

Studies on Biblical Imagery

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Peter's Rooftop Vision (Acts 10:9-29)

Peace to you. I pray this study will bless every reader with a greater revelation of God's love.

"And a voice came to him, 'Rise, Peter; kill and eat... for what God has cleansed you must not call common.'"

When Peter saw the vision in Acts 10:9-29, he was told to "kill and eat." We naturally think of this as an expansion of literal food laws, but the context here shows there is more to it. The good news of God's love kills our inner beast and makes us safe to interact with. A person who trusts in God's love, and wants to repay it, is also safe to bless. Peter had to kill his own inner beast in order to see the Gentiles become part of God's chosen people. (Acts 10:44-48, Isaiah 11:10)

The beasts of our flesh are all listed in Galatians 5:19-21 but for the sake of time we'll drill down on the top 4:

- envy, (Proverbs 27:4, Mark 15:10)
- lust, (1 Peter 4:3, 1 John 2:16, Job 31:9-12)
- excess, (Matthew 23:25, 1 Samuel 2:29, Ephesians 5:18)
- and pride. (Proverbs 21:24, Habakkuk 2:4, James 4:13-16)

Our Heavenly Father's logic overcomes these things by showing us how to live in a way that is peaceful, loving, moderate, and humble. (Psalm 119:9, John 15:3, Ephesians 5:25-27)

Accepting God's word unites us with His Holy Spirit. (John 10:35, Colossians 1:9-11, Romans 12:1-2, Numbers 20:8, Isaiah 43:20, John 4:14, John 7:38-39)

God's Spirit of Truth frees us from our slavery to sin. (Isaiah 2:3-4, Acts 1:8, John 4:23-24, John 8:34-36, John 14:16-17, Romans 6:17-18, James 1:5-6, Mark 8:38, 1 Thessalonians 4:1-3)

Our hunger for righteousness is satisfied when we become fit for God's use. (Micah 7:1-2, Matthew 5:6, 2 Timothy 2:21)

The beasts of the Law are:

- temptation, (Romans 7:7-25, Genesis 3:1-7)
- elitism / judgmental spirit / hypocrisy, (2 Samuel 12:5-7, Romans 2:1-2)
- and self-sufficiency outside of God's power. (Jeremiah 17:5-7, Revelation 3:17)

We may slip into judging others; thinking we are "better than them" because we are obedient to God. We may even believe that we don't need God's Spirit to make us right with Him if we let pride puff us up. (Matthew 3:9, Proverbs 6:16-17) Jesus tells us in Luke 17:7-10 that being an obedient servant doesn't give us anything to boast about. Similarly, we're warned in Luke 18:9-14 that being proud of our obedience will make us unrighteous in God's eyes.

When we remember Jesus' sacrificial death, supernatural resurrection, and His transcendent law of love, it helps us stay holy and humble. (Micah 6:8, 1 John 3:18, James 2:14-17) We can let His living truths transform us into His image, recreating us as holy people of God. (Proverbs 18:20-21, John 3:1-12, Romans 12:2) He is the vine, and we are the branches. We can't do anything without Him. (John 15:5)

The Bible compares the way we love and serve each other to:

- "good fruit." (Matthew 7:15-19, Galatians 5:22-23, Psalm 128:3) Our logic should nourish and bring life to ourselves and those we share it with.
- "unleavened bread." (Exodus 12:15, 1 Corinthians 5:7-8, Luke 12:1) We clear out our pride and hypocrisy so we can make sacrifices in a spirit of humility.
- "the salt of the earth." (Matthew 5:13, Leviticus 2:13) The relationships we have with others are preserved by the favor we freely give.
- "the light of the world." (Matthew 5:14-15, Psalm 119:105) Living by the truth we speak proves that it is safe and good.

Romans 12:20-21 says, "If your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty give him drink: for in so doing you will heap coals of fire on his head. Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good." We kill the spiritual beast within others when we nourish and cherish them like we nourish and cherish ourselves. (Ephesians 5:29-30, Proverbs 25:21-22) Our enemy's "head" is the devil, their cruel master. They're enslaved by sin. (John 8:34, Exodus 6:5-9) Thankfully, God's love shining through us is able to overcome their master by softening their hearts and opening their eyes. (2 Kings 6:15-23) Once they see how good our merciful God is by the love we show them, they can be set free to serve Him, too. (Proverbs 10:12, 1 Peter 2:5, John 8:34-40, James 1:25, Jeremiah 31:31-34)

Manna for the Soul, Part 1

What an amazing time we're living in! God's Word, has been translated into more languages than any other writings in the world. I found paperback Bibles in my dollar-store the other day. What a blessing that God's eternal message is available to just about anyone today.

God's Word is "the bread of heaven" and "manna for the soul." Jesus is the Word of God made flesh, John 1:1. He helps us understand His role in our ability to grow spiritually. John 6:30-41 tells us that He is our Manna; spiritual food to live by.

The word, "Manna" literally means, "What is it?" This is humorously appropriate when you look at all the imagery in the Bible. We read it and think, "What's this?" and then it turns out to be the most useful thing we will ever know on earth! It's what our heavenly Father feeds us in order to transform us into children of heaven; eternal beings who will share eternal life with Him. (Psalm 100:3, 1 Peter 2:1-2)

Jesus told us this in John 10:30-39:

30 I and My Father are one.

31 Then the Jews took up stones again to stone Him.

32 Jesus answered them, Many good works have I showed you from my Father; for which of those works do you stone me?

33 The Jews answered him, saying, For a good work we stone you not; but for blasphemy; and because that you, being a man, make yourself God.

34 Jesus answered them, Is it not written in your law, I said, You are gods?

35 If he called them gods, to whom the word of God came, and the scripture cannot be broken;

36 Say you of him, whom the Father has sanctified, and sent into the world, You blaspheme; because I said, I am the Son of God?

37 If I do not the works of my Father, believe me not.

38 But if I do, though you believe not me, believe the works: that you may know, and believe, that the Father is in me, and I in him.

39 Therefore they sought again to take him: but he escaped out of their hand.

The parables embedded into the cosmos, nature, the history of the Bible, and the aspects of the Temple, are all "hidden manna." We're allowed to hunger for it, so we can learn thankfulness. (Deuteronomy 8:1-3) Thankfulness toward God works like a medicine for the spirit. It helps us aspire to be like God because of His goodness, instead of only hungering for His power.

God's gift of insight and spiritual revelation is given through reading the Word and believing it. As we grow and progress, we come to truly understand the Word of God. (Luke 6:40, Matthew 13:12, John 6:54-64, Revelation 2:17)

What's the matter with manna? Part 2

Every choice we make is an act of worship, or an act of war. (Deuteronomy 30:19) Don't believe it? Ponder this question. Imagine that you were to walk into a famous 51 flavors ice cream shop, that you hardly ever get to go to. Do you know which flavor you would choose? I sure do! Aw, what a treat! It's going to be this one, or if that flavor is out, it'll be this other one for sure!

Now, just imagine you were to walk into that ice cream shop with the Living God, and today, He's buying! What are you going to get? You spent all day warming up for that favorite flavor and then BAM; God has a suggestion. He doesn't want you to get the one you want. He says He'd like you to have something else.

What are you going to do with that information? Are you going to argue? Are you going to beg God to let you have the one you want? Do you think you'd just say, "OK fine" and then brood about it the rest of the day? Maybe you'd throw a fit and say that if you can't have what you want, then you don't want anything at all. Take a look at Exodus 32:32 where Moses does it, and Jonah 4:6-9 where Jonah does the same!

Another example is found in 1 Samuel 8:1-20. The prophet Samuel tells God's people, in detail, just how bad things will turn out if God gives them what they want, (a king). He even gives them a chance to change their minds! 1 Samuel 12:16-22 is where they come to a point of no return.

So now we come to the misery over the manna in Numbers 11:5-15. This passage really bothers me. I consider the fact that everything I have and everything I am, belongs to God. He has always been the one meeting my needs and my wants. In the ice-cream store of life, He's always the one who's buying. The Bible told me so. (Psalm 50:12, Proverbs 20:12, 1 Corinthians 6:19)

I look at these stories of people, who are probably a lot closer to God than me, and I think, "If God were to save me out of all the junk in my life and give me a purpose, would I protest, throw a tantrum, and run away because God's plan wasn't what I had in mind?" (Jonah 1:3, Exodus 16:3) "Would I be thankful for His helpful input?" God knows what's good for me better than I do. There have been plenty of times in my life when the thing I really wanted turned out to be bad for me. Manna was what the people of Israel needed but they weren't satisfied. (Deuteronomy 29:6)

According to Numbers 11:13-23 and Numbers 11:30-34, getting what they really wanted didn't work out for the Israelites either. They ended up naming the place where they got the meat they asked for, "The Tombs of the Longing." Enough said!

When we feast our eyes and ears on the world, we are spiritually "eating and drinking with drunkards." (Luke 12:45-46) That's not good at all. This late in the game of life, it's downright terrifying.

I'm thinking, I need to really pray over myself if I'm going to have my prayers for ministry and purpose met with a "yes".

God loves us. He wants us to be set free to serve the Kingdom in a way that's best for everyone involved. He knows our strengths and weaknesses. He created them! His logic of love is the source of life. Scripture says that anyone more devoted to their own interests than

they are to Christ's, is not worthy of Him. (Matthew 10:35-40, Matthew 12:47-50) Jesus is the way, the truth and the life. (John 14:6) If we are choosing something other than life, even if it's just an ice cream, or a smoke, or whatever isn't promoting what is best for the lives of everyone connected to us, we're choosing against Christ's purpose for us. (Matthew 25:40, Romans 14:7, Hebrews 3:6, Ephesians 2:21, 1 Peter 2:5, Psalm 95:7)

When we allow our flesh and the world to dictate the desires of our heart, we find ourselves disappointed a LOT more often than God wants us to be. (Psalm 37:4) He wants to see our needs met and our desires fulfilled. (Proverbs 13:12) When we delight in the Lord, He is ready, willing and able to give us the desires of our heart AND it works out for the best.

Psalm 37:4-11:

4 Delight yourself also in the LORD: and he shall give you the desires of your heart.

5 Commit your way to the LORD; trust also in him; and he shall bring it to pass.

6 And he shall bring forth your righteousness as the light, and your judgment as the noonday.

7 Rest in the LORD, and wait patiently for him: fret not yourself because of him who prospers in his way, because of the man who brings wicked devices to pass.

8 Cease from anger, and forsake wrath: fret not yourself in any wise to do evil.

9 For evildoers shall be cut off: but those that wait on the LORD, they shall inherit the earth.

10 For yet a little while, and the wicked shall not be: yes, you shall diligently consider his place, and it shall not be.

11 But the meek shall inherit the earth; and shall delight themselves in the abundance of peace.

May we claim these promises for the good of the Kingdom and for the good of our souls, in Jesus precious name, Amen.

Manna: Food for thought. Part 3

The misery over the manna in Numbers 11:4-15 taught me something that makes me read my Bible a lot slower these days. "When God gives us something good, but we are not thankful for it, we lose the blessing in having it."

Did you notice in verse 4 that the Israelites in the wilderness coveted meat because of the Egyptians that came with them? This thought reminds me of the verses in Malachi 1:6-12 where the Lord says we dishonor Him when we despise His table by putting polluted food on it and then blaming Him that all we have to eat is junk. His answer to the problem? "Stop taking junk and you won't have junk to eat!" If we surround ourselves with people who are spiritually blind, and they share their polluted ways with us, and we accept it, what else can we expect but a mind full of junk? Proverbs 18:20-21 gives us more food for thought. It says, "A man's belly will be filled with the fruit of his mouth; with the fruit of his lips, he shall be filled. Death and life are in the power of the tongue, and those who love to use their tongue will eat its fruit." If we choose to tear down others with our words, how can we expect it not to harm us? Did you ever hit someone and then fail to guard yourself for the payback? We can't just put on a trench coat and run for the ditch. If I run toward a ditch, I should expect to fall headlong into a ditch. If I let someone lead me into the ditch, into it we will go!

The Lord of heaven and earth is raining down manna on us through His written word. Why are we looking for relief in secular music with lyrics that unashamedly sing about breaking one of the big 10 commandments? You know which one I'm talking about don't you? We all know. How are we going to be a good influence if we know the lyrics to these smut-mongering songs better than we know the Bible? OK, if you're laughing, it's because you know what I'm saying is true. The secular music today is breeding dissatisfaction and discontentment and it's hurting us spiritually. It's hurting our family and our ministry. It's making us ineffective at using our mouths for what they're for.

Isaiah 50:4 says, "The Lord has given me the tongue of a person taught by Him, so that I would know how to comfort the weary with a word. He awakens morning by morning, He awakens my ear to hear as those who are taught." Sometimes, the weary person we are able to comfort is ourselves! This truth is saving my life right now, which is why I'm sharing it with you.

Just as the manna was gathered in the morning, in Exodus 16:21, our Father is waiting to open our minds to scripture every morning of every day. All we have to do is ask for our daily bread, like Jesus taught us to in Matthew 6:11.

If you have a hard time memorizing scripture, no problem. Just change your music! Paul tells us that's how they did it in his day. What's good enough for Paul is good enough for me. (Ephesians 5:19)

Colossians 3:16:

Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly in all wisdom, teaching and admonishing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with grace in your hearts to the Lord.

May God bless you as you feast on His word today!

Two Trees in the Garden

"Whoever tends to the fig tree will eat the fruit of it; so he that waits on his master will be honored." (Proverbs 27:18)

Did you ever wonder why God put the Tree of Knowledge in the garden in the first place? Did it seem like we were kind-of being set up to fail? Here's why I don't think that's true.

God didn't want robots, He wanted children. This explains why He gave us a free will. Not a big deal if you are a lone amoeba with a limited life span. If you're being prepared to inherit and rule over an eternal kingdom, however, this is a massive amount of power and responsibility. (Galatians 4:1-7, Psalm 119:9) It's like driving a car; we have to be taught how before we're handed the keys and set loose on the highway of eternity.

I believe Eden is our first classroom and that these two trees are our introduction to free will.

The Tree of Life represents our power to do good for ourselves and others at all times, as long as we stay connected to our Savior, Jesus the Messiah. (John 15:5, Jeremiah 31:33-34) This is how our Father wants to see us live and rule with Him. We will be honored; supported and distinguished by Him if we are living by the truth and love He teaches us. Jesus Christ is the Tree of Life. His resurrection is proof that His teaching can be trusted.

Jeremiah 15:16:

Your words were found, and I ate them,
And Your word was to me the joy and rejoicing of my heart;
For I am called by Your name,
O LORD God of hosts.

John 6:56:

He who eats My flesh and drinks My blood abides in Me, and I in him.

Psalms 34:8:

Oh, taste and see that the LORD is good;
Blessed is the man who trusts in Him!

The Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil represents our power to use knowledge selfishly. We use our knowledge of things to get good for ourselves regardless of others. We may still do good sometimes, but only when it works to our advantage. This leads to others going without, being taken advantage of, or outright harmed. This is how we spurn justice and forsake mercy. (Jonah 2:8, Micah 3:5, James 2:15-16)

This is an unsustainable way to live. In fact, it's the fast track to death. A person who devours his world but rarely provides for it, can't feast forever! That would be like expecting to get something out of your refrigerator that you never put in it. God could have created our world to be a cosmic free candy machine and watched us frolic around like fish in a fishbowl, but we would never learn to be His children that way.

Genesis 2:15:

Then the LORD God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to tend and keep it.

We're meant to care for creation, not destroy it.

Revelation 11:18:

The nations were angry, and Your wrath has come,
And the time of the dead, that they should be judged,
And that You should reward Your servants the prophets and the saints,
And those who fear Your name, small and great,
And should destroy those who destroy the earth.

Even though we are a long way from Eden, we still choose which tree we will eat from every day. Remember the old saying, "You are what you eat?" Our job is to make a choice. Which tree will we tend to? Will we choose the logic that leads to eternal life, or the logic that gives us pleasure and power today and leaves us all empty tomorrow? The tree we choose is ultimately our master. (John 8:44-47, Matthew 5:43-45)

This day, life and death are set before you. Choose life, that you and your children may live. (Deuteronomy 30:19)

Our Father in heaven,

We come before you today for strength to make the choices you would have us make. We want to be worthy to be called your children. We want to be worthy of your Son, Jesus the Messiah. Lord, it's in Mark 14:38, you told us that you know our spirit is willing, but our flesh is weak. We pray that the joy of walking with you would override our desire to hold on to anything this world offers us. May the joy of unity with the Lord be our strength. In Jesus' mighty name we pray, Amen.

The Tree of Life - Two Trees, Part 2

"Greater love has no one than this, than to lay down one's life for his friends. You are My friends if you do whatever I command you." (John 15:13-14)

In the garden of Eden, the Tree of Life represented our ever-present Helpful Higher Power. Like a nursing mother, this Tree was always ready to respond to our needs because of God's design. We were made dependent on this blessed Tree in order to teach us thankfulness for God's love. Even today, it's God's will that we admire sacrificial love and desire to emulate it.

In every child we're blessed to raise, we see how they respond to dependency. Some are thankful for help, and experience fulfillment when they become old enough to help their family in return. Some feel entitled and become resentful if they experience any discomfort while waiting for their needs to be met. Some don't appreciate help and may even pretend they don't need it. (Proverbs 20:11)

If we thankfully accepted help in childhood, the parables in nature are easier to see. Thankful acceptance is the key that unlocks the parable of the Sower. (Luke 8:4-8, Luke 8:9-21) Thankful people are likely to call out to God because intuition tells them there must be a source of love behind their caretaker's design.

When we lose sight of the days we needed a helpful higher power, we don't take time to appreciate or learn from our Creator. We fail to be thankful for God's provision and protection. Without the foundational truth that man's existence depends on the strong aiding the weak, we cannot desire to grow up to be like Him. (Proverbs 4:19, Matthew 6:22-23, Matthew 7:3-5) We risk never discovering and fulfilling our purpose to become strong and strengthen others while we can. (Mark 4:30-33, Matthew 13:38, Deuteronomy 15:7-18, Psalm 1) We will forsake the blessing in supporting our parents. (Exodus 20:12, Mark 7:8-13) We will resent our own children. (Ezekiel 16:43-49)

To receive God's logic of "love your neighbor as yourself," we have to first accept love as a higher calling than self. (Proverbs 4:5-7, Proverbs 23:22-23, Romans 13:10) This is how we "eat from the Tree of Life," making truth part of ourselves. (Zephaniah 3:13, Proverbs 27:18) If we believe that we deserve more than others, or that those who support us are fools and schlemiels who deserve to be used for our advantage, we can never become a life-supporting, fruitful tree. (Jeremiah 17:7-11, Luke 14:28-35)

Jesus was sent to show us how to love and forgive. (1 Peter 2:21, John 13:5-15, Ephesians 5:2, Ephesians 5:25-30) Remembering Jesus is how we're going to win this battle. "We love because He first loved us." (1 John 4:19-21)

John 15:15-17:

"No longer do I call you servants, for a servant does not know what his master is doing; but I have called you friends, for all things that I heard from My Father I have made known to you.

You did not choose Me, but I chose you and appointed you that you should go and bear fruit, and that your fruit should remain, that whatever you ask the Father in My name, He may give you.

These things I command you, that you love one another."

Our Father in heaven, we acknowledge you as our Helpful Higher Power. We're so thankful for your provision and protection, your guidance and direction. Help us to forsake everything that keeps us from a deeper connection to you. Cause your holy seed of truth to grow in our hearts, so we can bear the fruit of love for those in need. In Jesus' name we pray, Amen.

From the Garden of Eden to the Garden of Gethsemane - Two Trees, part 3

Life is a classroom. This is its purpose. The lesson is that we can never choose even a little unfairness and expect it to produce something heavenly. (Galatians 6:7) Every moral choice has a set of laws governing it. (Deuteronomy 30:19-20) What we sow in others, we will reap. If we produce love, joy, peace and patience for our world, we're like a Tree of Life. This is how we sow into eternity. (Galatians 5:22-25) If the "fruit of our lips" is laced with lies that get us an unfair advantage, we've used our knowledge of good and evil like the Serpent in Eden. When what we sow into this life is death for others, we reap death. (Luke 16:25, Proverbs 18:20-21, Hosea 10:13, 1 Corinthians 15:33)

As infants, the laws that govern us are natural laws. We hunger and experience pain and gravity. We have to depend on someone else for our needs. Trust, patience, and thankfulness, are coping skills we learn in order to develop inner peace. If we cannot trust our parents to take care of us, it complicates things in the next phase of life and beyond.

As a youth, the law is set by nature and our parents. We've learned that things go better for us if we try not to break natural laws. We must discover and act on ways to deal with our parents' needs and nature. If they want the lights off at 7:00 pm, we had better leave them off. We go wherever they take us regardless of our desires. We don't understand their needs or boundaries, but we're better off following their instructions regarding them. We don't want to be caught breaking parental laws purposefully, but we don't know them all. We still feel restricted from things we think we want, and hurt by things we don't understand. It makes graduating from this class a little harder. We graduate as we are able to earn the trust, patience and thankfulness of others. This is earned by our obedience and contributions to our family. (Jeremiah 35, Proverbs 20:11)

As teens, we find places to use our God-given skills, and the skills taught to us by others. We may or may not choose to repay God and our teachers by using our skills for their intended purpose. We may understand that our gifts get us good things, and make room for us in the world, but most teens don't realize that our talents can be used to connect spiritually with others and with our Creator. (Psalm 119:9) The natural and parental laws are now accompanied by civil laws. If we break the laws of our land, we may end up in jail.

Adulthood, for most of us, allows us to choose things that seemingly defy laws without suffering harm; such as creating daylight after dark with a light switch, or flying in a plane to another country in less than an hour. Now, not only do we have fewer unpleasant run-ins with Mother Nature, we understand her laws and make them work for us in ways we never could before. This is a result of having lived according to the laws we're aware of long enough to understand them. This allows us to follow the law gladly. Gravity doesn't incite rebellion when we know how to live in tandem with it. (John 8:32) If at some point in our youth we had decided that our lack of flight capability was too restrictive and so decided to jump off a building, we might not have made it this far. (Matthew 4:5-7, Proverbs 30:17)

The issue mankind has today is that our power over nature has gone to our head. We've left the Creator's classroom to get more power over creation. Instead of looking to God for the next set of laws and lessons (the Tree of Life lessons), we've stolen the family car (our body made in the image of God, Mark 12:15-17, 1 Corinthians 6:19, 2 Corinthians 6:16). We've

driven ourselves under the tree of *man's* knowledge of good and evil (science, attractiveness, money, pleasure, whatever we want more power over), and there we have parked the car, feeding our minds with the carnal fruit of this Tree of Knowledge until further notice. (Hosea 12:1, James 5:1-5, Mark 8:36) A lot of us claim to know God, and how to retain power over our free will, but many of us haven't seen anyone take God's class, much less graduate from it. (Matthew 11:28-30, Luke 14:26-33, Isaiah 44:18-22, Acts 2:37-40) We may not believe there even is a class available to us, or that we need it. God's classroom in Eden is still awaiting us to come back from recess. (Psalm 119:100-102, Matthew 20:6-10, Hosea 14:8, Isaiah 50:4)

Jeremiah 31:33-34 tells us that our Father has chosen to unite us with Himself through His word, by writing it on our hearts. This final class is attained by accepting and working with authority. It's how we prove we can be trusted to use God's knowledge unselfishly. God's lessons are what we need to be prepared for the final test of life; a faithful death. We will find our Gethsemane; our opportunity to lay down our lives for our friends, if we will keep faithfully trusting God's ways more than our own. (Isaiah 55:6-13, John 15:13, 1 Peter 4:7-19)

1 Peter 4:7-10:

7 But the end of all things is at hand; therefore be serious and watchful in your prayers.

8 And above all things have fervent love for one another, for "love will cover a multitude of sins."

9 Be hospitable to one another without grumbling.

10 As each one has received a gift, minister it to one another, as good stewards of the manifold grace of God.

Learning to be like our Master - Two Trees, part 4

"He who tends the fig tree will eat its fruit, and the one who serves his Master will be honored." (Proverbs 27:18)

"A disciple is not above his teacher, but everyone who is perfectly trained will be like his teacher." (Luke 6:40)

Being made in God's image is like living a parable. While we are babes in spiritual matters, the milk of His instruction is the surplus for our deficit. (1 Peter 2:2, 1 Corinthians 3:1, 2 Corinthians 12:9, Proverbs 3:11-18) We grow to be more like our Father when we let Him feed our Spirit and conscience with His logic. (Psalm 82:6, John 10:33-36, Psalm 119:100, Proverbs 28:5, Matthew 10:25, Romans 12:1-2)

God's wisdom is available to us through His living word. (Deuteronomy 18:14-20, Matthew 13:10-13, Luke 8:18, Luke 16:27-31)

God's wisdom can also come through godly people in authority over us. (2 Kings 6:1-3, 2 Kings 2:3-5, 1 Peter 2:13-17)

Acceptance of our need for God's authority is vital if we're going to learn from our Master. Too often we head out for recess and fail to get back to our studies! He invites us back into His classroom for our benefit. (Matthew 11:29-30, Jeremiah 6:16) God's guidance also protects the wellbeing of those we give guidance to. (Deuteronomy 30:1-6, John 13:5-17, Galatians 4:1-7)

His lessons teach us to mature into what we were made to be; children of God. (Jeremiah 3:19, Matthew 5:43-45, John 16:25-27)

We may not understand His laws right away. We may feel unreasonably restricted by them at first. Trust, patience and thankfulness will help us obey Him long enough to learn why His laws are necessary. We can only learn from the laws we live by. Obedience comes first. Once we're fully trained, our work is to lovingly create equality. (Deuteronomy 15:7-10, Luke 3:10-11, Proverbs 19:17, Matthew 25:31-46, Acts 4:34-35, 2 Corinthians 8:13-14, Philippians 4:3)

We are meant to be a helpful force, empowered by our Helpful Higher Power. (Isaiah 50:4, Psalm 89:24, Mark 9:37-39, Luke 3:7-14)

Evening is approaching! How far are we from completing our training? I don't want to be found on the playground when it's time for finals! (Exodus 32:34, Deuteronomy 32:35, Matthew 20:8, Matthew 22:1-3, Romans 2:5-6, 2 Corinthians 5:10)

As believers, we may spend so much time trying to learn from other people, that we forget we can go straight to the source; God's living Word! Alternately, we may spend so much time trying to learn from other people how to overcome our worldly obstacles, physically, medically, or financially, that we neglect our purpose of learning to walk in the Spirit and overcome our fallen nature. When we do this, we're only treating the symptoms and neglecting the underlying disease. (Ezekiel 18:31, John 1:1-5)

I mean, think about it; if all our knowledge only enables us to live forever in a cruel, heartless world, eternal life will not be worth living. (2 Timothy 3:1-13, 2 Peter 3:1-12, Genesis 3:22-23)

God has made promises to those who return to Him. That is, if we will come to Him on His beautiful terms. God's terms are, "Love your neighbor as yourself, but not more than Me." (Matthew 5:40-45, Matthew 12:46-50, 1 Peter 1:22, Jeremiah 15:16-19, Luke 14:26-27)

God is Love, so this makes sense! (1 John 4:7-8, Jonah 4:2)

He promises that He will show the secrets of the universe to those He can trust to love. (Psalm 119:100, Daniel 2:22, Psalm 25:14, Proverbs 3:31-32, Matthew 13:11)

He will cause us to transcend nature farther than we could ever imagine. (John 14:12, Numbers 11:29, Joel 2:28-30)

He will make a covenant with us for eternity by giving us eternal bodies and an eternal home without war, sickness, or sorrow. (Isaiah 33:20-24, Isaiah 35:1-10, John 10:26-29, John 17:1-4, 1 John 5:11-20)

TL,DR "Field Guide":

The best thing we can do as teens and adults is ask God to be our Teacher and then open our Biblical Textbook. (Isaiah 30:15-23, John 1:1-4)

This is how we learn to "bear good fruit" for our Creator. (Song 4:16, John 15:1-5)

The worst thing we can do is to selfishly use all the good He provides for us and never pay it forward. (Matthew 21:19, Matthew 18:33, 1 Samuel 2:29, Luke 16:18-26, Revelation 11:18)

Our purpose is to become a Tree of Life to our world. We unite with our Creator in order to become a surplus for the deficits of others. (Proverbs 19:17, 1 Corinthians 12:20-25, Luke 3:8-11, Luke 14:21-23, Matthew 25:23, Job 29:11-17, Numbers 8:3, Luke 11:33, Matthew 5:14-16)

Jesus Christ is our best example of how this is done. (Luke 9:23, Hebrews 12:2, Isaiah 53)

Once we are trustworthy with the blessings we have now, we can safely be trusted with more, and in the end, trusted with eternity. (Luke 16:11-18, Hebrews 9:28)

This study was a little extra long because we were right at the end and I didn't want to leave off without a bit of "field guide" to get us rolling. These are promises we can trust in, hope for and live by. "Faith comes through hearing and hearing through the word of God!"

Thanks for your patience with all the verse references. Most are there to back up my statements, and some were just too good of a parallel to leave out.

May God richly bless us with faith to live out these truths so that His kingdom is glorified through us, whether we live for Him or die for Him. In Jesus' name, Amen.

The Significance of Baptism

Psalm 78 alludes to the idea that Israel's history is a parable. These parables reveal spiritual truths.

Water is often associated with God's cleansing logic, which we receive from the Word of God. In baptism, we see two things going on. We have to be cleansed by this spiritual water, but we also must be pulled out by someone else. This person in the parable, represents God.

In our human frailty, we're not capable of survival under the water. We must prepare to rise above it by listening to God's instruction. This is what Noah did when he built the Ark. It's what Moses' mother did when she created an ark before placing Moses in the Nile. These events were both a symbolic baptism into a new life.

The Red Sea crossing was the baptism of the nation of Israel. They were made worthy to come through the Red Sea because they were fleeing from slavery to sin. The advent of John the Baptist's ministry marked the beginning of the Messianic age. The world will be cleansed of sin, either by the water of the Word or by the fire of judgment at the end of the age.

God will receive anyone who turns from their sins. He also will not receive anyone who refuses to turn from willful sin. Hearing God's Word and receiving it as truth brings us sorrow over our sins. If we reach out for God to heal us from our slavery to sin, He will wash us from its hold and guilt, and bring us out of death into new life in Christ. This is what it means to be "saved by baptism."

1 Peter 3:18-21:

Christ suffered for our sins once for all time. He never sinned, but he died for sinners to bring you safely home to God.

He suffered physical death, but he was raised to life in the Spirit

So he went and preached to the spirits in prison—

those who disobeyed God long ago when God waited patiently while Noah was building his boat.

Only eight people were saved from drowning in that terrible flood.

And that water is a picture of baptism, which now saves you, not by removing dirt from your body, but as an appeal to God for a clean conscience.

It is effective because of the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

I think this study shows that whether we practice infant or adult baptism, we're showing a willingness to live by God's Word in order to prepare for eternity.

May truth bring us peace and unity in the body of Christ.

Water of the Word

"For as the rain comes down, and the snow from heaven, and does not return there, but waters the earth, making it bring forth and bud, that it may bring seed to the sower and bread to the eater: So shall My word be that goes forth from My mouth. It will not return to me without accomplishing what I please, and without prospering in the thing that I sent it for." (Isaiah 55:10)

"Now you are clean through the word which I have spoken unto you." (John 15:3)

When I look at the parallels between water and the word of God all throughout the Bible, I can't help but be compelled to believe that nature is a parable in itself. (Isaiah 45:8, Romans 1:20)

Ephesians 5:25-26 says, "Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church, and gave Himself for it, so that he might sanctify and cleanse it with the washing of water by the word." It's the truth of God's word that makes us free from the desire to sin, just as a person who washes their hands is not eager to get them dirty again. Clean hands and a pure heart bring us near to God in a way nothing else can. (Psalm 24:3-5, James 4:8) When we're cleansed from sin, we have the faith to believe He will hear us. (John 9:31, Psalm 4:3)

What's beautiful about our Creator is that He never holds us responsible for things we don't know, until we do know them. (John 15:22, Leviticus 4:13-14) It's not that the truth isn't there, we're just not grown-up enough to be held accountable to it. Thankfully, God listens to sinners all the time, just not willful sinners. (Matthew 9:10-13, John 9:31, Psalm 66:18) When we discover our need for washing, but refuse it, that's when God goes silent. (Proverbs 1:28-30, Matthew 7:22-23) That isn't to say that all silence from God is due to the rebellion of man. Sometimes God has to step back and see if we will choose Him over our flesh, even when there's no immediate reward. (Job 23:8-12) It strengthens our endurance and our character to exercise our faith. (Romans 5:3-5, Psalm 119:74-77)

To be righteous is to be "square" with God and man. (Mark 1:3, Proverbs 9:9) If we thirst to be righteous, we can go to the water of God's word and discover what true equality looks like. Jesus said, "If I had not come and spoken to them, they would not have sin. But now they have no cloak for their sin." (John 15:22) God's word reveals just how much higher His ways are than ours, so we can get in line with the rest of creation and give our Creator and our fellow man the love they deserve. (Isaiah 55:9, Mark 4:39-41)

Jesus said, "Whatever you've done for the least of these, my brethren, you've done for Me." (Matthew 25:37-40, Proverbs 19:17) As far as I can tell, the thing that keeps devout Christians from loving as much as we're called to, is fear. We fear to give our second coat away to him who has none, because, "What if God doesn't come through for us?" We fear to visit the sick because we might catch something. We cannot serve God if we're living in fear. Fear is the devil's grab for power over your mind. Faith comes through hearing the Word of God above all the noise of the devil, the flesh and the world. (Romans 10:17, Proverbs 8:1-4)

We each have a calling on our lives in the Water of God's Word. We can choose to let it sit in front of us until it's stagnant or we can drink it while it's fresh in our minds. Don't let the desire to do a good deed pass you by! The opportunity may not come again.

Jeremiah 15:19:

Therefore thus says the LORD:

“If you turn back to Me,

Then I will guide you again;

and you shall stand before Me.

If you take out the precious from the vile,

You shall be as My mouth.

Let them return to you,

but you must not return to them.”

The Red Sea Crossing - Baptism of a Nation

"Moreover, brethren, I do not want you to be unaware that all our fathers were under the cloud, all passed through the sea, all were baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea."
(1 Corinthians 10:1-2)

The account of the Red Sea Crossing, when Moses led the people of Israel out of Egypt, is a metaphor of the struggles we each must face to break free from habitual sin. (Psalm 78:1-13, 1 Corinthians 10:1-4)

Israel spent 400 years in a foreign land. It began as freedom from hunger, and ended in unbearable slavery. In the same way, we may take too much comfort from beneficial things only to find we've let their influence cross the boundaries of common sense. (Proverbs 14:12, 1 Peter 4:3-5) Each one of us has a personal Egypt to face that keeps us enslaved to a cruel master. Our master may be a pseudo-need we created for ourselves, like an addiction. It may be a legitimate need that we're so afraid of not having met, that we'll go against the Golden Rule to ensure our own comfort. (Matthew 6:31-34, Psalm 37:4)

Even when we make up our minds to escape our personal Egypt, we can't always break free. That's the scary truth about sin - it won't always let you go just because you want rid of it. (Romans 7:22-25, John 8:34, Jeremiah 2:25) Sin always provides a quick fix at first, but the more our load in one area is lightened, the harder it gets to support the things that will truly fulfill us.

The people of Israel were giving up everything in order to stay where the food came easily. (Exodus 1:22, Exodus 2:23-25) When they were finally ready to leave Egypt behind, God sent Moses and the power of His Holy Spirit to lead them out. They survived the plagues only by obedience. Even the Egyptians who listened to the God of Israel were spared. (Exodus 9:18-21) Many Egyptians left with them when they were finally set free. (Exodus 12:37-38) Our lives are the evidence the world needs to "taste and see that the Lord is good." (Psalm 34:2-8)

Trying to break free from fear or addiction can lead us straight into a wilderness. Without God's power, it can even look like a dead end. Just as the Egyptians chased after Israel, our old ways can sneak up on us when we feel helpless and hopeless. (Luke 11:24-26, Proverbs 26:11) But just as obedience got the people out of Egypt, listening to God's logic of love can make a way for us into our personal Promised Land. (John 8:34-36, Psalm 19:7-9) As Christians, we understand baptism to symbolize the washing away of our old life so we can enter new life empowered by our Messiah. (Psalm 51:7-10, 1 Peter 3:21) The nation of Israel saw the waters part for them and trusted God to keep them parted until they made it through.

Whatever we have to leave behind to discover God's best for us will be worth it in the end. Don't give up the struggle, and don't let go of the lover of your soul. If we just hang onto God, we got this. (Jude 1:24-25, Isaiah 41:10)

Oxen and Donkeys - Biblical imagery and its relevance today

"You will not plow with an ox and a donkey together." (Deuteronomy 22:10)

Jesus told us in Matthew 11:29-30, "Take my yoke upon you, and learn from Me, for I am humble and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls, for My yoke is easy and my burden is light." I find this to be a very profound statement, in that this is how oxen are trained to pull a plow. A very strong yet very humble animal who's also used in the Old Testament to represent God (the word "god" in ancient Hebrew literally being a picture of an ox and a shepherd's staff). Jesus is clearly describing His deity and His position as ruler/servant in a way every Jew could understand. (Mark 10:24-25) He wants to teach us to love, and love makes keeping the law very easy because love naturally does no harm to a neighbor. (Romans 13:10)

Each of us has an inner ox and an inner donkey. "For they that are after the flesh do mind the things of the flesh; but they that are after the Spirit the things of the Spirit." Romans 8:5

Jesus said, "No man can serve two masters. He will hate the one and love the other, or he will hold to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and riches." (Matthew 6:24) Our spiritual mind is set on eternity. To plow with my inner ox means I want to plant seeds of righteousness and equality in myself and my fellow man, trusting that the Lord will grow us up to be like Him. My fleshly mind is set on ensuring my physical needs are met. To plow with my inner donkey is to work to make money, and to be comfortable in this life, which sets me up for temptation to see my fellow man as the competition rather than my brother in the Lord.

Jesus taught us that if we will seek His kingdom first, He will take care of all our physical needs. (Matthew 6:25-33) For a long time, I believed that God still wanted to meet my physical needs through my actions, and certainly God gives us the power to create wealth. (Deuteronomy 8:18) What I've come to realize though, is that when my mind is fixed on the spiritual, I don't need to worry about my needs anymore. If I go out of my way to work solely for money, it's so I have enough to support someone who can't support themselves. This puts my inner donkey squarely in submission under the Lord, where he belongs. (Matthew 21:5) What better way to show God's love to another is there, than to help meet their pressing needs?

Titus 3:14:

Our people must also learn to engage in good deeds to meet pressing needs, so that they will not be unfruitful.

James 1:27:

Pure and undefiled religion in the sight of our God and Father is this: to visit the fatherless and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world.

Proverbs 19:17:

One who gives to a poor person lends to the LORD,
And He will repay him for his good deed.

Spiritual Gardening: A field guide to weed defense

*"Do not be deceived: God is not mocked. For whatever a man sows, he will also reap."
(Galatians 6:7)*

Without a sense of holiness, we humans have a hard time defining sin, so we have a hard time staying out of it. We think we can go on through life moving the fences that define healthy boundaries, when we don't have God's strength to enforce them. Did you ever see a working government without an army and a police force? A law is only as strong as the power behind it. Many relationships today are crumbling because two people decide their own rules of their covenant and then one decides against keeping those rules. When two people are committed to keeping the devil from coming between them, they stay inside God's laws so God will guard their relationship and keep them together.

God's laws are safe boundaries made to keep the devil out of our lives, our children's lives and our world. They work like fences that keep wolves out of a sheepfold, or foxes out of a vineyard. When we're inside the boundaries of what God has set apart for Himself, we have His protection.

When you think about a garden, you notice all sorts of safety measures being carried out so you can grow the special things you want to have on your dinner plate. The fence guards your garden from predators. You might set up a scarecrow or some pie plates to scare them off while you're away as well. A water system protects your plants from drought. You purposefully add some fertilizer so your garden has nourishment regardless of the quality of the land you have. Scheduled weeding and pest control ensures that all your energy isn't wasted and sucked up by invasive plants and bugs that will choke your precious garden and keep it from bearing fruit.

This is what God is doing in our lives. Our hearts are holy to Him. They are His garden.

The fence He sets up is the law of love and forgiveness. His scarecrow is His wrath against injustice.

His water system is His Word.

He makes our hearts more fertile by allowing us to experience the consequences of sin, whether it be the sins of others or our own sins. We can't help but want to produce good when we understand why evil is bad.

When God weeds worldly junk out of our lives, it's because it is decidedly not beneficial to us in the long run. A lot of our losses are not God's doing, as we can see from the parable of the wheat and the tares. God does not often take people from us. He is patient, not wanting anyone to perish but to have all men come to repentance.

God has given us the institutions of marriage and family so we can relate to, and participate in His work. Whatever we sow into the hearts of our family members is what we've chosen to grow in our lives. We never expect to pull something out of the refrigerator that was never put in.

The best place to start is to sow the hearts of our spouse and children with love and forgiveness. If we protect that investment by enforcing boundaries that expect our family to

respect each other's needs; if we water them with God's Word on a regular basis; if we allow them to learn from the consequences of their sins, yet use those times as opportunities to build them up to do better in the future; when we weed out the intrusions that keep our families from being drained by the world at large, we've done the work of God.

Just enjoying a nightly meal together without any media gives you an opportunity to see how your family is really doing, not just how they say they're doing. In my experience, kids know their parents better than anyone, and parents barely know their kids at all. Let's change that today. We are the guardians of God's will in their lives. We can unite with God's strength by doing things God's way inside God's fences.

May the truth in love guide us to unity in Christ.

Has the devil trapped you in a spiritual prison?

Our spiritual prisons are those conditions we find ourselves stuck in because of sin. It might be our own sin, another person's sin, or an outright attack of the devil.

Our Savior, Jesus, taught us that sin makes us a slave of the devil. He is the father of lies. We need truth to set us free.

John 8:34-36:

"Whoever commits sin is the slave of sin, and the slave doesn't live in the house forever, but the son inherits the house. If the son makes you free, you become truly free."

There are four great truths that can bring us out of our spiritual prisons:

1. Our prison is killing us: it's unsustainable because it harms us, and those around us. We are spiritually physically, mentally or socially in chains. Our prison may also be ruining our emotions, finances, marriage, ability to parent, and ability to produce spiritual "good fruit" for others. (Galatians 5:16-25) This first truth is the one that drives us to rock-bottom. It's the one that makes us look to God for help.

"For her house leads down to death, and her paths to the dead." (Proverbs 2:18)

"As righteousness leads to life, so he who pursues evil pursues it to his own death." (Proverbs 11:19)

2. Our prison is a demonic stronghold that has taken us captive on every level; soul, spirit and body. We can be set free from it by the power of God's Word, the Holy Spirit, and prayerful fasting. Fasting from our sin, and fasting from things that distract us from prayer, are both beneficial.

"So then as Christ has suffered for us in the flesh, arm yourselves likewise with the same mind: for he that has suffered in the flesh has ceased from sin." (1 Peter 4:1)

3. We have the authority of Jesus Christ to renounce the sin that is enslaving us. We are directed to pray for deliverance from perverse and evil men, as well as from demonic strongholds. If the Lord says we can pray for it, we can also trust Him to answer that prayer.

4. When there is nothing we can do to remedy our situation because of our oppressors, we can be thankful for what we still have and work to hold on to it. Our kindness, our good character, our sanity, our relationship with our Creator; these are things no man can take from us. Proverbs 18:14 says, "The spirit of a man will sustain him in sickness, But who can bear a broken spirit?"

When we're stuck in prisons of our own making, the wisest thing to do is correct our words and actions in the hope of being released early for good behavior.

Daniel 4:27:

"Let my advice be acceptable to you; break off your sins by being righteous, and your iniquities by showing mercy to the poor. Perhaps there may be a lengthening of your prosperity."

Proverbs 16:6:

"In mercy and truth atonement is provided for iniquity;
And by the fear of the LORD one departs from evil."

Jeremiah 18:8:

"If the nation which I (the Lord) have spoken against turns from its evil, I will relent of the disaster that I thought to bring upon it."

Luke 11:41:

"Instead (of giving alms of temporary value) give of those things you have within (love, fairness and mercy); then indeed all things are clean to you."

Matthew 10:27-28:

"What I tell you in darkness, that speak ye in light: and what ye hear in the ear, that publish ye upon the house tops. And fear not them who kill the body, but are not able to kill the soul: but rather fear him who is able to destroy both soul and body in hell."

The unforgiving servant in Matthew 18:32-33 was released from the prospect of prison when his Lord forgave his debt. He proved unworthy of the mercy he was shown because he didn't pay it forward. Instead, he used his freedom to build a case for prison against his neighbor.

Isaiah 58:5-7 helps us understand that fasting is supposed to be a self-imposed prison for envy and our appetites. (1 Corinthians 7:1-5) It should restrain all self-serving behavior for the purpose of replacing temporary pleasures with eternal pursuits, and drawing near to God. Removing food from our day and then going about fleshly business as usual only redirects our selfish appetites and does nothing for our fellow man, our relationship with God, or our spiritual growth.

The goal of breaking free from our spiritual prisons, is a good one. It's not the end of the road, though. We're still sheep in need of a shepherd so the wolves of the world don't eat us alive! Praise God, we have a Great Shepherd who is ready, willing and able to guide us safely home.

John 17:18-23:

As You sent Me into the world, I also have sent them into the world.

And for their sakes I sanctify Myself, that they also may be sanctified by the truth.

I do not pray for these alone, but also for those who will believe in Me through their word;

that they all may be one, as You, Father, are in Me, and I in You; that they also may be one in Us, that the world may believe that You sent Me.

And the glory which You gave Me I have given them, that they may be one just as We are one:

I in them, and You in Me; that they may be made perfect in one, and that the world may know that You have sent Me, and have loved them as You have loved Me.

Do you want to tell your secular friends about God's love for them, but you don't know how?

"The fruit of the righteous is a tree of life, and the wise person wins souls." (Proverbs 11:30)

I've been working on this study for several years. When my son asked me this question, and I needed a refresher course, we pulled it out of hiding and decided to share it here. I remember being really surprised that the outline looked a lot like a speech writing class I had long ago, but not at all in the way I expected. The main points were ethos, pathos, and logos, but instead of requiring a lot of inspection of my audience, sharing the good news of God's love takes a massive amount of introspection. I have to "get the beam out of my own eye," before I can help anyone else remove whatever "speck" is blocking their view of God's love.

To establish ethos is to identify where you have common ground, and to meet people as one of them, not as a "leader." To do this right, we have to be 100% real. If I can't identify with the person I'm talking to, or if I think I'm better than them, I am not ready for this job. The Apostle Paul tells us that God had arranged his life in such a way that he was equipped for the work he felt called to do.

1 Corinthians 9:18-22:

What is my reward then? That when I preach the good news, I may make the good news of Christ without charge, so that I do not abuse my power in the Gospel. For though I am free from all men, yet I have made myself a servant to all, that I might gain the more.

Unto the Jews, I came as a Jew, that I might gain the Jews. To them that are under the law, as under the law, that I might gain them that are under the law. To them that are without law, as without law, not that I am without law toward God, but that I am under the law to Christ, so that I might gain those who live without the law (of Moses). To the weak I was made weak, that I might gain the weak. I have been made all things to all men, that I might by all means save some.

Peter adds to our job description by informing us that humility will bring us nearer to God and make Him part of our plans. (1 Peter 5:1-5, Numbers 12:3) We can't do anything without Him, so having Him along for the ride is everything, Amen?

If we approve of envy and hypocrisy, we're not ready to take on the mission of witnessing to our friends. James tells us that our words won't represent our Savior if we have these kinds of inner conflicts in our heart.

James 3:12-16:

12 Can the fig tree, my brothers, bear olive berries? either a vine, figs? so can no fountain both yield salt water and fresh.

13 Who is a wise man and endued with knowledge among you? let him show out of a good conversation his works with meekness of wisdom.

14 But if you have bitter envying and strife in your hearts, glory not, and lie not against the truth.

15 This wisdom descends not from above, but is earthly, sensual, devilish.

16 For where envying and strife is, there is confusion and every evil work.

Matthew 10:16:

Behold, I send you forth as sheep in the midst of wolves. Therefore, be wise as serpents and harmless as doves.

Pathos - in speech writing, this would be to "pull on the heart strings" of the person you're talking to. But in witnessing, it's having your heart strings pulled by the love of the Creator. We're driven by the beauty of our Messiah's sacrificial love, which we were shown at His crucifixion. When we can redirect our hearts to understand the kind of compassion God has for the unsaved, we equip ourselves to show that compassion to them. (Romans 5:1-5) The best example of this is the Good Samaritan. According to Jesus' words in Luke 10:33-35, the Good Samaritan was fully equipped to care for the needs of others in every way. When his conscience called on him to save the half-dead Jewish man at the side of the road, he stopped everything to fulfill his calling, even though in all likelihood the man would not have done the same for the Samaritan in return. This reminds me of the verse in 1 Corinthians 13:4-8 which says, "love does not seek its own."

Last of all, logos is an appeal to logic. In order to share good logic, we have to have good logic. The Bible describes God's logic behind His acts of love toward us as justice and mercy. Justice and mercy work together to support and defend life in the presence of those who choose death. Our God-given conscience is an innate sense of justice and mercy. The way we show we've accepted our Creator's logic is by being people who uphold the truth in love. As long as the person we're witnessing to still has their conscience intact, they have a heart that can be prepared to receive truth when it's spoken in love.

In Hosea 10:12 we're given this command:

"Sow to yourselves in righteousness; reap in mercy. Break up your fallow ground, for it's time to seek the Lord, until He comes and rains righteousness on you."

He's showing us how to get ourselves right. Once we know how to do that, we're like a beggar who can tell another beggar where to find bread.

To "reap in mercy" is to bring others into the Kingdom with us. We prepare to do this by being mindful that we're all sinners in need of mercy. That way, we can humbly, compassionately share the good news with sinners as one of them.

Romans 3:23:

For all have sinned, and fall short of the glory of God.

Ecclesiastes 7:20:

For there is not a just man upon earth, who does good and never sins.

Jesus' parable of the steward of unrighteousness shows us that our forgiveness of others is the final step in reaping with mercy. To forgive the debts owed you will cost you something, but it makes you rich toward God.

Luke 16:5-10:

5 So he called every one of his lord's debtors unto him, and said to the first, "How much do you owe my lord?"

6 And he said, "A hundred measures of oil."" And he said to him, "Take your bill and sit down quickly, and write fifty."

7 Then he said to another, "And how much do you owe?" And he said, "A hundred measures of wheat." And he said unto him, "Take your bill and write eighty."

8 And the lord commended the unjust steward, because he had done wisely. For the children of this world are in their generation wiser than the children of light.

9 And I say unto you, make friends for yourselves with the mammon of unrighteousness, that when you fail, they may receive you into everlasting habitations.

The mammon of unrighteousness represents other people's debts to us. It's a false sense of superiority that drives us to bear the burden of the grudge we carry. This is a deceitful bag of riches, because we can't take it with us into eternity. Since Jesus already paid for the sins of the world, it's not really ours to claim. When we trade our entitlement to justice for the opportunity to show mercy, we represent Jesus' love to the world.

Luke 6:37:

"Judge not, and you will not be judged. Condemn not, and you will not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven."

Do you feel guilty about being excessive, but you don't know why?

*"And He humbled you and let you go hungry, and fed you with the manna which you did not know, nor did your fathers know, in order to make you understand that man shall not live on bread alone, but man shall live on everything that comes out of the mouth of the LORD."
(Deuteronomy 8:3)*

This is the scripture Jesus quoted while He was fasting. He was confronted with temptation to obey the devil and "turn stones to bread."

As our Messiah faced each temptation, He broke the hold this world had on His body. Temporary pleasures anchor us to this life and whittle away at our tolerance for temporary suffering. We are called to deal with stress and displeasure in order to learn how to make room for the needs of others. How can I give my second coat to the guy who has none, if I'm unwilling to deal with the prospect of being the least bit cold at some point? (Luke 3:11)

Proverbs 16:5:

"By mercy and truth iniquity is purged: and by the fear of the LORD men depart from evil."

Not everything God gives us is for us. When we have a surplus and use it for ourselves, we fail to discover where we were meant to plug into our community and be the relief for someone else's deficit.

Daniel 4:27:

"Therefore, O king, let my advice be acceptable to you; break off your sins by being righteous, and your iniquities by showing mercy to the poor. Perhaps there may be a lengthening of your prosperity."

Countless scriptures tell us that if we will turn from our sins, God won't have to correct us with punishment. The entire book of Jonah is one great example.

Luke 11:41:

"But give, as to the poor, the things that are within you, and you will see that everything is clean for you."

When we think of "the poor" we usually associate it with those who don't have the ability to earn a living. "The poor" who need what we have on the inside, are those who humbly seek our forgiveness; those who long for our compassion, those who depend on us for comfort and strength when hard times come.

Matthew 10:28:

"And do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. But rather fear Him who is able to destroy both soul and body in hell."

Cold and hunger are not our enemies. They're spiritual exercises that make us strong enough to carry our cross to the finish line.

To satisfy the debt of injustice there must be a sacrifice. How many times have you wished you could take your loved one's suffering so they could experience some relief? When you have an excess, you have an opportunity to give the living God some relief!

Matthew 25:40:

"And the King will answer and say to them, 'Truly I say to you, to the extent that you did it for one of the least of these brothers or sisters of Mine, you did it for Me.'"

Proverbs 19:17:

"Kindness to the poor is a loan to the LORD, and He will repay the lender."

Suffering through sacrifice teaches us the value of justice. When no one is suffering, instead of helping others avoid harm, we can help them share joy.

Nehemiah 8:10:

"Then Nehemiah told them, "Go and eat what is rich, drink what is sweet, and send out portions to those who have nothing prepared, since today is holy to our Lord. Do not grieve, for the joy of the LORD is your strength."

Esther 9:22:

"...On those days the Jews rid themselves of their enemies, and it was a month which was turned for them from grief into joy, and from mourning into a holiday; that they were to make them days of feasting and rejoicing, and sending portions of food to one another, and gifts to the poor."

We learn how to trade this temporary life for eternity when we sacrifice creature comforts for unity in community. (Matthew 13:44, Acts 4:37, Leviticus 17:11, Luke 12:17-21)

Ultimately, every path in life is a trade-off between the temporary flesh and the eternal spirit. (Genesis 13:8-12, Jeremiah 2:13, Luke 12:33, Proverbs 19:17)

John 15:13:

"Greater love has no one than this, than to lay down one's life for his friends."

Do you feel like you must be made for something more than the daily grind?

"He will not break a bruised reed, and He will not put out a smoldering wick." (Matthew 12:20)

Jesus taught us, in Matthew 25:40, that whatever we do to the least of His brothers and sisters, we've done to Him. When God sends someone new our way, are we often too busy, enamored, or distracted to remember to ask Him what they need? Did this person end up on our path because God trusted us to comfort them? Do they need help in some way?

James 2:14-17:

What good does it do, my brothers, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can faith save him?

If a brother or sister is not properly clothed and destitute of daily food,

and one of you says to them, "Go in peace, be warmed and filled," but you do not give them the things which are needed for the body, what does it profit?

Thus also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead.

It makes me tremble and pray when I'm given the opportunity to meet someone new. I think of the verses that say "the wise wins souls" and beg God to get me out of the way so He can use me to deliver the right words at the right time. We are called to be acutely aware of this delicate operation of the Spirit. We are invited to be a part of God's holy work. It's a serious moment when a surgeon is brought a case on which a life depends; or when a physician stands by a bedside to administer remedies for a critical illness. Do we dare neglect these far more serious moments, when a human soul is put into our hands to be relieved of the guilt of failure - or comforted through trials - or to have open wounds of the heart healed? We need divine skill, wisdom, patience, and guidance for such a sacred work. Only Christ can teach us how to deal with human lives, in their need and sorrow. He has a most gentle touch. Jesus alone has infinite skill to bind the wounds that sin or grief have made. He never breaks a bruised reed.

If we will commune with Him, listen to Him and stay with Him on His good path by loving each other from the heart, He will give us spiritual gifts for mending broken lives.

Isaiah 50:4-5:

The Lord GOD has given Me

The tongue of the learned,

That I should know how to speak

A word in season to him who is weary.

He awakens me morning by morning,

He awakens my ear

To hear as the learned.

The Lord GOD has opened my ear;

And I was not rebellious,
Nor did I turn away.

Do you wonder how to tell a truth teacher from a false teacher?

"When He (the Shepherd) has brought out all his own, he goes on ahead of them, and his sheep follow him because they know his voice. But they will never follow a stranger; in fact, they will run away from him because they do not recognize a stranger's voice." (John 10:4-5)

It is true of sheep in the Middle East, that while they quickly respond to their names when their own shepherd calls them, because they know his voice - yet if a stranger comes to the door of the fold and calls them by the same names, they will be alarmed and will turn and run. It ought to be so with Christ's sheep. We are called to be "quick to hear, slow to speak and slow to get angry." (James 1:19) We're wise to discern our own Shepherd's voice from the rest. We should also be able to detect any voice that is not our own Shepherd's.

The voices of strangers still fall continually upon the ears of Christ's friends. There are temptations which would lure us away from the simple truths of love, justice and mercy. Voices preaching pleasure and power tempt us to wander down paths of revenge, hatred, elitism and insatiable hungers - paths that end in sin and death.

As we stray into selfishness and independence from God, we encounter false guides who tell us we're blessed to be full now, to laugh now, to have all men speak well of us now. Yet Jesus our Messiah warned us in Luke 6:25-26:

Woe to you who are full now,
For you shall hunger.
Woe to you who laugh now,
For you shall mourn and weep.
Woe to you when all men speak well of you,
For so did their fathers to the false prophets.

The "prosperity gospel" to some, seems wiser than the path of selfless mercy. These foreign voices are wolves who want to turn the sheep away from the old, trustworthy paths, in order to fill their ravenous bellies.

Our inner sheep is not drawn out by these teachings; that's how we can know they are false. Our inner sheep, our conscience of how to love one another, is chased away by the voice of these foreign ideals. Every voice which is not known to be Christ's, should alarm the Christian, causing him to run quickly to his own Shepherd for shelter and protection. We need never be afraid when we hear his call, though it be in the darkness of sorrow or of trial.

Psalm 23:

The Lord is my Shepherd
I lack nothing I need
He makes me lie down in green pastures
He leads me beside quiet waters

He restores my soul and guides my path in righteousness
for the sake of His name.

Yes, even when I walk through the valley of the shadow of death

I will fear no evil

For You are with me

Your rod and your staff are a comfort to me

You prepare a table before me

in the presence of my enemies

and my cup overflows

Truly, love and mercy shall follow me

All the days of my life

and I will dwell in the house of the Lord

forever

Jesus of Nazareth has given you the power to call on God!

This has been an important holy day for my family. We're preparing for Yom Teruah and celebrating the Jewish New Year. Yom Teruah (Day of Trumpet Blasts, or Feast of Trumpets) isn't named specifically in the New Testament, but in Jesus' day, it was marked by a blast of the ram's horn (shofar) that alerted God's people to remember Him, wake up, pay attention, and repent before His judgment fell. Many messianic believers expect "the Ingathering of First Fruits" or "Rapture" to take place on a Yom Teruah. (Matthew 25:6) The day is understood to begin at the sighting of the first sliver of the moon after a New Moon. Interestingly, unlike other Jewish holy days, it isn't a day that is known until it shows up. (Matthew 24:50, Matthew 25:13)

This is Mark 13:32-37:

"But of that day and hour no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father.

Take heed, watch and pray; for you do not know when the time is.

It is like a man going to a far country, who left his house and gave authority to his servants, and to each his work, and commanded the doorkeeper to watch.

Watch therefore, for you do not know when the master of the house is coming - in the evening, at midnight, at the crowing of the rooster, or in the morning-

lest, coming suddenly, he find you sleeping.

And what I say to you, I say to all: Watch!"

The shofar is the topic of my study today. I wanted to share this study with you because it gave me hope and faith to call on God.

In the story of Abraham's willingness to sacrifice Isaac, God provides Himself a ram. (Genesis 22:1-8) The ram is caught in a thicket by his horns. Horns often symbolize power in Biblical writings. (Psalm 75:10, Psalm 89:17-24, Psalm 112:9) The ram is slain in the stead of Isaac. (Genesis 22:13, Psalm 34:22, John 3:13-17)

The shofar is the horn of a ram. The shofar is used to call on God for help in the day an army approaches to war with His people.

The shofar is sounded in battle-cries, (Joshua 6:13) (the word for "trumpet" used here is "shofar")

rejoicing, (Psalm 89:15) (the word "joyful sound" is "teruah," trumpet blasts)

and to proclaim a new King. (1 Kings 1:34, 2 Kings 9:13, 1 Corinthians 15:50-52)

The sacrificed ram is a foreshadowing of Jesus our Messiah; the lamb of God slain in our place. (John 1:29) His horn is now ours to carry. He has transmitted to His adherents the power to call on God for help because of the covenant made in His blood. (Leviticus 17:11, 1 Peter 1:18-21)

I encourage you to be inspired! I invite you to join us in listening to the shofar and calling on God today.

Luke 21:36:

Watch ye therefore, and pray always, that ye may be accounted worthy to escape all these things that shall come to pass, and to stand before the Son of man.

Do you ever wish for a map that could show you how to get closer to God?

I've been giving a lot of thought to the Bride of Christ these days. The Bible says we are the Bride and God is the Bridegroom. (Jeremiah 31:31-34, Hosea 2:16, John 3:29)

I worry for precious people in my life when I realize that Jesus didn't pay the bride-price of His flesh and blood just to build a kingdom of adulterers; He's preparing a pure Bride for Himself.

My Bible study last night was in John 2; Jesus' miracle of turning water to wine at a wedding. I want to share it with you today, because this miracle provides a road-map for uniting in covenant with God. It guides us to pursue faith, hope and love and then shows us how to cultivate these things in our hearts through thankfulness.

When Jesus turned the water to wine at the wedding in Cana of Galilee, He showed us several parables.

The cosmic wedding is the marriage of God to the earth - the union of Justice and Mercy. (Psalm 85)

Water for purification was the initial purpose of the stone pots. There are several interesting parallels here.

1. The stone pots held water, just as the stone tablets of Moses held the Law.
2. The stone pots represent our stony hearts which must first be filled with God's laws in order to fulfill their purpose. When we see the truth that justice must be tempered by mercy, we are ready to receive God's sacrifice. (Ezekiel 36:26, 2 Corinthians 3:3)
3. God's Word is the living water provided to us in order to fill our hearts and purify our minds, our words and our actions. (Jeremiah 2:13, Isaiah 55:10-11, John 1:1)
4. The people being married could not afford the wine required for the guests at their wedding. The blood of the grape is miraculously provided for everyone's joy, although they did nothing usual to produce it. They only obey by filling the pots. (Luke 10:38-42, Isaiah 55:1-3) In the same way, we cannot afford the price of blood in order to pay our debts to God and man. Our work is to put the Word of God in our hearts in faith that it will change us and make us right with God. (Romans 12:1-2, 1 Corinthians 1:18-24, 2 Corinthians 3:18, Psalm 73)
5. The water turned to wine foreshadows the gracious provision of Christ's sacrifice for us. Jesus is the Word of God made flesh. (John 1:14, Matthew 1:23, Isaiah 7:14)
6. Only a heart of flesh contains blood. A sacrifice provides blood for cleansing. This is why God chose for His Word to become flesh. God sacrificed His right to exact justice from us. Instead, He paid for our sins Himself. This is how He satisfied justice in order to show us mercy. We are promised a "heart of flesh" that will empower us to keep a new covenant. (Ezekiel 11:19 Ezekiel 36:26-27, Jeremiah 31:31-34)
7. Our thankfulness for Jesus' great sacrifice softens our hearts and writes His law of love within us. Those who love their neighbor as themselves, have no need to be told not to harm their neighbor. Our purification is complete when we rejoice in God's love and want to return that love. (Psalm 51:10, John 15:3)

8. Only by trusting in God's love and mercy will any man be found righteous in the day of Judgment. This is because we cannot always keep our side of the covenant unless we have complete faith in God to keep His part of it. (John 15:5, Psalm 34:8, Psalm 34:22, Hebrews 11:5-6, James 2:15-26, Psalm 119:97-105)
9. The wine of Communion helps us remember what we're thankful for. This keeps our love for Jesus alive in our hearts. It's love that keeps our heart alive even in a hurtful, cruel world. (Proverbs 4:23, Mark 7:21-23)

In conclusion:

Romans 10:17:

"Faith comes through hearing and hearing through the Word of God."

Proverbs 3:5:

"Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and do not rely on your own understanding.

Read God's Word so you'll know what you can trust Him to do and what He expects from uniting with you. Believe Him and live like you believe Him. That's how you get in covenant with God.

Romans 5:1-5:

"Therefore, having been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom also we have access by faith into this grace in which we stand, and rejoice in hope of the glory of God. And not only that, but we also glory in tribulations, knowing that tribulation produces perseverance; and perseverance, good character; and good character, hope.

Now hope does not disappoint, because the love of God has been poured out in our hearts by the Holy Spirit who was given to us.

Genesis 15:6:

"And He (Abraham) believed in the Lord, and He counted it to him for righteousness." (See also James 2:21-24)

God lets us go through hard times so we can be purified from bad reasoning, become strong for others, and so He can be glorified for His great love and power. Don't lose hope when things get tough. The junk you throw out makes room for God in your life.

Proverbs 10:12:

"Hatred stirs up strife, but love covers all sins."

1 Peter 4:8:

"And above all things have fervent love for one another, for 'love will cover a multitude of sins.'"

Love for God is deeply rooted in thankfulness. If we're not thankful for all Jesus gave up to pay for our sins, we won't love Him or anyone else like they deserve to be loved.

1 Thessalonians 5:18:

"In everything give thanks; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you." (See also Job 1:21)

1 Thessalonians 5:23-24:

"Now may the God of peace Himself sanctify you completely; and may your whole spirit, soul, and body be preserved blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. He who calls you is faithful, who also will do it."

May our heavenly Father bless your walk with Him!