

Blessings In The New Covenant

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Well, good afternoon, everyone! It's certainly nice to see everyone back together again, this Sabbath. I'm sure you are all enjoying the little break in the weather we are getting here. For all you watching this in DVD, you are probably not going to see this until after the Feast, but we're filming this today on Labor Day Weekend. And we're finally getting a relief here from the severe heat we've had here in Texas all summer!

Brethren, if you keep up at all with the Sabbath Updates that Rick sends out each Sabbath, it's not hard to see that a lot of God's Brethren right now are suffering some pretty severe trials. And if you just keep up with him and read some of the details, you notice that a number of Brethren are facing some pretty severe, tough trials right now in their lives. And, of course, what we see there in the Sabbath Update are just the individuals affiliated with our small organization. The Church of God in general is much larger than our little group. And it's true across all the Church of God. If you see across all of God's people, there are many people suffering some very severe trials right now.

And that's not only difficult on those that are particularly suffering these trials right now, it can also be difficult to all their friends and loved ones, all the rest of us, that see our friends struggling and suffering through these trials. It can be very difficult on both sides of the equation. In fact, I recently heard a church member make a comment and she was just struggling to come to grips with watching a close friend go through a very grueling hard trial—an individual she knows as a very devout sincere church member, does the best she can to obey God. And she made the comment, she said, "I don't understand. Isn't it God's desire to bless His children? Doesn't He want to give good things to His children and bless them? Why is this person I know is such a good Christian, why are they suffering so much?"

Well, what we're going to do today is to address this particular question. Because does God want to bless His children? Absolutely, He does! Definitely, God wants to bless and give good things to His children, especially those who obey Him.

However, one thing we need to understand is there is a very different definition to the subject of blessings in the New Covenant (the relationship that we're in that we all entered in at baptism that we're now in with Jesus Christ) as opposed to the Old Covenant (how ancient Israel in the Old Testament was) and how blessings were defined then. I think sometimes we struggle with this particular subject because we confuse the definition of blessings in the Old Covenant versus the New Covenant. And if we do, what that can lead to is unrealistic expectations. And if we go into a situation with unrealistic expectations, we can oftentimes wind up being disillusioned, being discouraged, and affecting our faith and our trust in God if we're expecting things from Him that are not accurate. So if you would like a title for this sermon, it's *Blessings in the New Covenant* because that's the subject we're going to focus on today.

And realize in looking at these subjects, what we're also going to look at is not only just the definition of "blessings," but to understand why they're different. We're also going to have to look at the logic (the whole purpose that is being accomplished with both of these Covenants) and the philosophy (what's going on behind them), what they're trying to basically accomplish. Because understanding the purposes behind them is why we will understand why they are different. I think sometimes as church members we naïvely, and sometimes good-heartedly, mistake the differences between the Covenants like this. We look at it and think:

"Well, the only main differences between the Old Covenant and the New Covenant are when you get to the New Covenant, of course, you do away with the sacrificial system because Jesus Christ's sacrifice covered that. And that's an Old Covenant concept.

"And, of course, we add the holy spirit and salvation because those were not offered to ancient Israel. That's offered in the New Covenant."

But if we look at it like that thinking those are the only differences between them, because those are definitely real differences between the Covenants, but that's not the only differences at all. See there is a totally different philosophy and purpose that they are both trying to accomplish. And as a result, the rules are different and the definition of a blessing in both of them is different.

So, to understand this, let's start off turning over to Deuteronomy chapter 28 and let's look at how blessings are defined in the Old Covenant. It's Deuteronomy chapter 28. We're going to look at the chapter here we oftentimes call "The Blessings and Cursings Chapter."

I'm sure we're all familiar with this, but before we go specifically into reading this, I want to just summarize some information I think we're all pretty familiar with. I'm sure as we all know, when God brought Israel out of Egypt, brought them out of slavery, He delivered them, took them to the Red Sea, and He gets them off to Mount Sinai. And, then, He enters into a marriage agreement, a Covenant, between Jesus Christ who was the God of the Old Testament (the Old Covenant and the Old Testament) and the nation of Israel.

But understand this entire agreement they were doing was purely a physical arrangement. The holy spirit and salvation were not on the table. Basically, He was offering them a deal where if they obeyed Him, He would give them certain blessings. And, of course, as we know, historically they did a very poor job of keeping up their end of the bargain. They didn't obey Him for any consistent length of time. But, however, what He was offering them, again, was totally physical. It had nothing to do with anything beyond their physical life or however long they lived (however many decades they lived on this earth), and, then, when they died, that was it. That's the end of the movie. And, of course, these individuals get their chance offered at salvation later in the Second Resurrection, but understand for the purposes of this deal, it only had to do with their physical lives for however long they lived and that was it.

So, if we understand the logic behind this, that will help us understand how this affects the definition of a blessing.

To start off, let's start reading in Deuteronomy chapter 28 and verse 1.

Deuteronomy 28:1. *"Now it [will] come to pass, if you diligently obey the voice of the Lord your God, to observe carefully all [of] His commandments which I command you today, that the Lord your God will set you high above all nations of the earth.*

2) *"And all these blessings shall come upon you and overtake you, because you obey the voice of the Lord your God: (NKJ)*

Now, notice when we start reading from verse 3, the things it is mentioning it's calling blessings.

Deuteronomy 28:3. *"Blessed shall you be in the city, and blessed shall you be in the country.*

4) *"Blessed shall be the fruit of your body, the produce of your ground and the increase of your herds, the increase of your cattle and the offspring of your flocks.*

5) *"Blessed shall be your basket and your kneading bowl.*

6) *"Blessed shall you be when you come in, and blessed shall you be when you go out.*

7) *"The Lord will cause your enemies who rise against you to be defeated before your face; they shall come out against you one way and flee before you seven ways.*

8) *"The Lord will command the blessing on you in your storehouses and in all to which you set your hand, and He will bless you in the land which the Lord your God is giving you.*

9) *"The Lord will establish you as a holy people to Himself, just as He has sworn to you, if you keep the commandments of the Lord your God and walk in His ways (NKJ).*

Now, notice this was all contingent upon them consistently obeying, which we know from history they didn't do for any length of time.

Then, picking up in verse 10:

Deuteronomy 28:10. *"Then all peoples of the earth shall see that you are called by the name of the Lord, and they shall be afraid of you.*

11) *"And the Lord will grant you plenty of goods, in the fruit of your body, in the increase of your livestock, and in the produce of your ground, in the land of which the Lord swore to your fathers to give you.*

12) *"The Lord will open to you His good treasure, the heavens, to give the rain to your land in its season, and to bless all the work of your hand. You shall lend to many nations, but you shall not borrow.*

13) *"And the Lord will make you the head and not the tail; you shall be above only, and not be beneath, (NKJ)*

Now, notice that. We're going to come back to that in a second.

Deuteronomy 28:13b. ... if you heed the commandments of the Lord your God, which I command you today, and are careful to observe them.

14) "So you shall not turn aside from any of the words which I command you this day, to the right hand or to the left, to go after other gods to serve them. (NKJ)

Now, notice the contract He is making with them is: Their end of the bargain was they had to consistently obey God, which again we know from history they didn't do for any length of time. But had they done that, what He is telling them is basically, "Your life is going to be a physical utopia. Everything is going to go great for you. I'm just going to rain blessings down from the sky for you."

And notice how He's defining blessings. It's "Your crops are going to grow well. The weather is going to be good. You're going to be healthy. Your wives are going to be fertile. Your children are going to be healthy. Everything physically is going to go good." It's the things that we as physical human beings like to look at in terms of blessings.

Now, think about it. When we look back at our life and think, "Man, I've really been blessed!" Of course, as Christians, we can have a more mature perspective on it, but oftentimes, what we do oftentimes look at? The things that physically improve our lives right now. Or we tend to look at the things that remove the pain and discomfort out of our lives and that give us pleasure and enjoyment because that's what affects our lives today. Those are the things we enjoy, the things we like. And when we think of being blessed, those are the things we want. When we want God to bless, that's normally what we want to sign up for, right? "Give me the positive things. Take the pain out of my life. Give me pleasure and enjoyment. That sounds great!" That's how we tend to look at blessings as physical human beings.

But notice this. Let's turn over to Leviticus 26. Let's look at the parallel chapter of this. As we all know, this chapter is also oftentimes referred to as "The Blessings and Cursings." I just want to show another account that shows the details here of again how He is defining blessings and how He said things would go here. Leviticus 26 and verse 3, He said:

Leviticus 26:3. *'If you walk in My statutes and keep My commandments, and perform them, (NKJ)*

Notice, once again, this is contingent upon obedience.

Leviticus 26:4. *then I will give you rain in its season, the land shall yield its produce, and the trees of the field shall yield their fruit.*

5) *Your threshing shall last till the time of vintage, and the vintage shall last till the time of sowing; you shall eat your bread to the full, and dwell in your land safely.*

6) *I will give peace in the land, and you shall lie down, and none will make you afraid; I will rid the land of evil beasts, (NKJ)*

Notice He's even telling them He's going to protect them from wild animals. "You're not even going to have problems with evil beasts. As long as you obey, I'm going to keep that problem away from you."

Leviticus 26:6b. ... and the sword will not go through your land.

7) You will chase your enemies, and they shall fall by the sword before you.

8) Five of you shall chase a hundred, and a hundred of you shall put ten thousand to flight; your enemies shall fall by the sword before you.

9) 'For I will look on you favorably and make you fruitful, multiply you and confirm My covenant with you.

10) You shall eat the old harvest, and clear out the old because of the new. (NKJ)

In other words, if they continued to obey, they would never have shortages. They would never be without because He's saying, "You're going to have such plentifulness you're going to be throwing away some of the old harvest so you can make room to store all the new stuff! You're never going to have a shortage. Things are always going to go good for you physically."

Now let's pick up here in verse 11.

Leviticus 26:11. I will set My tabernacle among you, and My soul shall not abhor you.

12) I will walk among you and be your God, and you shall be My people.

13) I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, that you should not be their slaves; I have broken the [bonds] of your yoke and made you walk upright. (NKJ)

Just stop there. The next verse goes into the cursings. But if you notice here, what He is defining as blessings, as I mentioned, are the things we like to think of as physical human beings as blessings. It's the things that take pain and discomfort out of our lives and give us pleasure and enjoyment today, but because that's basically what He was telling them He would do.

And also notice, as we read in Deuteronomy 28, He said, "If you consistently obey, you will be above only and not beneath." In other words, "As long as you are consistently obeying, you will always get physically good things. You won't have adversity and hard times and trials." That [adversity, hard times, and trials] was promised to them if they disobeyed because, again, realize this is purely a physical arrangement. We're going to notice in the New Covenant when it becomes spiritual, it is very different, but I'm getting ahead of the story here.

Turn with me over to Deuteronomy chapter 28 and let's pick up where we left off. In Deuteronomy 28, we're going to start in verse 15. And notice these are the curses that would come from disobedience.

Deuteronomy 28:15. "But it shall come to pass, if you do not obey the voice of the Lord your God, to observe carefully all His commandments and His statutes which I

command you today, that all these curses will come upon you and overtake you:

16) "Cursed shall you be in the city, and cursed shall you be in the country.

17) "Cursed shall be your basket and your kneading bowl.

18) "Cursed shall be the fruit of your body and the produce of your land, the increase of your cattle and the offspring of your flocks.

19) "Cursed shall you be when you come in, and cursed shall you be when you go out.

20) "The Lord will send on you cursing, confusion, and rebuke in all that you set your hand to do, until you are destroyed and until you perish quickly, because of the wickedness of your doings in which you have forsaken Me.

21) "The Lord will make the plague cling to you until He has consumed you from the land which you are going to possess.

22) "The Lord will strike you with consumption, with fever, with inflammation, with severe burning fever, with the sword, with scorching, and with mildew; they shall pursue you until you perish. (NKJ)

Now, notice it only mentions severe health problems in the context of disobedience. That's, again, how this was handled in the Old Covenant when it was simply a physical arrangement. In verse 23:

Deuteronomy 28:23. *"And your heavens which are over your head shall be bronze, and the earth which is under you shall be iron.*

24) "The Lord will change the rain of your land to powder and dust; from the heaven it shall come down on you until you are destroyed.

25) "The Lord will cause you to be defeated before your enemies; you shall go out one way against them and flee seven ways before them; and you shall become troublesome to all the kingdoms of the earth.

26) "Your carcasses shall be food for all the birds of the air and the beasts of the [field], and no one shall frighten them away.

27) "The Lord will strike you with the boils of Egypt, with tumors, with the scab, and with the itch, from which you cannot be healed.

28) "The Lord will strike you with madness and blindness and confusion of heart.

29) "And you shall grope at noonday, as a blind man gropes in darkness; you shall not prosper in your ways; you shall be only oppressed and plundered continually, and no one shall save you.

30) "You shall betroth a wife, but another man shall lie with her; you shall build a house, but you shall not dwell in it; you shall plant a vineyard, but [you] shall not gather its grapes.

31) "Your ox shall be slaughtered before your eyes, but you shall not eat of it; your donkey shall be violently taken away from before you, and shall not be restored to you; your sheep shall be given to your enemies, and you shall have no one to rescue them.

32) "Your sons and your daughters shall be given to another people, and your eyes shall look and fail with longing for them all day long; and there shall be no strength in your hand.

33) "A nation whom you have not known shall eat the fruit of your land and the produce of your labor, and you shall be only oppressed and crushed continually. (NKJ)

In other words, if they consistently disobeyed, if they consistently made it their habit to disobey God, they should just expect problem after problem after problem coming upon them as punishment for their disobedience.

Now, if you noticed the basic logic that's being laid out here. Last year, we covered the Book of Job in great detail and went through two different sermons there. And one of the things I mentioned is that Job's three friends (at least the individuals referred to as his friends in the book) and even Job himself at times were arguing from the logic that "Bad things don't happen to good people." And you can see essentially where they would get that idea because as the Old Covenant is laid out here in this, it was only blessings as long as you're only consistently doing what God tells you to do, which, of course, ancient Israel was not consistent in obeying. And the bad things happen when they disobey.

But remember this when you look at individuals like Job and the prophets and Abraham and Moses and all the major figures that we tend to look at in the Old Covenant, remember these individuals had the holy spirit and they were being offered salvation. That's a game changer as they say in today's world. That's completely a game changer because when you give the holy spirit and salvation, the rules change because the logic of what is being accomplished is completely changing. So, when you look at situations like Job, for example, who was suffering even when he was righteous—and, again, we'll cover that in the new Covenant when we get there—realize he was converted. So, that's a different situation than what we're dealing with here. What He was offering ancient Israel, again, was just a physical arrangement.

Now, think about this. If all you have is a physical arrangement and your life just consists of however many decades that you live on this planet and then when you die, the movie is over. Hope you had a good time. That's the end of the game. (And, again, we realize everybody gets their chance at salvation later, but I'm just saying just look at the physical part of this.) If that is all you have, what is the definition, then, of the best deal you could possibly get? The definition, then, of the best deal you can possibly get is to spend however many decades that you have on this planet with as little pain and discomfort as possible and as much pleasure and enjoyment as possible. Because once you did, the ride is over! That's all you had! So, that is the best deal you can get. That is exactly what God was offering them. He was offering them the best deal they could get as a physical arrangement. And we have to understand this logic. Again, this was completely physical.

But as I mentioned in the introduction to this, it can be very disillusioning and discouraging to us if we look at our trials today, if we look at our lives today as New Covenant Christians in the context of these Old Covenant promises. Don't get me wrong. We can certainly suffer a lot because of our sins and our mistakes that we make. And God certainly can bless us for obeying Him. I'm not putting away those concepts. But what I'm saying is notice how He was promising to them was "You'll be above only and not beneath."? In other words, as long as you're consistently obeying, you'll just generally get good things all the time. You won't get lots of adversity. That changes

dramatically when we get into the New Covenant. Because let me give you an example of what can happen to an individual and their faith in God if they are looking at their life today, again, only through the eyes of the Old Covenant type promises.

Let me give you an example that happened many years ago. I want to say this happened back in the Worldwide days, probably back in the eighties if I remember correctly. But I heard a minister share this particular story. He said that there was a family he dealt with in this congregation. It was a young couple and they had a small child. And unfortunately, this small child had some very severe health problems. It was just continually suffering very hard times. And it was just eating the parents' lunch. I mean just emotionally caring for their kid and the love they had for their child, watching their child suffer like that was just beating them up.

And the husband of the couple was talking to their minister one day. And he confided in the minister. He said, "You know," he goes, "I don't know how much longer I can go on serving a God who will not tell me what the lesson is." Because, you see, he was looking at the trial from the context of what we read here in the Blessings and Cursings. You can hear in the logic what he was saying was "Obviously, there has to be this sin I committed. Me and my wife somehow must have messed up somewhere because the child is too young for it to be their fault. So, obviously, if there is something that we're doing, why will God not just tell us what it is so we can repent of it and make it go away? And of course, the trial will go away automatically." That's the logic they were using, but that is not adequate logic for the New Covenant.

Yes, we can certainly suffer because of our own sins. And it is always a legitimate question and something we should look at if we're suffering trials is to say, "Well, what's my part in this? And what could I have done to add to my own problems? Are there decisions I could do better? Is there something I could change to change my situation?" That is always something we should look at and we should evaluate.

But we also have to understand when we get to the New Covenant the rules of this change quite a bit. Now, let's turn over to Matthew chapter 5 and start looking at the definition of blessings in the New Covenant.

Because, as we know when we get to the New Covenant, as I mentioned before, yes, one of the common differences we are all aware of is once Christ's sacrifice took care of the sacrificial system, that was done away with because that's why we don't do that today. And the holy spirit and salvation are added on the table, because that wasn't offered to ancient Israel. It was to the heroes of the Bible, again, on an exception basis because God had to work with them for the whole Plan of Salvation. But, on a wide scale, that was not offered to ancient Israel. They were not given the holy spirit. They were not offered salvation. That is something that will happen in the Second Resurrection.

But when He is working with the Church of God today, the rules change dramatically because the holy spirit is being offered and now salvation is being offered. And this

changes, again, not just the fact that we don't have sacrifices and we have salvation offered, this changes the entire philosophy of the game because now the focus is not on enjoying our lives today. The focus is on ultimately the Kingdom which is later. The great blessings in the New Covenant are deferred compensation as referred to in today's world. You get paid later. In other words, the great reward is eternal life and salvation that comes later. And God's primary focus now in managing our lives is not just our physical enjoyment today and how pleasurable or non-painful our life is today; it's preparing the character in us to be able to make us into God-beings to have us reign in His Family and to be turned into that and to be molded in His image. So, now, that's the entire focus. And what we're going to see is that changes the rules of the game completely. And it drastically alters the definition of a blessing.

Now, with what I'm about to cover, let me be clear before I get started here. I'm not saying in the New Covenant that God doesn't physically bless us. I think we can all look at our lives in various times and see where God has provided physical blessings for us, has removed pain from our lives, has done, again, what we like to think of as blessings from a physical perspective. God certainly does that and He certainly cares about what we go through in not giving us too much to deal with and such. But I think it's important that we also see what He defines as blessings in the New Covenant because we don't find these types of statements in the Old Covenant arrangement.

So, let's start looking now in Matthew chapter 5 and we'll start reading in verse 10.

Matthew 5:10. Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

11) *"Blessed are you when they revile and persecute you, and say all kinds of evil against you falsely for My sake.*

12) *"Rejoice and be exceedingly glad, for great is your reward in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you. (NKJ)*

Now, notice what He's describing here as a blessing! Being reviled! Having your name slandered! Who wants to sign up for that? How many of us go "Yeah, pick me! Pick me! I want that to happen to me!"? No, we tend to go, "I'd like to find a way to avoid that," because that's painful. That's unpleasant to go through. But He is calling this a **blessing!**

Now, notice over here in Luke chapter 6. It's Luke chapter 6; we're going to look at several verses that hit this same concept, because you're going to find this idea all throughout the New Testament. Luke chapter 6 and verse 21:

Luke 6:21. Blessed are you who hunger now, for you shall be filled. Blessed are you who weep now, for you shall laugh.

22) *Blessed are you when men hate you, and when they exclude you, and revile you, and cast out your name as evil, for the Son of Man's sake.*

23) *Rejoice in that day and leap for joy! For indeed your reward is great in heaven, for in like manner their fathers did to the prophets. (NKJ)*

As, I mentioned before, remember the prophets? They had God's spirit. They were being offered salvation. They had the same kind of game that we're playing in terms of they were required to suffer. (I'm getting ahead of the story here.)

But just notice here what's being defined as blessings. These are things we don't typically—when we think of asking God to bless us, that's normally not what we're thinking of. "I want to be reviled and I want to be slandered and I want people to turn on me." That's not normally what we're thinking of when we talk about blessings.

So, let's just follow this thought here. Turn over to 1 Peter chapter 3. What we're going to see here is this, again, this same idea is all throughout the New Testament. 1 [Peter] chapter 3 and verse 13:

1 Peter 3:13. *And who is he who will harm you if you become followers of what is good? 14) But even if you should suffer for righteousness' sake, you are blessed.* (NKJ)

Now, notice it's calling suffering, even when you have done good, it's calling that a blessing!

1 Peter 3:14b. *"And do not be afraid of their threats, nor be troubled."
15) But sanctify the Lord God in your hearts, and always be ready to give a defense to everyone who asks you a reason for the hope that is in you, with meekness and fear;
16) having a good conscience, that when they defame you as evildoers, those who revile your good conduct in Christ may be ashamed.
17) For it is better, if it is the will of God, to suffer for doing good than for doing evil.* (NKJ)

Now, notice it's saying here, "It's a blessing if you suffer, even when you've been obedient and done right."

Now, that's very different than what we read in Deuteronomy 28, isn't it? Because what it said there is if you are constantly obeying God and always doing what He what He says, "You'll be above only and not beneath." In other words, you won't be suffering. You'll live in a physical utopia. The sky will just rain down physical blessings on you all the time as long as you're consistently obeying God.

This is telling us the opposite. It's saying, "Even when you've been obedient, even when you have done what God has said, you should expect to have adversity. You should expect to have trials."

Turn with me now over to James chapter 5. It is James chapter 5, we're going to start reading in verse 10.

James 5:10. *My brethren, take the prophets, who spoke in the name of the Lord, as an example of suffering and patience.
11) Indeed we count them blessed who endure.* (NKJ)

Now, notice we're talking about the prophets here. Most of these guys got martyred. Most of them got violently killed for what they believed in. It is saying, "We account them blessed!" "This is a blessing that they endured this" is what it's saying.

Let's read on here.

James 5:11b. *You have heard of the perseverance of Job and seen the end intended by the Lord—that the Lord is very compassionate and merciful. (NKJ)*

Again, we have Job's example. How many of us would want to be blessed the way Job was? To go through all the gut-wrenching trials that he went through one after another? That's normally not something we want to sign up for! Our normal thought is "I'll just read the book and I'll just learn the lessons from what he went through. [I] don't need to go through that myself!" That's generally the perspective we tend to take on it because who wants to sign up for that kind of agony and pain? That's not what we tend to think of as blessings! We tend to look at a blessing as when the pain is taken away from us. But think of it like this: God looks at this subject very, very differently than we do.

Now, we're physical human beings and we don't like pain as a result. And that's just normal and natural for us as individuals. But oftentimes when we think, "Man, I've really been blessed that nasty trial got taken away from me," isn't that how we normally look at it? "The pain went away and I'm so thankful that went away. I've been blessed." And that's true. We should. I'm not saying we shouldn't. We should be thankful for that. That's a good thing for us.

But if you understand this through God's eyes, I think oftentimes He considers the blessing (the pain and the trial that we went through) as a greater blessing than the relief from it. Because, again, He is looking at it through spiritual eyes; we're looking at it through physical eyes because we don't like pain. We're just naturally wired that way. We want to avoid pain. And, again, that's normal. That's natural. I'm not putting that down. I'm just saying if we look at this through God's eyes, it gives us a different perspective on the entire subject.

As we can see here, not only does the New Covenant tell us that blessings—I should say suffering adversity and trials and being attacked even when we're doing good is considered a blessing, it also tells us it is a requirement. What we're about to see here in the Bible is a requirement for salvation. As I mentioned when the holy spirit and salvation are put on the table, it's a game changer. It completely changes the rules because now we're not just blessed and given good things all the time, and again from a physical perspective for obedience, we're required to suffer.

Turn with me over to Romans chapter 8 and we'll see this directly stated in the Bible. It's Romans chapter 8 and we're going to start reading in verse 16. It says:

Romans 8:16. *The Spirit Himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God,
17) and if children, then heirs—heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ, (NKJ)*

So now, it's telling us that as New Covenant Christians, we have the opportunity to be born into God's Family. We can be joint heirs with Christ. Salvation is on the table as part of the deal. So, if we successfully fulfill our part of the bargain, we actually get rewarded with eternal life! But under what condition? Let's continue reading.

Romans 8:17b. *... if indeed we suffer with Him, that we may also be glorified together. (NKJ)*

It's a stated requirement in the contract. In other words, once the holy spirit and salvation are put on the table, now we have to suffer even when we've done right. It is part of the requirements for what we're going through.

Turn with me over to 1 Peter chapter 2 and we're just going to look at several Scriptures that reinforce this same idea here. 1 Peter chapter 2 and we'll start reading in verse 19.

1 Peter 2:19. *For this is commendable, if because of conscience toward God one endures grief, suffering wrongfully. (NKJ)*

And, we're going to notice here suffering wrongfully means suffering when you didn't do anything to deserve it. You know when it's not an issue of you made bad decisions, you sinned, you did something stupid, and the natural consequences are coming your way. What it's calling "suffering wrongfully" that is suffering even when you have done right. Even when you have been righteous, you have done what God said, you've made good decisions, but you're suffering anyway.

Verse 20:

1 Peter 2:20. *For what credit is it if, when you are beaten for your faults, you take it patiently? But when you do good and suffer [for it and] take it patiently, this is commendable before God. (NKJ)*

And now, notice verse 21!

1 Peter 2:21. *For to this you were called, because Christ also suffered for us, leaving us an example, that you should follow His steps: (NKJ)*

The Bible calls this "suffering as Christ suffered."

Now, how did Christ suffer? We know He went through lots of adversity during His life. Not only at the very end of His life, but even all throughout His life. But He never sinned! He lived a perfect life His entire life. He never messed up and He never made any mistakes or bad decisions or something where He could be reaping the consequences

of His sins or His bad decisions. That never happened! So, when He suffered, He suffered wrongfully as it calls it here in 2 Peter—it's actually 1 Peter. He was suffering even when He didn't do anything to deserve it. It wasn't a matter of His sins. He was suffering even when He had been righteous.

Notice over here in 2 Thessalonians. We're just going to follow this same theme here for a bit. 2 Thessalonians chapter 1, we'll start reading in verse 3.

II Thessalonians 1:3. *We are bound to thank God always for you, brethren, as it is fitting, because your faith grows exceedingly, and the love of every one of you all abounds toward each other,*
4) so that we ourselves boast of you among the churches of God for your patience and faith in all your persecutions and tribulations that you endure,
5) which is manifest evidence of the righteous judgment of God, that you may be [accounted] worthy of the kingdom of God, for which you also suffer; (NKJ)

In other words, why are we suffering, then? To be accounted worthy of the Kingdom of God. It is a stated requirement in the New Covenant that we have to do this to qualify for eternal life and to be a spirit-being.

Now turn back over to 1 Peter in chapter 4 this time. 1 Peter chapter 4, this time we'll start reading in verse 12. It says:

1 Peter 4:12. *Beloved, do not think it strange concerning the fiery trial which is to try you, as though some strange thing happened to you; (NKJ)*

In other words, don't consider this unusual. Don't consider this an anomaly. Consider this a normal expectation. This is par for the course as they say in golf. This is something you should expect as a normal expectation in a New Covenant arrangement.

Picking up in verse 13:

1 Peter 4:13. *but rejoice to the extent that you partake of Christ's sufferings, that when His glory is revealed, you may also be glad with exceeding joy. (NKJ)*

In other words, consider this a blessing when you have to go through this! Now, I realize that's easy to say and hard to do when you're going through it. That's true for all of us. But that's how the Bible is telling us to look at it.

1 Peter 4:14. *If you are reproached for the name of Christ, blessed are you, for the Spirit of glory and of God rests upon you. On their part He is blasphemed, but on your part He is glorified.*

15) But let none of you suffer as a murderer, a thief, an evildoer, or as a busybody in other people's matters.

16) Yet if anyone suffers as a Christian, let him not be ashamed, but let him glorify God in this matter. (NKJ)

Now, notice again here, he's telling us we can certainly suffer because of our own mistakes, because of our own bad decisions, because of our own sins. And as flawed physical human beings that's probably the majority of the time for us. We brought things upon ourselves.

But it's also telling us here that we suffer, oftentimes, also not because of something we did. Not because it is a direct punishment for a sin we committed or a mistake that we made. Even when we have been righteous, we are required to suffer. Again, it is a term of the contract when salvation is on the table that we have to do this.

Let's also notice something else here. Turn over to 2 Timothy 3 and verse 12. We're going to notice another Scripture here that hits at this same idea. 2 Timothy 3:12:

2 Timothy 3:12. Yes, and all who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will suffer persecution. (NKJ)

Notice that is an all-encompassing statement.

When we think of persecution, oftentimes we tend to look at it through the eyes of like what the apostle Paul himself faced. He's an apostle. He's out trying to preach the gospel. And oftentimes, he's being attacked either by the government in the area or lynch mobs that are after him. He's thrown in prison. He's stoned. He's been beaten. He's directly being physically attacked or thrown in prison because of what he believes or because of what he's preaching.

Now, what we're going to see here is that's not exactly what he is referring to here when he says, "persecution." Because think about it. This is stated as an all-encompassing statement. It doesn't say, "Just the prophets of the Old Testament; they'll just be the ones that suffer persecution; just the original apostles; just John the Baptist; just those heroes of the Bible, they'll be persecuted but not anybody else." That's not what it says! It says, "all." It says everyone who wants to live a life "in Christ Jesus will suffer persecution."

So how are we to understand that? Because if we define persecution like I mentioned the way Paul faced it where it was a lynch mob coming after him or he was being thrown in prison by the governing authorities in the area, we've all known lots of lots of Christians—in fact, the vast majority of us in America—in our time in the Church have never faced that kind of persecution. We've all known Christians who have lived and died. Their Christian life is finished and they never faced that kind of persecution.

So, what is it referring to here when it says, "all must face persecution"? Well, you have to understand who the persecutor is. Don't look at the persecutor here as just being governing authorities in whatever area you live in or an angry lynch mob coming in your neighborhood. That's not how this is defined. Paul, who wrote this letter, also defined for us who the persecutor is in Ephesians chapter 6. Turn with me over to Ephesians

chapter 6. We're going to read verse 12 here. Ephesians chapter 6 verse 12 is a very familiar Scripture here.

Ephesians 6:12. *For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this age, against spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places. (NKJ)*

What Paul is telling us here, what we're really up against, it isn't physical human beings. It isn't just the government in a particular area. It's not just an angry lynch mob. It's Satan and his demons. That's who is really behind it all.

So, when Paul was being attacked (because he literally did get stoned; he literally did get thrown into prison and such), who was really behind that was Satan and his demons. Yes, they were physical human beings who carried that out but the real persecutor was Satan.

Because think of it like this: Look at the example of Job. And I won't take time to turn to the book there because last year we went through this in great detail in two sermons. But one of the things that we covered was all the graphic details of what that Job went through. And the Bible tells us the behind-the-scenes story. That Satan was directly responsible for carrying out all the issues that happened to him (Job).

Of course, God placed limitations upon it. There was kind of a negotiation process there and God made sure He controlled the parameters. But by the end of the negotiation, the final limit was "Just don't kill him. You can fire every bullet you've got at this guy. You just can't kill him." And that's what Satan did. He went out and he threw every bullet he had. Every weapon he had to use, he simultaneously threw it at him—whatever God would allow.

Now if you would have asked Job in that situation, "Job, do you feel like you are being persecuted?" All you have to do is read his story. The answer is astounding, "Yes!" Absolutely, he felt like he was being persecuted. Because he was!

Because Satan is who does the persecuting and he can do it through various means. It doesn't have to be a lynch mob. It doesn't have to be the government in a particular area. He can come as through numerous means.

But when he's [Paul] saying that "All who want to live in Christ Jesus have to suffer persecution," the persecutor is Satan, because "we wrestle not against flesh and blood." It's against the dark spiritual forces in this universe. That's who we're struggling against. So, that's where the persecution is coming from. That's why all have to face that.

So, if you think of it in that context, just apply that to your own trials at times. I know that there are times all of us go through where you just get hit with trials. And it's just one trial after another after another after another. And you just think sometimes in

desperation. You go, "Man! I just feel like I'm being persecuted!" Maybe you are. Maybe you are being persecuted, but again that persecutor is Satan.

And, again, that doesn't mean that we don't look at times in our life when we're going through that and say, "Hey, is there a sin I'm doing? Are there mistakes I'm making? Could I make better decisions that could change some of this?" Those are always valid questions.

But we also have to realize that it's not necessarily that simple because there are times we have to suffer and go through adversity and trials that aren't a result of punishment for sin or bad decisions. They are a requirement in the New Covenant that we have to go through this to build the character necessary to be in God's Kingdom.

So, with that in mind, we've covered the fact that blessings in the New Covenant are often times defined as trials. Things that we would call trials, adversity, stuff that we want to go away, God oftentimes looks at it as blessings and He's telling us to have that outlook as well. Again, that's easy to say and harder to do, but that's what He's telling us.

And, again, don't get me wrong, God certainly does give us physical blessings. He does certainly in the New Covenant give us blessings, again, the way we like to define them as physical human beings—the things that take the pain out of our lives and give us pleasure and enjoyment. He certainly does do that too.

What I'm saying is He's adding to the picture here the requirement that we have to suffer, that we have to endure through hardships, again even when we've been righteous. Why does God do that? Why is that a requirement when salvation is on the table? What's the point? What's the purpose behind it? Are we dealing with a God that just likes to see how much we can take? Is He being insensitive? Is He being cruel or unkind? Well, let's take a look at why He would do this.

Turn with me over to James chapter 1. It is James chapter 1; we're going to start reading in verse 2.

James 1:2. My brethren, count it all joy when you fall into various trials, (NKJ)

Now, notice it is saying basically, "Look at this as a blessing. Look at this as a blessing. Be joyful when you fall into hard trials." Again, that is easy to say and hard to do when we're going through it. But let's notice why.

James 1:3. knowing that the testing of your faith produces patience.

4) But let patience have its perfect work, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking nothing. (NKJ)

See he is saying here that these trials, these hard times that we have to go through, they wind up developing us spiritually. They build character in us.

Also, as I mentioned before, when the holy spirit and salvation are on the table, it is a game changer. It changes the entire philosophy of what's being accomplished. So, the rules change as a result because it isn't just about physically enjoying our lives and having our physical lives be a pleasurable experience. Now, it's about building character. It's about developing the mind of God so that we can be developed into His Family. So the whole focus, then, becomes upon again that deferred compensation (this reward that's going to come later) and molding us in His image so that we can make it to that point. That becomes the entire purpose.

So, that's why He's saying, these are blessings, because He's more focused on the character it develops in us than He is in how much we enjoyed the experience. Now, we as physical human beings tend to be more focused on how much we enjoyed the experience going through it. And going through trials is generally not terribly enjoyable. We like them to go away. But the reason He is saying this is a blessing is because it develops His character in us. It strengthens us. As it's telling us here in James, it perfects us. That's what helps mold us into God's image.

But think of it like this. When we oftentimes think of the subject of trials and why we go through them, I think most church members would tell you, "Well, we go through them because it builds character." And that's true. That's an absolutely accurate answer.

There is a deeper reason than that. I guess you might say there is more of a deeper understanding of the same answer. What I'm about to show you in the Bible is that by Biblical definition, it is impossible to develop the very mind and character of God without suffering. That is why it is an absolute requirement.

Turn with me over to 1 Corinthians chapter 13. 1 Corinthians chapter 13, as I'm sure we're all familiar, this chapter is oftentimes referred to as "The Love Chapter." And the reason being is because *agape* love is the subject that Paul is primarily addressing here.

Now we won't take the time to turn over to 1 John because I think you are all familiar with this, but in 1 John chapter 4, it tells us that *agape* love is basically the summation of the mind of God. It sums up His existence, His character, His mind. It literally just puts it down into a sentence and says, "God is *agape*." Or as it is translated in English, "God is love." In other words, that one word just defines His mind, His character, who He is.

As a result, that is by far, bar none the most important characteristic we can ever develop because it is the very mind of God. And we'll notice here in the first couple of verses here in 1 Corinthians 13 that's exactly what it is telling us. Now, notice here in verse 1:

1 Corinthians 13:1. *Though I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love [In other words, have not agape.], I have become [as] sounding brass or a clanging cymbal.*

2) And though I have the gift of prophecy, and understand all mysteries and all

knowledge, and though I have all faith, so that I could remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing.

3) And though I bestow all my goods to feed the poor, and though I give my body to be burned, but have not love, it profits me nothing. (NKJ)

What it is articulating for us here is this is by far, bar none the single most important thing we can ever have in terms of a character trait. And it doesn't matter what other gifts or talents that we have. It doesn't matter if we can foretell the future, if we understand everything about the Bible, if we know all mysteries, all of that doesn't mean a thing if we don't have this characteristic of *agape* love.

But, now, notice how *agape* love is defined. Notice the very first statement here in verse 4 defining this very characteristic.

1 Corinthians 13:4. *Love suffers long and is kind; (NKJ)*

That's what we're going to focus on here.

Now notice also this chapter just goes on giving a much more thorough definition of *agape* love than just this one statement. It's certainly defined much broader than this.

But notice this particular statement. We're talking about the very characteristic that is the mind of God that sums up His very character, the most important thing we could ever have to develop, and part of how it is defined is the quality of character that enables you to suffer long and still be kind.

Think of it like this. How can one learn and develop the ability to suffer long and still be kind if you don't have to first suffer long? How would that be possible?

Think of it another way. As we all know, God likes to try and test us like He did to Abraham. He sent him up to sacrifice Isaac. And then when He got him all the way up to the point of just being ready to carry it out where Abraham was just fixing to do it—in his mind, he had already done it—and God stopped him. And God looks at him and says, "Now, I know. Now, I know what you're going to do because I understand the best predictor of future behavior is past behavior. And I know what your past behavior is. You're going to do whatever I ask you to do." Well, He tested him and He made sure he would actually do what He says.

How could you be tested on the ability to suffer long and still be kind, if you never suffer long? By definition, how would that be possible? It's not. By the very definition of the very mind of God, you have to suffer to be able to develop that. Because, again, if it's defined as "suffering long and still being kind," by definition you have to suffer to develop the ability to still be kind when you do that so that it can work.

So, when you look at your trials, think of it like this. God doesn't just put us through these because He is insensitive, because He doesn't care, because He likes playing a

game of "How much can you take and how much can we pile on this guy before he caves in?" That's not God's perspective. He's a very loving Father. And He puts us through these difficult, grueling hard times at times because He wants to reward us with the ultimate reward. He wants to give us eternal life. He wants to give us, as we're going to see at the end of this sermon, He wants to give us the feel good, happy ending. (And I'll explain that in a minute.) But He wants to give us a life where we have none of these problems and we can live forever without this.

But the only way to get there by definition is to go through trials and suffering—again, by definition of the very mind of God. So, when He is doing this to us, He's doing it as an act of love. That's hard for us oftentimes to understand when we're going through it and we're feeling the pain because, again, as physical human beings, we focus on the pain. We're focused on how it feels right now and we want that pain to go away.

But God oftentimes looks at that as a blessing because He's focused on the long term overall picture of what He is trying to accomplish here. And, as a result, He sees that as a blessing, because, again to Him, oftentimes the trial is a greater blessing than the relief from the trial. We tend to focus on the relief because we like it when the pain goes away. But God does that, again, to bless us because it's required to build character.

Also, we'll think like this. I mentioned earlier in the sermon basically the differences between the Old Covenant and the New Covenant. The Old Covenant was a completely physical deal. Like I said, if all you have is this life and however many decades that you're going to live as a physical human being in this life, the best deal you can get is having as much pleasure and enjoyment as possible and as little pain as possible. That's as good as it gets.

But, if you look at our lives as New Covenant Christians where you are required to suffer, you're required to face adversity even when you've done everything that's been expected of you. We have to keep our focus on, again, that deferred compensation as I like to call it, the ultimate reward that comes at the end of this, because if we don't, if that didn't exist, then we quite frankly got the worst deal possible. And let me show you where that is directly stated in the Bible.

Turn with me over to 1 Corinthians chapter 15. As you know this particular chapter is oftentimes referred to as "The Resurrection Chapter" because that is the primary subject that Paul is addressing here is the subject of the resurrection. Now, notice in verse 16, it says:

1 Corinthians 15:16. *For if the dead do not rise, then Christ is not risen.*

17) And if Christ is not risen, your faith is futile; you are still in your sins!

18) Then also those who have fallen asleep in Christ have perished.

19) If in this life only we have hope in Christ, we are of all men most pitiable. (NKJ)

In other words, we got the worst deal possible! If you got a deal where you are required to obey, not just the letter of the law, you're required to obey the spirit of the law and

you've got to do all of this and face adversity and face persecution and suffer even when you've done exactly what was asked of you and you get rewarded, as we would look at it with trials and adversity. If at the end of that, you don't get eternal life, man, you would have been better off just living your life for pleasure today because when you died, that's all you got! That's just basically what Paul is saying here.

But think of it as in the context of the trials Paul himself went through. Totally understand why he would say this. Turn to 2 Corinthians chapter 11. Let's look through the list here of what Paul said he himself went through as a Christian. And you can see exactly why he would say, "If there's not a resurrection after this, if there's not eternal life like God's promising us, we got ripped off! This is a horrible deal!" But look at this in 2 Corinthians 11 verse 22.

2 Corinthians 11:22. *Are they Hebrews? So am I. Are they Israelites? So am I. Are they the seed of Abraham? So am I.*

23) *Are they ministers of Christ?— I speak as a fool— I am more: in labors more abundant, in stripes above measure, in prisons more frequently, in deaths often.*

24) *From the Jews five times I received forty stripes minus one.*

25) *Three times I was beaten with rods; once I was stoned; three times I was shipwrecked; a night and a day I have been in the deep;*

26) *in journeys often, in perils of waters, in perils of robbers, in perils of my own countrymen, in perils of the Gentiles, in perils in the city, in perils in the wilderness, in perils in the sea, in perils among false brethren;*

27) *in weariness and toil, in sleeplessness often, in hunger and thirst, in fastings often, in cold and nakedness— (NKJ)*

Now this is a list he's giving us of what he went through after he was converted! This is after he's repented of all the persecuting of the Church he did before he was converted and Christ's sacrifice has already covered all of that and he's [Paul] forgiven. These are the things he went through after he becomes an apostle of God and he is doing his best to obey God. He basically becomes the poster-child for Christianity in that he writes the majority of the New Testament.

So, you can realize if you go through all of this and you have to suffer all of these types of trials and you don't wind up and there's no eternal salvation after this is done, it's the worst deal possible! That's what Paul is telling us.

But, you see, Paul realized we do get salvation. There is eternal life offered after this and **that makes it the best deal possible!** Turn over with me to Romans chapter 8. Let's just read verse 18 this time.

Romans 8:18. *For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us. (NKJ)*

In other words, he is saying, "When you consider the ultimate reward, when you consider salvation that's offered after us and you compare that to what we have to go

through in this physical life, these trials don't seem like such a big deal. They're not worthy to be compared with this fantastic offer of this blessing that we're going to receive in eternal life, because, again, the worst deal possible becomes the best deal possible when you consider the ultimate reward!

What we ultimately get is what I like to call "the feel good, happy ending." And the reason I say that is I'm sure you remember when you were a child and your parents, your grandparents, other people read you bedtime stories. How did they typically end? Didn't they normally end with "And they all lived happily ever after!" It's kind of this feel-good ending where everybody gets to ride off into the sunset; they have no problems; and everything is positive and good.

And then we grow up as adults and then we go to the movies. And oftentimes how do your really positive ending movies tend to end? It winds up somehow the good guy gets the girl and they fall in love and they get married and they ride off into the sunset and all their problems are resolved and they just kind of live happily ever after as the credits roll up.

Now, we all know that when we see that in this physical world that's a fantasy. That doesn't really happen because even again if you consistently obeyed in an Old Covenant environment and had all these physical blessings on you, the ever after part doesn't happen. Because eventually your body wears out; you die and it comes to an end. It doesn't last forever.

Well, what we're offered in salvation is truly the feel good, happy ending. Turn with me over to Revelation chapter 21 and verse 4.

Revelation 21:4. "And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes; there shall be no more death, nor sorrow, nor crying. There shall be no more pain, for the former things have passed away." (NKJ)

And see this lasts forever because this is describing a time when everyone who has made it into God's Kingdom is already a God-being and is already spirit. And the physical is done away with. That's when we get what I like to call the feel good, happy ending because, at this point, truly they all live happily ever after. Then, everybody is spiritual. There is no more pain. There is no more adversity. There are no more negative things to happen. And that lasts forever!

And that's what we have to keep our eye on because if you think about the context of this chapter—and we won't take the time here just wrapping up to go through all of this—but what is being described here in Revelation chapter 21 is the New Jerusalem, which it tells us is the Bride of Christ. It's the Church that gets changed in God-beings and marries Jesus Christ.

So, when you think about it, this is truly describing the feel good, happy ending. And what I mean by that is this is a story where the good guy, Jesus Christ, gets the girl, the

Church of God, and they get married. And, then, They ride off into the sunset and live happily ever after. So, this is truly the storybook ending in the movies that we all look at and we know is a fantasy, but this one is real. This really happens!

So, if we look at our trials today and the sufferings that we have to go through, we have to look at it in this context because we're required to endure to the end. And we're told in the New Covenant God doesn't give us a rose garden. He promised us up front in the terms of the contract.

I'm sure, when we were all baptized, one of the things the minister went through with us is counting the cost. This is going to be hard and you might have to give your life. And you are going to have to suffer even when you've done good. And we saw all these requirements and that's what we agreed to.

Now, I'm sure, as we all went through the years afterwards, we realized it was a lot harder than we initially anticipated. That's normally how that works. But still the point is we have to endure to the end through all of this, in spite of all of that, because at the end there is this wonderful picture. Again, we get the best deal possible.

What we have offered to us is the greatest deal that ever has been and ever will be offered to anyone who will ever live. It truly is, again, the feel good, happy ending where there is no more pain; there is no more sorrow; there is no more crime. And truly, they all live happily ever after.