

Hangin' On to the Truth

Jack Elder

Recorded on September 1, 2018

American English has its own peculiar colloquialisms and idioms. Every language and culture has them, but in America we seem to have more than our share, so sometimes foreigners have trouble understanding us when we speak. We may use a phrase a lot but never really look up its origin. One such example is “Hang in there”, an expression most Americans are familiar with. I don’t know if everyone knows this or not, but that phrase came into use after appearing on a poster of a cat.

As the story goes, there was a well-known photographer who lived and worked in Los Angeles—this was in the early ’70s—and he worked with actors and other celebrities, but his first love was animals; he loved to photograph them. How he captured this image nobody really knows—it was just one of those once-in-a-lifetime opportunities—but he caught a picture of a Siamese kitten hanging by its claws from a bamboo pole. It had a terrified look on its face; even its rear claws were out as if it was trying to grab on to something, and the caption read, “Hang in there, Baby!” That was actually the origin of that term. Rather than say, “Hold on” or “Stay with it”, we now usually use the term “Hang in there.” You’ve probably seen it on motivational posters, and that’s all that it means; it’s a phrase used to encourage people to persevere, to not give up. I even saw a poster once of a noose—I can’t remember if it was in one of the offices of one of the buildings I worked in, but it was large and made of rope, and the caption below it read, “Hang in there. It could be worse.”

I was just thinking about that in relation to our church, that most of us here have been around for a long time. We look back in our history and we wonder about people who didn’t hang in there, who didn’t stay with it. I’ve lost count but we probably had a half dozen, old church directories, and sometimes we’d recognize a face, but couldn’t remember the name, so we’d pull those out and start reminiscing about folks we’d known in the past. So many of them are now gone. We wonder where they went, if they left the church. It could be dozens, it could be hundreds of people, when we think about all the families we’ve known through the years. Maybe we’ve heard about them or seen them on social media. Mostly though we just don’t know what happened to them. That leaves a question in our minds. Did they leave the church? Was it because of an offense? Did they just migrate to another group? What happened? We just don’t know. Why did they leave the truth that they once evidently had? I kind of borrowed the title for my sermon from the story of that cat:

Hangin' On to the Truth

That’s my title. Of course that became a national catch phrase, now widely used. There are many scriptures that talk about truth, so let’s just look at a couple of them. I would like to go over to Proverbs 23, if you would turn there please. Proverbs is a

collection of sayings directed at the young student, you might say. That's for all time, really, because we're all God's students—we're all God's kids. So these principles from Proverbs obviously apply to us. I would like to read this from the Holman Translation.

Proverbs 23:23 *Buy—and do not sell—truth, wisdom, instruction, and understanding.* (HCSB)

The first one I've selected says to buy truth. In other words, don't let go of it. It's something very valuable. As near as I can tell, the meaning of truth, from the Hebrew, comes from a word that means, among other things, stability, certainty, trustworthiness, faithfulness, surety. In other words, it's something that is solid and firm and stable. It's not something else one day and another thing another day—it just isn't. It's always the truth. It's not something we can decide for ourselves. Some people try to do that. You hear people say, "I know the truth!"

Let's turn over to Psalm 31. Both the Father and the Son are characterized by truth. In Psalm 31, I would like to read this from the Amplified Bible. Psalm 31:5—the last part of the verse.

Psalm 31:5 ... *You have redeemed me, O LORD* [the literal translation is Yehovah], *the God of truth and faithfulness.* (AMP)

The point here is that God is always the same, always truthful, always faithful, always stable; He never changes—ever. As we think about these things, Proverbs admonishes us to acquire these things, to hang on to them, to buy them, no matter the price, because they're more valuable than anything else. They are godly, eternal truths. So the question comes up, can we lose that truth? I'd like to turn back over to Proverbs 3. Can we lose the truth? The question remains, how does that happen? We'll go on to see that later. Proverbs 3 and verse 3; I would like to read this from the New American Bible.

Proverbs 3:3 *Do not let kindness and truth leave you; Bind them around your neck, Write them on the tablet of your heart.* (NASB)

As we know, Proverbs often uses one thing to illustrate another—to make a point. Here we have the images of kindness, and some translations say, *mercy; truth; necklace of the heart*. Those are symbols of outward and inward qualities, meaning that God's truths are so valuable to us—they should be—that they literally become a part of us. In a sense, that is the working of God's Holy Spirit in us. That truth is reflected outwardly in our behavior and it's reflected inwardly in the kindness and mercy of our thoughts that direct and motivate everything we do. God's Holy Spirit imparts those qualities to us.

Going back to the part that says, don't let truth leave you, it's implying that it's entirely possible to lose the truth. We need to hold it in the highest regard, because it is possible to lose it, for a variety of reasons, and those are some of the things we'll look at today. For the record, I want to make clear that when I talk about truth, I'm talking about

the entirety of God's word—everything—everything in here; all of it. The whole package, not just a piece of it, is the truth.

In the recent God controversy (I know that always sounds really odd even when we say it), that's a profound piece. When you think about that, when you understand about God, about His role in the Old Testament, the New Testament, whichever one it is, it gives us a complete package. That's what we want; we want as much truth as we can possibly get, as we can possibly absorb. If we don't know who God is or has been—past, present, and future—we have an incomplete package. We're running around with an incomplete package, and we don't have everything. Again, the truth I'm talking about is the entirety of God's word.

Let's turn over to John 17. I'm using the New King James, which I'll probably use throughout. In John 17, we have another Lord's Prayer. Christ prayed to His Father,

John 17:17 *Sanctify [that just means to make holy—to purify] them [that means everyone—past, present and future—whom the Father would call, choose, and give to Jesus Christ] by Your truth. Your word is truth. (NKJV)*

God said that, through Christ. Another reference scripture, which should be very familiar to all of us, is John 4:24, where Christ says,

John 4:24 *God is spirit, and those who worship Him must worship in spirit and truth. (NKJV)*

When I see that scripture, I can't help but think of God's truth as the connecting bridge between us, in our physical state, and God (and the spiritual side of things). We all know that when we're initially called, how were we called? By the truth. We heard something, we read something, and it rang true. I think with every one of us, it's fun to sit around and tell the different stories of, what are you doing here, how did you get here? Somebody as strange as me, for instance—how did you get here? We heard that truth, we responded to it, we answered that call, we repented and were baptized, and here we are. After that, we tend to not think about it too much, and why we need it, to hang on to it, and how we can lose it—we don't think about it that much. God's word repeatedly tells us that God's truth should be in our hearts, as Proverbs said, and it should be expressed in our behaviors.

Let's turn over to Psalm 51 and see a little bit of this. God used David as an example that verifies the need to internalize God's truth. We know this is the psalm David wrote after Nathan came to him and called him out on his sin with Bathsheba.

Psalm 51:1 *Have mercy upon me, O God, According to Your lovingkindness; According to the multitude of Your tender mercies, Blot out my transgressions.*
2) *Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity, And cleanse me from my sin.*
3) *For I acknowledge my transgressions, And my sin is always before me.*
(NKJV)

I find that kind of interesting because most people will blame someone else for their problems—they'll blame someone else or some other thing if they get into trouble—it's never them. Like Gordon talked about a little bit in the sermonette, people don't want to take responsibility for their own problems, in many, many cases. If you're like me, my biggest problem is that old geezer looking back at me in the mirror every day.

4) *Against You, You only, have I sinned, And done this evil in Your sight—That You may be found just when You speak, And blameless when You judge.* (NKJV)

God is always right; He's always true—always.

5) *Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity, And in sin my mother conceived me.* (NKJV)

He's not talking about a sexual sin. He's just saying he acted like he was never converted. He's stating there that it was pure carnality; he recognized the sin for what it was.

6) *Behold, You desire truth in the inward parts, [it's the same word; it means stability, faithfulness, trustworthiness—all of that] And in the hidden part You will make me to know wisdom.* (NKJV)

Then it goes on to say, in verse 7, *purge me with hyssop*—that's symbolic of a spiritual cleansing—forgiveness and cleansing—and in verse 10, *create in me a clean heart; a steadfast spirit*. God's Spirit operating from the inside. He goes on to plead, in verses 11 and 12, that God not to cast him away from Him—don't take His Holy Spirit from him. David did have God's Holy Spirit, and he was converted; the point is, he saw he was in danger of losing that. Verse 16.

16) *For You do not desire sacrifice, or else I would give it; You do not delight in burnt offering.* (NKJV)

Nothing from the outside.

17) *The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit, A broken and a contrite heart—These, O God, You will not despise.* (NKJV)

The point is, God is interested only in changes on the inside, based on His truth operating in our inward parts. Many scriptures teach that when we embrace God's truth, it changes our lives. We commit to living differently; we commit to imprinting those truths—everything God tells us—on our hearts and in our minds. We demonstrate that by our behaviors. It doesn't mean we are perfect; that's a slow process, as we all know. We're all trying to get there. Once again, we can do all of this and we can still lose it.

Let's look at how that can happen and perhaps take a warning from God's word. I have seven points—I think I can get through seven. I'll cover seven points; you could probably think of others, you could probably improve on all these points—I would hope that you could. Reasons that could cause us not to hang on to God's truth:

1. Being deceived.

I would like to turn over to 2 Thessalonians 2—you probably know where I'm going. We can lose the truth. We could lose everything; we could do that by being deceived. This is from the New King James. Paul is speaking here.

2 Thessalonians 2:1 *Now, brethren, concerning the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ [that's referring to the fact that Christ had come, died, and been resurrected] and our gathering together to Him, we ask you [the King James says, we beseech you, we appeal to you],*
2) *not to be soon shaken in mind or troubled ... (NKJV)*

The Greek there means to be tossed around like a ship would be at sea; in other words, don't get worked up about all the things you see around you, the things that are troubling you.

2 continued) *... either by spirit ...*

He's talking about someone who maybe has a wrong spirit, or someone with a false prophetic vision—we know that Satan is behind all of that, trying to slip some deception into our thinking, to get us look at things in a wrong way, in a corrupt way, or whatever the case might be.

2 continued) *... or by word ...*

That's how things get started, always—through the rumor mill.

2 continued) *or by letter, as if from us [a forged letter], as though the day of Christ had come. (NKJV)*

The King James says, *is at hand*. The idea was going around that Christ's return was imminent, or as one translation put it, that it already occurred. There are people in the world who believe that Christ has actually returned—He's doing something out there, we just don't know what it is. At this point, Paul realized it wasn't going to happen immediately; it was going to be a while, because certain things had to happen before His return. Down in verse 3, we read Paul's warning:

3) *Let no one deceive you by any means [or in any manner]; for that Day will not come unless the falling away comes first, and the man of sin is revealed, the son of perdition ... (NKJV)*

Hold your place here and let's turn over to Matthew 24 to see a similar warning. This is probably familiar enough; you may even have this one memorized. It's where Christ gives this warning:

Matthew 24:4 *And Jesus answered and said to them [because they had questions, so one of the first things He told them was]: "Take heed that no one deceives you.*

5) For many will come in My name, saying, 'I am the Christ,' and will deceive many. (NKJV)

We have other scriptures—we could look in another place but it's not my intention to go there; however, in 1 John, and I believe it's in chapter 2, He talks about the Antichrist. Between those verses, 6 and 23, Jesus is talking about all the signs that will precede His coming. In verse 24, He indicates the very real possibility that some will be deceived. In Matthew 24 and verse 24, He says,

Matthew 24:24 *For false christs and false prophets will rise and show great signs and wonders [some people will be fooled by them] to deceive, if possible, even the elect. (NKJV)*

The called and chosen. We used to interpret that to mean it wasn't possible for us to be deceived, but it doesn't say that. Let's go back to 2 Thessalonians; I would like to reread verse 3 of 2 Thessalonians 2 from the King James.

2 Thessalonians 2:3 *Let no man deceive you by any means: for that day shall not come, except there come a falling away first, and that man of sin be revealed, the son of perdition; (KJV)*

In the Greek, it's talking about an apostasy; literally, it means a pulling away or a standing away from something—that's what apostasy means. Remember when we used to read that verse and we would conjure up this weird, scary image of coming to services one day and half the people would be gone? It used to be that here in the Tri-Cities, we had a congregation of about 150 people. Well, the way we literally took this verse was that it would be very sudden. We would come to services, where normally we had 150 in attendance, but there would be only fifty of us left; 100 people just disappeared—we wouldn't know where they went or what had happened to them.

That's the way we used to look interpret it, but it doesn't say that. If you read the verse carefully, what does it say? That there will be a falling away. Not some mass falling away. The Greek, again, means pulling away from something. Let's talk about that falling away or drifting away as a part of this apostasy. For our purposes it means not hanging on to the truth. Let's take a look at how and why it happens so we can be alert to the possibility.

Theologians think that apostasy is some kind of a deliberate act. You can easily be fooled into that. The pulling away that people do, the leaving that people do—this is

what we wonder about all the time, if people have left the church. We're called into the ecclesia, but people move away from it and isolate themselves, which to me really is dangerous. We tried that and believe me it's a bad place to be. It's not necessarily a deliberate act. If it is some kind of willful, deliberate act, where people are deceived and they actually reject God's truth (once they've been converted), unfortunately the game is pretty much over for them. Hebrews 10:26 tells us that. Go over to Hebrews 10; you know the religious leaders, and some of those folks in Christ's day, knew Him and rejected Him, but they will have a chance later. They didn't know. They were totally deceived by the religion they thought was worshipping God, but it wasn't. In Hebrews 10:26 it tells us about this.

Hebrews 10:26 *For if we sin willfully after we have received the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins ... (NKJV)*

If we intentionally, deliberately turn away from the truth, even after we've known and understood it, then it's over. We'll receive what we deserve, which is eternal death. So there is a definite possibility that people, even though once converted, will lose it. They can willfully reject and turn away from the truth. If they don't repent of that, they are going to suffer the consequences. We know people of the world, in the religions of the world (Gordon touched on that in his sermonette) think that God is going to find some way to save everyone somehow. He's just going to do that—you know, God is love—He's going to save everybody, He's just going to find a way to do that. But how can God save somebody who deliberately rejects Him? How can He do that? He can't. He can't because that person made a choice.

God will not save everyone, because scripture tells us clearly that some will go into the lake of fire—they're going to reject God. We see then, in this first point I'm making, that some will reject God; they'll be deceived, and there is such a thing as self-deception. People can get to us, they can fool us. Through that, they will outright reject God's truth even though they once accepted it—they can be fooled into it. How many will it be? We don't know, that's God's call; God makes those judgments, we don't.

Going on then to other factors that influence or may cause us to go away, not hang on to the truth, and drift away from it:

2. Thinking that it won't happen to us.

It can't happen to me. 1 Corinthians 10:12, picking up the context there. The context is talking about Israel leaving Egypt, and their rejection of God.

1 Corinthians 10:12 *Therefore let him who thinks he stands take heed lest he fall. (NKJV)*

Remember they said in Exodus 19 that they would follow Him—they would do everything that God said. Yet they didn't. We also have a New Testament example of someone who thought that very thing—this won't happen to me, can't happen to me,

never, ever, will happen to me. We have Peter's example; let's go over to Mark 14. The context is Christ's final Passover; His crucifixion was near. They had taken the bread and wine, washed each other's feet, sung a hymn, then they went out. Picking it up in Mark 14 and verse 27.

Mark 14:27 *Then Jesus said to them, "All of you will be made to stumble because of Me this night, for it is written: 'I will strike the Shepherd, and the sheep will be scattered.'* (NKJV)

He's quoting a prophecy there. Down to verse 28, Christ is still speaking.

28) *"But after I have been raised, I will go before you to Galilee."*

29) *Peter said to Him, "Even if all are made to stumble, yet I will not be."*

30) *Jesus said to him, "Assuredly, I say to you that today, even this night, before the rooster crows twice, you will deny Me three times."*

31) *But he spoke more vehemently, "If I have to die with You, I will not deny You!" And they all said likewise.* (NKJV)

They all succumbed to peer pressure. They said, we too, Lord! We've got your back, we'll stay with You, we'll be with You—but what happened? We see in verse 50.

50) *Then they all forsook Him and fled.* (NKJV)

What happened to that chorus from just a short time ago? Peter boasted that he would stay with Christ even if it meant his death, and then the minute the soldiers came to take Him away, he and the rest of them were gone—they took off, they headed out, as it says in verse 54.

54) *But Peter followed Him at a distance [it was a nice, safe distance], right into the courtyard of the high priest. And he sat with the servants and warmed himself at the fire.* (NKJV)

You know the story—one of the servant girls recognized him, called him out, and said, you were with Jesus of Nazareth. But he denied it. He went on exactly as Christ had prophesied; before the rooster crowed twice, he would deny Him three times, and he did so here in the passage. Let's go down to verse 70. He denied it again—he just kept on doing it.

70) *But he denied it again. And a little later those who stood by said to Peter again, "Surely you are one of them; for you are a Galilean, and your speech shows it."*

71) *Then he began to curse and swear, "I do not know this Man of whom you speak!"* (NKJV)

Peter had been with Christ for more than three years and yet he denied Him.

72) A second time the rooster crowed. Then Peter called to mind the word that Jesus had said to him, "Before the rooster crows twice, you will deny Me three times." And when he thought about it, he wept. (NKJV)

Peter denied Jesus despite what He'd said earlier, and when he realized what he had done, he wept bitterly. That must have been pretty painful for him. When Peter writes later, in 2 Peter, about the risk of turning away, of not following God—and in this case, he wasn't following the Son of God—he writes from firsthand experience. We can see that over in 2 Peter 2, and verse 20.

2 Peter 2:20 *For if, after they have escaped the pollutions of the world through the knowledge [that entails the truth] of the Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, they are again entangled in them [all the things that are anti-God, all the things that are anti-truth] and overcome, the latter end is worse for them than the beginning. 21) For it would have been better for them not to have known the way of righteousness [not to have known God's truth, not to have known anything about the whole package], than having known it, to turn from the holy commandment delivered to them. (NKJV)*

We know in Peter's case, he turned back and repented. Not everyone will. Peter recognized the risk in doing that. Poor Peter, always full of bravado and pride, and all of that; he thought he would never deny Christ, yet how easy it was for him to do so. He thought he was strong, he thought he could stand any test, but he soon found out otherwise. The lesson for us there is pretty plain. Thinking we can withstand any temptation—doing it on our own, thinking we could never drift away, and never lose God's truth—actually puts us in danger of succumbing to it.

That brings us to the third reason that may cause people to let go of God's truth and just drift away.

3. A lack of vigilance.

Back to Mark 14; let's go down to verse 32 this time. Remember, this is right after they all said, we'll all die with You. Then we have the account of what happened and there is a lesson in that.

Mark 14:32 *Then they came to a place which was named Gethsemane; and He said to His disciples, "Sit here while I pray."*

33) And He took Peter, James, and John with Him, and He began to be troubled and deeply distressed. (NKJV)

He was disturbed, not only by the thought of His impending death, but by their attitude.

34) Then He said to them, "My soul is exceedingly sorrowful, even to death. Stay here and watch." (NKJV)

He needed some support.

35) *He went a little farther, and fell on the ground, and prayed that if it were possible, the hour might pass from Him.*

36) *And He said, "Abba, Father, all things are possible for You. Take this cup away from Me; nevertheless, not what I will, but what You will."*

37) *Then He came and found them sleeping, and said to Peter, "Simon, are you sleeping? Could you not watch one hour?"*

38) *Watch and pray, lest you enter into temptation. The spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak."* (NKJV)

As the story goes, we know the account; He went away and prayed again, He returned, and then He came the third time; verse 41.

41) *Then He came the third time and said to them, "Are you still sleeping and resting? It is enough! The hour has come; behold, the Son of Man is being betrayed into the hands of sinners.*

42) *Rise, let us be going. See, My betrayer is at hand."* (NKJV)

Back there in verse 38, He is telling them, be vigilant, be prepared. You may have good intentions but your faith is weak. It's much easier just to kick back and kind of snooze through life, and not have a whole lot of things to do—it's just a lot less work, a lot easier to do. Let's go over to Luke 22 and we'll see a little more about Peter; we'll look specifically at the encounter between Jesus and Peter that night, in Luke's account.

Luke 22:31 *And the Lord said, "Simon, Simon! Indeed, Satan has asked for you, that he may sift you as wheat.*

32) *But I have prayed for you, that your faith should not fail; and when you have returned to Me [in other words, when you're converted], strengthen your brethren."* (NKJV)

Try to put yourself in Peter's shoes here for a little bit. Jesus just came to you, He told you Satan is after you, that he's going to try to sift you like wheat. The second thing Jesus says is, I've been praying for you that you'll be faithful, and, by the way, you're not converted, but when you are, I hope you'll encourage people and be a good example to them. Talk about taking the wind out of your sails; that probably did it for Peter. You have to consider, what if Christ had said these things to us? I think we would be in shock. Peter wasn't; he blew it off. Down in verse 33,

33) *But he said to Him, "Lord, I am ready to go with You, both to prison and to death."* (NKJV)

Not to read through it again, but Christ told Peter, before the rooster crows, you're going to deny Me. Peter thought his good intentions were good enough, and as a result, he denied Christ. Yes, his lack of conversion was a big factor. He just needed to learn a certain vigilance, a certain discipline, not to let things slip, and that's what is pictured by

this sleepiness here. It kind of reminds you of some other scriptures, like Matthew 25, where the whole church slept. Same situation for us today; it takes a while to learn to be vigilant, to be attentive to those spiritual things we need to be focused on all the time, and not neglect God's word, because it could slip away.

In Hebrews 2 we have a warning about losing focus of God's truth. We'll just read verses 1 through 3.

Hebrews 2:1 *Therefore we must give the more earnest heed to the things we have heard, lest we drift away.* (NKJV)

Other translations say, lest we let them slip. In other words, we need to pay attention, more attention as time goes by, to what we've heard because it could leave us; we could lose it all if we just neglect it, as it goes on to say here.

2) *For if the word spoken through angels proved steadfast, and every transgression and disobedience received a just reward,*
3) *how shall we escape if we neglect so great a salvation ...* (NKJV)

If we neglect the things that keep us close to God, then like Peter, when Satan came along, we might deny Him, too.

3 continued) *... which at the first began to be spoken by the Lord, and was confirmed to us by those who heard Him ...* (NKJV)

So the point there is, we need to remain vigilant—wide awake, spiritually speaking, at all times.

That brings us to reason number four—another thing that might cause people to drift away from the truth, to lose God's truth, to not hang on—and this one is pretty obvious.

4. Fear of what others think.

We can see that. We're going to stick with Peter for a while; he's a good example of what not to do, in Mark 14. We can see from the account that when Peter followed Jesus, he didn't want to be too close, he didn't want to be connected with Him. He wanted to distance himself, if he could, to protect himself.

Mark 14:54 *But Peter followed Him at a distance, right into the courtyard of the high priest. And he sat with the servants and warmed himself at the fire.* (NKJV)

We read all of that before, about the servant girl; we know the story. Verse 70.

70) *But he denied it again. And a little later [note this] those who stood by [there was a crowd there] said to Peter again, "Surely you are one of them; for you are a Galilean, and your speech shows it."* (NKJV)

Just like me, my speech shows who I am—I'm a blue-collar guy, and if you know what to look for, you know what to look for. In verse 71, again, Peter began to curse and swear. Peter outright lied here, under the peer pressure of that crowd. No wonder he wept bitterly after that—no wonder. I heard of a study one time—I wish I could remember all the details of it, and I'm not going to quote anything, but if I did, I would need to identify, clearly, who and where. There was a researcher one time who kept tabs on the Christian world—mostly evangelicals—and his conclusion was that 80 percent of Christians are casual Christians. That may be true when you think about it.

Here's a brief description—I paraphrased a little of what he said—of what a casual Christian is like. I just have a few points. They wouldn't be caught dead with a Bible in their hands; they don't want people to know they are religious at all; they don't want people to see a Bible in their home, or in their car, or anywhere—they don't want it to be visible. They don't want to act like they spend any time thinking about God, or faith, or prayer, or anything like that. They don't want to come off as too religious. They don't want to be thought of as some kind of religious freak. They just want to do their thing—maybe show up to Sabbath services and still figure they will be okay.

That kind of describes a casual approach to Christianity, to God's truth. Some of these people may start out okay—they have good intentions—but peer pressure from the people they associate with can dissuade them; it can cause them to drift away from God's truth. We don't want to be known as being too religious. We don't want people to know that we actually pray and talk to God and all that—we don't want people to know it. Obviously if we spend too much time with folks like that—I think a lot of us learned this when we were first coming into the church—we find that we need to stay away from them. That peer pressure, that fear of what others think, of reluctance to appear too religious, could be another reason why some people leave God's truth and drift away.

That brings us to reason number five.

5. Persecution.

For some people, whenever the church gets persecuted, they get stronger. They become more reliant on God, more diligent in study, they pray harder, they fast, they do all kinds of things. But some people just can't take the heat. Matthew 13, parable of the sower, talks a little about that—they just can't take the heat. A lot of us have been persecuted in different ways. I'm not going to talk about that per se; a lot of us recognize that when we talk about persecution, it comes from different directions sometimes. A lot of times it's from the workplace, it can even come from our own brethren; it can come from many different sources.

Matthew 13:5 [Christ is telling this story] *Some fell on stony places, where they did not have much earth; and they immediately sprang up because they had no depth of earth.*

6) *But when the sun was up they were scorched, and because they had no root they withered away.* (NKJV)

So when the sun came up—symbolizing trials, persecution, whatever it might be; the heat was on, so to speak—they withered. The pressure just got to them. The heat of persecution can do that. It caused them to pull away—to just drift away from God’s truth and leave it. Matthew 24 talks about that a little bit. Sometimes the persecution can come from within the church. The persecutors can be our own brethren, in some cases. Matthew 24—I’m sure you recognize this; we can look at this in different ways from time to time. We have heard it many, many times. This is talking about severe persecution. You might look at this as the ultimate price of following God’s truth.

Matthew 24:9 *“Then they will deliver you up to tribulation and kill you, and you will be hated by all nations for My name's sake.*

10) *And then many will be offended, will betray one another, and will hate one another.* (NKJV)

That’s pretty wide-ranging, when you think about it. Some who may have been with us turn away, and they turn against the church, and they turn against you and me. Frankly, we may see persecution become a big factor in leaving God’s truth in the future, because it will create a lot of pressure.

That brings us to reason number six; Gordon alluded to this somewhat, in the sermonette.

6. Worldliness.

There are many ways to define it, but it basically means getting wrapped up physically, emotionally, psychologically, philosophically—however you want to put it—in everyday life, in everything around us. Over in 2 Timothy Paul talks about someone who left him because of worldliness. In his account, we have an example we can learn from as well. 2 Timothy 4 and verse 10, and in context, he’s talking about a man with him—one of his companions—named Demas.

2 Timothy 4:10 *for Demas has forsaken me, having loved this present world, and has departed for Thessalonica—Crescens for Galatia, Titus for Dalmatia.* (NKJV)

When you look at society (and we have this wonderful, prosperous society that we live in), it’s easy to forget how much we need to depend on God—it really is. We get caught up in the material things. Yet Christ tells us, over in Matthew 6, not to worry about all that stuff, but to turn our attention to the spiritual—it talks about that in Matthew 6 and verse 24.

Matthew 6:24 *“No one can serve two masters; for either he will hate the one and love the other, or else he will be loyal to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and mammon. (NKJV)*

You can't serve God and physical things. God has to come first, always—every time.

25) *“Therefore I say to you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink; nor about your body, what you will put on.*

We never think about those things, do we? Of course we do.

25 continued) *Is not life more than food and the body more than clothing? (NKJV)*

He's talking about, in all the intervening verses, how God takes care of the birds of the field; He says they don't need to worry about these things, so why should you worry about all the things that you need? He knows what you need.

32) *For after all these things the Gentiles seek. For your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things.*

33) *But seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things shall be added to you. (NKJV)*

The point here is to focus our attention where it should be, on God's righteousness, on His Kingdom, on spiritual things, and God will take care of everything we really need. It may not be the way we want it, it may not be what we want, but God will take care of our needs.

I was talking to someone recently about this—sometimes God will allow us a trial to see how we handle it. We don't like that, but we can learn things by facing it, by coping with it, that we wouldn't learn otherwise, and God knows that. I have always remembered James's healing sermon—that's our James—he gave a great sermon on healing once. The one thing that stuck in my mind from that sermon, that made more sense to me than anything, was that God is not in the healing (and, I might add, the fixing) business. God is in the character-building business. That's what God wants. God's focus is always in the future. He can see about a million miles farther down the road than we can. Jesus says, in Matthew 6 and verse 34,

34) *Therefore do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about its own things. Sufficient for the day is its own trouble. (NKJV)*

That is certainly the truth, no matter where we are in life—even as we go through these phases in life. Just as a reference scripture, let's read Psalm 37 and verse 25:

Psalm 37:25 *I have been young, and now am old; [I've been around a long time, he says.] Yet I have not seen the righteous forsaken, nor his descendants begging bread. (NKJV)*

He didn't say everybody, but he said the righteous and their descendants wouldn't be begging bread. So if our attention is focused where it should be, God won't forsake us. Again, it may not be what we want, the way we want, but His interest is always in what we need. God thinks in the long term. We often do not. We used to have this idea in the church of a health and wealth gospel. It might not have been intended to be taken that way, but the idea was, if you gave lots of tithes, lots of money, generous offerings, God was somehow obligated to bless you materially. The saying used to be—it used to be a favorite saying—you can't out-give God. I've heard that many, many times. We've known people who have tithed, just to get something. Where is that in the Bible? God deals with each one of us independently. He knows everything that goes on in our life; certainly He knows what our needs are. Yet Jesus told us how we should pray in Matthew 6:11. This is called the Lord's Prayer. We have to read this and notice what it doesn't say. Here's some instruction on how to pray.

Matthew 6:11 *Give us this day our daily bread. (NKJV)*

It doesn't say bless me and give me everything I want—that's not what He said. If God fixed everything and gave us everything, it wouldn't take long—we wouldn't depend on God at all, would we? We would stop; we would just drift away. We wouldn't be looking to God every single day, which is what it says to do here. Look to God every single day.

We have another reference scripture, Matthew 6:19 through 21, where it says, don't lay up for yourself treasure on earth. That's all going to go away, it's all going to rust—if it's made out of metal it's going to go back to the ground from where it came. It says, but lay up for yourselves treasure in heaven, where none of that happens—no rust, nothing destroys it, thieves don't steal it.

Matthew 6:21 *For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also. (NKJV)*

Often we have to look at ourselves and look at that person in the mirror, and ask, where is our heart? Is it set on stuff or spiritual truth? Is it set on those things that are working in our lives? Another scripture along these lines is in 1 John 2. 1 John 2 is a really interesting chapter—all of 1 John is, but chapter 2 is pretty interesting. Someone could probably give a whole sermon on that. John learned this, too, as did Peter—they all learned.

1 John 2:15 *Do not love the world or the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. (NKJV)*

So if we love the world too much, there's something missing.

16) *For all that is in the world—the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life—is not of the Father but is of the world.*

17) *And the world is passing away, and the lust of it; but he who does the will of God abides forever. (NKJV)*

You might add there, he who hangs on to God's truth abides forever. All that is material will pass away—everything in the world will pass away. We need it, we use it, but it's all going to be gone someday.

The seventh and final thing that can cause some people to drift away kind of overlaps with some of the other points. The next element we're going to examine overlaps with deception and peer pressure.

7. False teachers and false teaching.

Let's go to Matthew 24 again, and verse 11. This is probably a memory scripture also.

Matthew 24:11 *Then many false prophets will rise up and deceive many. (NKJV)*

It's just going to happen. We can see that even in the infancy of the church, there were false teachers coming in. That was a common thing, and you can see it all through the book of Acts and through the other epistles; you can see the false teachers popping up. Think about that today; look at what we face today with the Internet. We are literally swimming with information and people use that—Gordon mentioned that a little bit in the sermonette, about all that information out there. Some of it is true, and some of it isn't, that's just a fact. People will entice you away with that. False teachings can do that to you. Let's turn to 2 Timothy again.

2 Timothy 4:3 *For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine [that's talking about the church, Paul to Timothy], but according to their own desires, because they have itching ears, they will heap up for themselves teachers;*

4) and they will turn their ears away from the truth, and be turned aside to fables. (NKJV)

Things that aren't true, things that aren't scripture; people will be turned away by these things. This is right, that isn't right; back and forth it goes. God's word is the one that is right and that's the one source that we need to be looking to. People want to hear what they want to hear. They want people to tell them what they want to hear. Sometimes anything new is titillating to itching ears—it just is. Even if you go back in history and look at Ancient Israel, even the priests (they weren't supposed to, they were supposed to be God's priests) were giving the people what they wanted to hear. We have that famous scripture in Amos 8 that talks about a famine of the word. Amos 8—I'll read this from the literal translation—this is literally what it says, in Amos 8, verse 11.

Amos 8:11 *Lo, days are coming, an affirmation of the Lord Jehovah, and I have sent a famine into the land, not a famine of bread, nor a thirst of water but of hearing the words of Jehovah. (YLT)*

Remember when we used to read that verse, we would say people would be looking around for the word of truth but they wouldn't be able to find it? That acted as a kind of motivation for us to kick in more, to do the work, and to get the message out there. It was kind of used in that way.

That verse doesn't say there will be a famine of the word, per se. It doesn't say it won't be available, it says, there will be a famine in the hearing of the word. It doesn't mean it won't be available, but that there will be a famine of the hearing. I have nineteen translations in my software and they all say that, they all have that same word in there—the hearing. The word will be there but people won't hear it because it doesn't agree with what they want to hear.

The famine is in the hearing; it's in the attitude and the approach of what people are seeking. If you don't want the truth, you won't hear it. You won't recognize it, if it doesn't look like what you think it should look like. Maybe it's not politically correct; maybe you'll think, that can't be, I never believed that before. Never mind what the evidence says, that's not what I want to hear, that's not what I want to see.

The point I'm trying to make is that we must always be open to what God says. If a man says something that disagrees with what God's word says, then the choice for us is clear. Those who will willfully block out God's truth, who just won't look to or listen to Him, in a sense reject God. They've made a choice and hopefully will repent of it, or they will have to accept the consequences.

On the other hand, it is possible to repent of drifting away from God. We have the story of the prodigal son that teaches us that. We have a scripture in Isaiah that is an admonition and a hope in that respect. Isaiah 55 and verse 6—this is very familiar if you just want to use it as a reference scripture.

Isaiah 55:6 *Seek the LORD while He may be found, Call upon Him while He is near. (NKJV)*

It's so much easier to stay close to God than to realize, one day, that you're out there on your own; you're adrift and you can't find your way back.

I have a sea story about that. I've mentioned it a hundred times—I spent some time in the navy, stationed at an airbase for a while, and then was sent out to the fleet to a destroyer, and that's where I spent the next four years. The military loves to drill. The navy especially loves a drill. On a destroyer, you drill to practice so if the real thing happens, you know what to do, so that everyone is not floundering around looking at each other, wondering what to do. One of the drills we did repeatedly was called "man

overboard”. That’s a big ocean out there. If somebody goes overboard, you have to find them pretty quick.

So a couple of things would happen when we had a man overboard. Of course it would come over the public address system—man overboard, man overboard; port side, starboard side (for you landlubbers, that’s the left and the right side of the ship). The first thing that would happen is the bridge would turn the ship away from the swimmer, because you didn’t want to pull him into the screws. You have two great big turbines turning those screws. You don’t want to shred somebody in the water, turning them into fish food.

Another thing that would happen really quick—and these guys trained and trained to do this—three or four guys would show up and they would get as high up as they could, on the super structure, with rifles, and that was to try and keep the sharks off the guy in the water (they were all guys, by the way; there were no women in the navy then). Everybody moved fast because if you didn’t get to that person pretty quick, and then sometimes you had rough seas—if you didn’t get to them pretty quick and they drifted too far away, you could lose them; you couldn’t get them back.

It’s tragic and heart-wrenching when you see that. I saw a few people who were lost. A lot of times pilots are lost because you can’t find them. Here’s the point of that illustration: If we don’t hang on to God’s truth and we drift away, there’s a point at which we can still make it back, but there’s a point also that if we drift too far out, and we can’t make it back, it’s too late, and we don’t want to be there.

First and foremost, stay close to God; the points we covered will help you with that. Don’t be deceived—that’s Satan’s number-one job; he’s behind it all. He deceives the whole world; we’re not immune to that at all. Secondly, never let yourself think it can’t happen to you, because it can, if we’re not careful. The third one: Stay focused—on a personal level—and vigilant. Don’t get sleepy spiritually—stay awake. The fourth one is don’t worry about what other people think, especially when you’re following God’s truth. We’ve seen a lot of that lately. There are a number of people out there who oppose what we believe. The fifth one is don’t let persecution derail you, because that can happen. People can just give up. They will let go. The sixth point is avoid worldly pitfalls—you can figure that one out. The last one is to avoid, or put some distance between, yourself and false teaching.

If we do all these things, we will hang on to God’s truth.