righteous people to be in residence for the cities to be spared. There were not enough and the outcome was fire from heaven. So obviously, intercession is not a method of imposing man’s will on God, but of expressing God’s will toward someone through our prayers and blessings.

In Numbers 30:1-16, there is a very interesting example of God delegating authority to man, which allows him to intercede, judge favorably, and invoke a blessing for his wife or daughter. In this case, a man is given delegated authority to release his wife or daughter from a vow, pledge, or rash promise they may have made, even if it was to the Lord. Throughout the record of God’s dealings with his

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people there have been men, acting in the role of priests, who could intercede between the people and God; and help them disentangle themselves from sin. Hebrews 7:23-25 says,

There have been many of those priests, since death prevented them from continuing in office; but because Jesus lives forever, he has a permanent priesthood. Therefore he is able to save completely those who come to God through him, because he always lives to intercede for them.

No one takes this honor upon himself; he must be called by God, just as Aaron was. So Christ also did not take upon himself the glory of becoming a high priest. But God said to him, "You are my Son; today I have become your Father."

Hebrews 5:4-5

Just as Jesus received this authority from His Father, we as priests unto Him also receive the authority to intercede for one another's sins. In Matthew 9:2-7,

Some men brought to Him a paralytic, lying on a mat. When Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralytic, "Take heart, son; your sins are forgiven." At this, some of the teachers of the law said to themselves, "This fellow is blaspheming!" Knowing their thoughts, Jesus said, "Why do you entertain evil thoughts in your hearts? Which is easier: to say, 'Your sins are forgiven,' or to say, 'Get up and walk'? But so that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins." Then he said to the paralytic, "Get up, take your mat and go home." And the man got up and went home.

Here Jesus was demonstrating that healing a man's body was a greater expression of authority than to forgive sins. This simple truth sometimes baffles people, especially the proud "teachers of the law" that Jesus confronted here and in Matthew 23.



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In 1 John 5:14-16 we are exhorted by the Apostle John to come before God and intercede for the sins of our brothers.

This is the confidence we have in approaching God: that if we ask anything according to his will, he hears us. And if we know that he hears us—whatever we ask—we know that we have what we asked of him. If anyone sees his brother commit a sin that does not lead to death, he should pray and God will give him life. I refer to those whose sin does not lead to death. There is a sin that leads to death. I am not saying that he should pray about that.

How did John know that such a thing was according to the will of God? He knew because he was a witness when Jesus delegated the authority to forgive sins. After Jesus' resurrection He appeared to His disciples several times.

On the evening of that first day of the week, when the disciples were together, with the doors locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you!" After he said this, he showed them his hands and side. The disciples were overjoyed when they saw the Lord. Again Jesus said, "Peace be with you! As the Father has sent me, I am sending you." And with that he breathed on them and said, "Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive anyone his sins, they are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven.

John 20:19-23

The Amplified version of the Bible says, "Now having received the Holy Spirit and being led and directed by Him, if you forgive the sins of anyone they are forgiven." So John is exhorting us to use delegated authority that He personally received from Jesus. But why is this wonderful authority granted to us? In 2 Corinthians 2:10-11, the Apostle Paul says,

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If you forgive anyone, I also forgive him. And what I have forgiven—if there was anything to forgive—I have forgiven in the sight of Christ for your sake, in order that Satan might not outwit us. For we are not unaware of his schemes.

The devil is actively trying to entangle people in sin. In John 10:10, we are told that Satan's ultimate goal is to destroy us with sin. Jesus said, "The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full." So since we know that our "enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour" (1 Peter 5:8), it makes perfect sense that Jesus placed authority in our hands to help disentangle our brothers from sin and the grip of Satan. In the same way as the Levites served and assisted their high priest in the ministry of the temple, we serve and assist our High Priest, Jesus Christ by interceding to bless, forgive, and reconcile people to one another and to God.

My wife and I have benefited enormously from this kind of intercession. We tried for years to counsel one another; each of us trying to get the other to see his or her sin. But our discussions often ended up with her defending her fears and me expressing my anger. We weren't just arguing about personal offenses between a husband and wife. There were many times when our sins were not against one another. It could have been an attitude one of us had about a friend, a fear that kept us from being able to participate in life freely, or a misconception about faith and obedience that caused us to sin against God. It was frustrating for us to watch one another continue to entangle ourselves in the same sins and live under the confusion and guilt they brought. We were no different than most people who tend to be blind to their own sins and only see other people's sins clearly.

One morning, while we were arguing about a particular fear that was plaguing her life, she said something that surprised me, "Since you see it so clearly and I don't, when you see me expressing fear, why don't you just forgive me for it?" When I left the house for work, her words were still ringing in my ears. So as I was driving

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along I began to pray for her. I had forgiven her many times for things she had said or done to me personally, but this time I was forgiving her for fear and unbelief that I was able to observe in her behaviors. I asked God to let me see her situation as He did, and to guide my prayers for her. Immediately I began to pray for her and to forgive her this way: *Lord, I forgive Dorothy for not trusting You. I forgive her for the unbelief and doubt that she speaks. I forgive her and I bless her in Your Name. I bless her with wisdom and I ask You to give her a revelation of her sin. Help her to see why she is this way and reject the old way of thinking. I bless her with peace and I rebuke the bondage of this fear from her in Jesus' Name.*

My prayer for her that day was considerably different from my usual, "Lord, please do something about Dorothy's fears." I found myself strangely at peace when I finished. I realized that, maybe for the first time, I was praying in the will of God for my wife.

When I returned home that evening she was bright-faced and eager to share what had happened to her. The thing she had never before been able to understand or receive from me as counsel, she now understood. God had shown her the roots of her fear. She had repented, forgiven the people in her life associated with her fear, rejected the devil's grip on her life, and was set free from her bondage. God had truly set her free. When I asked her what happened, she said it was like a mountain of sin-guilt had suddenly been removed from her life; and she was able to understand how her fear was causing her to sin. She said it actually became easy for her to see the fear as sin and reject it. As we discussed the dramatic effect of interceding in prayer this way, I discovered that she had been interceding and forgiving me for some time. In fact, some revelations I had reported to her concerning my own sins were things about which she had been specifically interceding in prayer and forgiving me.

Since then, we have had dozens of examples of the power of this kind of intercessory prayer. As the Lord has led us, we have forgiven and blessed one another, our family, and friends, and have seen astounding results. Now our counsel to one another takes place after intercessory prayer, and to confirm the results of the revelation we have received about our sins. Our conversations often start with, "I am being convicted about such and such. Have you been praying

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for me about that?” It has become an important expression of our love for one another, and a bond between us and God that is unshakeable.

I tried for many years to lead my family by exhorting and counseling them “on to good works,” but with limited success. When I was finally willing to consider a new way of thinking and praying, I discovered the amazing truth of what the Lord said in Jeremiah 15:19 (NAS), “Therefore, thus says the Lord, ‘If you return, then I will restore you—Before Me you will stand; and if you extract the precious from the worthless, you will become My spokesman.’” Learning to pray this way brought satisfaction to my prayer life that I had longed to experience. When I came before the Lord to bless, forgive, and reconcile, I knew that I was “extracting the precious from the worthless.”

### **Stand Firm in Your Faith**

When a man becomes a follower of Christ, his life takes a turn into an entirely new dimension of the spiritual world that has always been there even though we may have been unaware. People who have been involved in the occult before coming to Christ usually have no problem at all accepting the spiritual nature of the things we are called to do. They know evil spiritual forces are real and working to seduce people into wrong thinking and behaviors. “And no wonder, for Satan himself masquerades as an angel of light” (2 Corinthians 11:14). Satan and the demonic forces that follow him have one purpose, that is to “steal and kill and destroy” (John 10:10). When we intercede, pronounce blessings, judge favorably, forgive, or in any way use the spiritual authority given to us; we are literally maneuvering against the forces of evil that want to destroy people’s lives.

The Scriptures give us many different glimpses of the unseen spiritual world and how it is ruled by the exercise of our faith. In Hebrews 11:24-27 Moses’ exercise of faith is described. It says,

By faith Moses, when he had grown up, refused to be known as the son of Pharaoh’s daughter. He chose to be mistreated along with the people of God rather than to enjoy the pleasures of sin for a short time.

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He regarded disgrace for the sake of Christ as of greater value than the treasures of Egypt, because he was looking ahead to his reward. By faith he left Egypt, not fearing the king's anger; he persevered because he saw Him who is invisible.

Like Moses, anyone who believes in Christ follows the “King [who is] eternal, immortal, invisible, the only God” (1 Timothy 1:17), and we do it by faith. So if we believe in and are willing to obey this invisible God, we should also believe what He has said to us about our invisible adversary the devil. When you look up the words Satan, devil, evil spirit, and demon in your concordance, you will be amazed at how much the Lord has to say about them. In Mark 16:16-18 Jesus said,

Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned. And these signs will accompany those who believe: In my name they will drive out demons; they will speak in new tongues; they will pick up snakes (Acts 28:3-5) with their hands; and when they drink deadly poison, it will not hurt them at all; they will place their hands on sick people, and they will get well.

This is a powerful list of spiritual acts, which believers can accomplish by faith and in the Name of Christ. The Gospels and the book of Acts are replete with examples of Jesus and His disciples engaging in the tactics of this great spiritual strategy to overcome the schemes of the devil. Jesus also said, “I tell you the truth, anyone who has faith in me will do what I have been doing. He will do even greater things than these, because I am going to the Father” (John 14:12).

A great end-time battle is described In Revelation chapter 12. In verses 10 and 11 it says,

Then I heard a loud voice in heaven say: “Now have come the salvation and the power and the kingdom of our God, and the authority of his Christ. For the

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accuser of our brothers, who accuses them before our God day and night, has been hurled down. They overcame him by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony; they did not love their lives so much as to shrink from death.”

This Scripture defines the fundamental battle strategy required to prevail against the schemes of the devil. Relying completely on the blood of the Lamb (Jesus), which is the price of our salvation, the word of our testimony of faith in His Name, and an unshrinking commitment even to death, we move confidently forward in life as Christ’s hands extended. There is no other authority and no other ordination required to overcome Satan. “There is salvation in no one else; for there is no other name under heaven that has been given among men, by which we must be saved” (Acts 4:12 NAS). Here the definitions of the Greek words offer helpful insight into the broad intent of the Scripture. The word for salvation (#4991) means to “rescue or bring to safety either physically or morally.” The word for saved (#4982) means to “save, deliver, or protect.” These words are translated throughout the New Testament as “save, heal, preserve, do well, and make whole.” So the promise of salvation is broader than deliverance from judgment and hell. It is a promise of a “full life” now as Jesus said in John 10:10.

As husbands and fathers we have a mandate to exercise the authority the Lord has given us in His Name and lead our family into deliverance and healing. But we must remember that the nature of this battle is uniquely spiritual. Usually, when men think of battle, they imagine testosterone-driven behaviors with aggressive expressions of their soul power or physical strength. Our fixation on these things is confirmed by our recreational activities, which often include watching movies and sports that mimic warfare. There appears to be an inborn capacity in man to engage in battle. As disciples, we must learn to channel that inclination to the purposes and methods of the Kingdom of God.

For though we live in the world, we do not wage war as the world does. The weapons we fight with are not the weapons of the world. On the contrary,

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they have divine power to demolish strongholds. We demolish arguments and every pretension that sets itself up against the knowledge of God, and we take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ.

2 Corinthians 10:3-5

In Ephesians 6:10-18, the Apostle Paul describes more of the overall strategy, including the armor and weapons available to us, and the tactics for engagement:

Vs. 10—“Be strong in the Lord and in his mighty power.” (Our first strategy must be to become an obedient disciple, depending wholly on the Lord. We must yield our own strength to Him, trusting in the power of His Spirit in us.)

Vs. 11—“Put on the full armor of God so that you can take your stand against the devil’s schemes.” (We must reconsider any limitations we have set for His Spirit in us.)

Vs. 12—“For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms.” (Do not be drawn into the deception that people are your enemy. Keep focused on setting people free.)

Vs. 13—“Therefore put on the full armor of God, so that when the day of evil comes, you may be able to stand your ground, and after you have done everything, to stand.” (The battle starts within us as we learn to bring what we say and do under the control of the Holy Spirit. Stand firm, don’t waste effort attacking everything you see or hear. Remember Jesus’ example in John 5:19, 30. Use reasonable judgment as directed by the Holy Spirit.)

Vs. 14 —“Stand firm then, with the belt of truth buckled around your waist.” (Our truth must be that found in the Word of God. We must always be guided by the values of intellectual integrity and moral conscience.) “With the breastplate of righteousness in place.” (We pursue righteousness by cultivating repentance and forgiveness. It is like a bullet-proof vest against the threats and accusations we face in life.)

Vs. 15—“And with your feet fitted with the readiness that comes from the gospel of peace.” (Stand firm, but be ready to move

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forcefully in the Spirit, as you remain at peace with every person. Our battle is not *against* people, but *for* them.)

Vs. 16—“In addition to all this, take up the shield of faith, with which you can extinguish all the flaming arrows of the evil one.” (Hold the shield of faith in front of you and your family by trusting God’s methods. Repent, forgive, intercede, bless, and reconcile as acts of faith.)

Vs. 17—“Take the helmet of salvation.” (Our salvation includes deliverance, protection, healing, doing well, and making whole.) “And the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God.” (Study to handle accurately the Word of God and speak what it says about life when we are challenged or tempted, like Jesus was in Matthew 4:1-11.)

Vs. 18—“And pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests. With this in mind, be alert and always keep on praying for all the saints.” (Be task faithful and always yielding to the Holy Spirit.)

Imagine that you had to play a chess match with the devil, and that you knew almost nothing about the games’ underlying strategies. To make matters worse, the results of each move during the game will have the potential of bringing you and your family into bondage to the devil’s evil schemes, redirecting your career toward success or failure, and influencing many other choices and opportunities. Ultimately the outcome of the match may determine where you, and possibly your family and others, will spend eternity. What you say about your strategies and tactics will either perfectly target your moves or expose your plans to the devil’s counter-attack. Your physical strength, although helpful, will only be useful to keep you alert and active under the stress of the battle. Beyond that, you will be limited to your intellectual abilities.

Then you discover that the Lord will observe and judge the outcome of the match. And to your great relief, He has offered Himself to you as a coach and strategist. You will have the option of having His Spirit reside in you, so that you will never actually be alone. This close relationship will increase your ability to see and hear what He would do in each situation before you move. He will guide you with nudges, words of wisdom, words of knowledge, and



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other revelations and references to His Word, which will be transferred via a secret channel from His Spirit through your own spirit and into your mind. Both the Lord and the devil will be invisible players, and you will sit at the table observing the subtle movement of the devil's pieces and watching his strategies unfold.

Considering the tremendous consequences of this match, where and on what would you focus your time and energy in preparing for battle? What would you be doing between moves and between games? Would you be seeking instruction about chess? Or would you be spending time with the Lord, reading His Word, praying, being filled with His Spirit, receiving instruction from Him, and learning how to see and hear what the Lord would tell you to do? If your faith is in your own abilities, intellectual or otherwise, you will learn only about chess. But if you recognize the realities of your situation, and have put your faith in the Lord, you will spend the time necessary to learn to yield to His Spirit.

The devil plays dirty. He takes every possible opportunity to steal, kill, and destroy. He also has many associates, both in the spiritual and natural worlds, ready to attack, confuse, and entangle us in his destructive schemes. When we get serious about being a disciple of Christ and embrace the values and strategies of spiritual accountability, we gain a strategic advantage in this battle. Then, as we discipline ourselves to follow the example of Christ, the word of our testimony can become consistent with Isaiah 50:4-10:

The Sovereign Lord has given me an instructed tongue, to know the word that sustains the weary. He wakens me morning by morning, wakens my ear to listen like one being taught. The Sovereign Lord has opened my ears, and I have not been rebellious; I have not drawn back. I offered my back to those who beat me, my cheeks to those who pulled out my beard; I did not hide my face from mocking and spitting. Because the Sovereign Lord helps me, I will not be disgraced. Therefore have I set my face like flint, and I know I will not be put to shame. He who vindicates me is near. Who then will bring

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charges against me? Let us face each other! Who is my accuser? Let him confront me! It is the Sovereign Lord who helps me. Who is he that will condemn me? They will all wear out like a garment; the moths will eat them up. Who among you fears the Lord and obeys the word of his servant? Let him who walks in the dark, who has no light, trust in the name of the Lord and rely on his God.