

Realistic Expectations for the Christian Life

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For a lot of you out there who know me, you probably know that I've worked in the field of recruiting for close to the last twenty years. I currently work for a hospital system in Dallas, TX as a corporate recruiter. I often times jokingly describe what I do as being a corporate matchmaker. What I mean by that is, I spend a lot of my time every week interviewing individuals who are applying for a job with my company.

You try to look at both sides of the equation. I'm not just screening the individuals to find out if they have the skills, the background, and the experience that we need for the position. I also try to assess the candidate themselves in terms of what they're looking for. Why they're looking for a job, what they would like to see in their next position, what their career goals are, what their salary expectations are. I'm trying to see if it's a good match on both sides of the equation. I want it to be a win-win for both parties and see if this is a good match.

I spend a decent amount of my time managing expectations. I try to see what a candidate's expectations are, what they want to see in their next job and what they might think of the salary offer that they are going to get. I try to manage that first of all so that, if their expectations of what they're looking for and what this position can offer them are just not a match, then I tell them that up front. Then they don't waste their time pursuing something that's not going to be what they wanted in the first place.

There are other ratios to manage as well. A person can go completely through the process and be offered the job that they were applying for. But, if it's not what they were wanting it to be or the offer is not in the range of what they were hoping for, then they have gone through this whole process and even though they have successfully won—you might say—they are not happy with what they got. It doesn't match their expectations of what they were hoping for this to be. It can wind up being an upsetting and disillusioning process for them and I try to offset this. As a result, I am often trying to paint a realistic picture for people. In some cases, regardless of how up front you are, candidates can be the type that see what they want to see and hear what they want to hear. Regardless of how accurate a picture you try to create for them, in their minds they are thinking, no, I'm just going to impress people so much that they're going to offer me this bigger number. I'm going to get offered this bigger position or something else outside the realm of what I've told them to expect.

As a result, sometimes these people go through this whole process and even though you've told them very clearly what to expect—sometimes being downright blunt about it—when things don't work out the way they wanted them to be, then they are very upset. Sometimes they then file complaints and insist that they were promised this and was told it was going to be like this. Even though, in reality you told them very bluntly it wasn't going to be what they had envisioned. You had heard their statements and knew

what they were thinking and told them no, it's not going to be like that, it's going to be something else. Sometimes people refuse to hear that.

The reason I mention this is that we in our Christian lives, in our relationship with God, are sometimes guilty of the same thing. Sometimes in our relationship with God and our walk in the Christian life, even though the Bible can tell us very clearly what to expect in situations and how it's going to work, sometimes we just see what we want to see and hear what we want to hear. We project onto God and onto this whole picture what we want to see and then when it doesn't turn out like that, we can get upset and disillusioned. We can say, God didn't do what He promised me He would do, when in reality, maybe scripture told us very clearly and very bluntly what to expect. But we were seeing what we wanted to see and hearing what we wanted to hear.

What I would like to do today is address the subject of expectations and how this relates to our relationship with God and our walk in the Christian life. If you would like a title for this sermon, it's:

Realistic Expectations for the Christian Life

As I mentioned, expectations can be a very big deal for us in how we cope with the reality of our lives. As I like to phrase it, if you look in terms of our satisfaction with our lives, we can look at it as a mathematical formula. It's happiness equals reality minus expectations. In other words, if the reality of your life turns out better than you were expecting, how do you feel? I'm lucky, I'm blessed, things turned out so well. If your expectations were way up here and you feel like your reality is less, how do you feel? I got ripped off, I deserve better than this and I didn't get what I needed and you feel cheated. That's how expectations affect our lives.

Let's start off looking at how this can affect our Christian lives and what scripture tells us about this.

Proverbs 13:12 *Hope deferred makes the heart sick, But when the desire comes, it is a tree of life.* (NKJV)

What this scripture is specifically addressing is the concept of having to wait a long time to see what we're hoping for, come to fruition and how waiting a long time can be discouraging. It can wear us out and make the heart grow sick. Think about it in terms of, what if what you are hoping for, what you are anticipating and looking forward to, was not realistic in the first place. That means what you are wanting to see happen, is never going to happen. That can make the heart grow sick, that can be disillusioning, it can be very discouraging and frustrating for us. That's why it's important that we have realistic expectations when we face anything in life. This can apply in lots of different areas of our lives. But it can be particularly damaging in our Christian life if we are not getting our expectations of how the Christian life works, or how our relationship with God works. If we aren't getting those expectations from what scripture clearly tells us, we can set ourselves up for disillusionment. If we are taking our own physical, carnal

ideas and projecting them onto God and the Bible, we can be discouraged and upset when things work out exactly how God told us they would, but not how we were expecting they would.

Let's look at an example of this in the Bible in Luke 24:13. To set the scene, the time frame we are looking at is after Christ finished His ministry on earth as a human being. He has already been crucified and put in the grave and had been resurrected and is now back to being a God-being. But He's on earth interacting with physical human beings. We will pick up in verse 13.

Luke 24:13 *Now behold, two of them were traveling that same day to a village called Emmaus, which was seven miles from Jerusalem.*

14) *And they talked together of all these things which had happened.*

15) *-So it was, while they conversed and reasoned, that Jesus Himself drew near and went with them.*

16) *But their eyes were restrained, so that they did not know Him. (NKJV)*

In other words, they didn't realize this was Christ they are talking to.

17) *And He said to them, What kind of conversation is this that you have with one another as you walk and are sad?" (NKJV)*

He notices that they were sad, upset and discouraged and this is what He is asking them about. Notice how they respond.

18) *Then the one whose name was Cleopas answered and said to Him, Are You the only stranger in Jerusalem, and have You not known the things which happened there in these days?"*

19) *And He said to them, What things?" So they said to Him, The things concerning Jesus of Nazareth, who was a Prophet mighty in deed and word before God and all the people,*

20) *-and how the chief priests and our rulers delivered Him to be condemned to death, and crucified Him.*

21) *But we were hoping that it was He who was going to redeem Israel. Indeed, besides all this, today is the third day since these things happened. (NKJV)*

Notice they said, we were hoping He would redeem Israel. If you are defining that spiritually, He did! He is the spiritual redeemer of Israel. But that was not their definition of what redeeming Israel was. They were thinking of this physically. He was the Messiah. But their idea of what that was, is that He was going to come, free them from the Romans, restore them to physical prosperity, make their physical lives good and make the nation prosperous. He would take all of their pain away. That is what He's going to do for us and that's not what happened. He gets betrayed and killed, crucified, murdered and buried and they're saying, what happened? This was not what we were expecting and now they're upset. Notice what Christ corrects them for. Pick up in verse 22.

- 22) *Yes, and certain women of our company, who arrived at the tomb early, astonished us.*
- 23) *When they did not find His body, they came saying that they had also seen a vision of angels who said He was alive.*
- 24) *And certain of those who were with us went to the tomb and found it just as the women had said; but Him they did not see.”*
- 25) *Then He said to them, [notice Christ’s correction] O foolish ones, and slow of heart to believe in all that the prophets have spoken!*
- 26) *Ought not the Christ to have suffered these things and to enter into His glory?”*
- 27) *-And beginning at Moses and all the Prophets, He expounded to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning Himself. (NKJV)*

Notice, He’s correcting them by saying, why don’t you guys believe scripture? Think about it, their expectations were that He was going to restore them to prosperity, He was going to free them from the Romans. Christ was saying, if you had read Isaiah, that is not what it says. If you had read scripture it would have told you that the Messiah is going to come, He is going to be killed, He is going to be buried and He is going to be raised in three days—this was what was going to happen. If you had your expectations based on scripture, then that’s what you would have been expecting. It wouldn’t have been a shock to you that this had taken place. What you did was, you took your physical expectations—what sounded good to your physical, carnal mind and you projected them onto this picture. That’s what He’s telling them. You didn’t get your expectations from scripture. Notice, He then walked them through scripture starting with Moses and going through the prophets and showed them what it actually said. If you had been studying this, that’s what you would have expected to happen. They weren’t getting their expectations from scripture. They were taking what sounded good to their physical minds of what a physical human being would want to see, then they were projecting that onto what a loving God would do. That was not what He was going to do and that was not what He said He was going to do. Their expectations were not based on scripture. They were based upon their physical, carnal ideas.

This is an example on the positive end. What I mean by that is, they had positive expectations. They weren’t realistic but they were positive expectations. They were expecting God to do something good for them. Let’s look at an example where the same kind of thinking happened on a negative point of view in Matthew 25 and verse 24. We are breaking into the context of the parable of the talents. A lot of you are probably familiar with the parable of the talents as it is a well-known parable that gets addressed a lot. This is a parable where Christ was teaching lessons about the Kingdom of God. It gives us the example of three different individuals. It says to one He gives five talents, to another one He gives two talents and to a third guy He gives one talent. Then He leaves and comes back later to see what they have done with these talents while He was gone and rewards them accordingly. We’re going to focus on the guy with one talent and the conversation that took place between Him and Christ.

There are some important lessons we can glean from this story on the subject we're addressing, beginning in verse 24.

Matthew 25:24 *“Then he who had received the one talent came and said, Lord, I knew you to be a hard man, reaping where you have not sown, and gathering where you have not scattered seed.*

25) And I was afraid, and went and hid your talent in the ground. Look, there you have what is yours. (NKJV)

Stop for a second and consider what this guy is saying. He said to Christ, I knew you were a hard man, you reap where you didn't sow. If you say to somebody, you reap where you didn't sow, what are you saying to them? You selfishly take things that are not rightfully yours. You are basically a bully and a thief because you take from people what is not yours—that's what reaping what you haven't sown is. Notice Christ's response, verse 26.

26) But his lord answered and said to him, You wicked and lazy servant, you knew that I reap where I have not sown, and gather where I have not scattered seed. (NKJV)

If you read this in English it appears that Christ is agreeing with this guy. We're going to see that is the key to the confusion. If you knew I was like this..... it sounds like He's agreeing with that allegation. The problem is, we're reading this in English and not in Greek. Just notice that and then we'll continue the thought.

27) So you ought to have deposited my money with the bankers, and at my coming I would have received back my own with interest.

28) So take the talent from him, and give it to him who has ten talents.

29) For to everyone who has, more will be given, and he will have abundance; but from him who does not have, even what he has will be taken away.

30) And cast the unprofitable servant into the outer darkness. There will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. (NKJV)

As I pointed out earlier, the guy with one talent says, I knew you were this harsh, unfair individual who reaps where he hasn't sown. Then Christ returns and says, if you knew I was this person—which like I said, sounds like Christ is agreeing and validating this allegation. The key is, we are reading this in English and in English, the same English word is used in both cases which is *knew*. In Greek it is two distinct words. If you look at the definitions, it clarifies what is taking place here.

Let me share with you the two definitions of the two Greek words that are used. The definitions that I'm going to give you are coming from Vine's Expository Dictionary of Biblical Words by William Vine. The first word, that was used by the guy with one talent when he said, I knew—the word he uses “ginosko” and is Strong's #1097. Here are portions of how Vine's defines it—realizing in both of these cases I'm reading excerpts and not everything that Vine's writes. He defines it as:

In the New Testament ginosko frequently indicates a relation between the person knowing and the object known. In this respect, what is known is the value or importance to the one who knows and hence the establishment of the relationship. Such knowledge is obtained not by mere intellectual activity but by operation of the Holy Spirit, consequent of acceptance of Christ.

What this guy is saying is that I really knew you—I knew you from a relationship and experience, through inspiration of the Holy Spirit, I knew what kind of guy you are—is what he is saying. Notice when Christ responds and says, what you knew—He uses a different word. He’s correcting what this guy’s statement is. The word Christ uses is “oida” and is Strong’s #1492 and this is from Vine’s. It’s defined as

to see; to have seen or perceived, hence to know; to have knowledge of; in the case of human knowledge to know from observation.

This isn’t known from a relationship of deeply knowing Him and inspired by the Holy Spirit, this is more superficial observation. Now notice how Vine’s goes on to expound the difference between these two words.

The differences between ginosko and oida demand consideration. While ginosko frequently implies an active relation between the one who knows and the person or thing known, oida expresses the fact that the object has simply come within the scope of the knower’s perception.

In other words, it’s a much more superficial knowledge of just basic observation. Whereas ginosko is more of a personal relationship. You deeply know each other and it even gets into inspiration of the Holy Spirit being included in this. The guy with one talent is saying, I had this deep knowledge of you and I really knew what I was talking about when I said this. Christ is saying, no you had a superficial understanding of what you thought you knew. He then turns around and says that your logic doesn’t even follow either, because if you knew Me to be this person, why didn’t you at least put it in the bank and draw some interest. He’s really pointing out that he was making excuses; he was making excuses for self.

What I want you to see in this, is that this guy was convinced—I really know who He is—but he had a superficial understanding and his negative impressions he projects onto Christ. He is seeing what he wants to see. He’s not seeing what is really there and he doesn’t really know the subject. He is not getting his expectations from scripture and inspiration. He’s getting them from his physical understanding of things and he’s projecting that onto this.

Let’s look at one of the biggest ways this can affect our spiritual lives. I mentioned that the whole subject of expectations and how we approach them in our physical lives and in our relationship with God is what I’m focusing on today. Let me give you a personal

example that I have witnessed, of one of the most common ways in which our unrealistic expectations of the Christian life can really trip us up in our walk with God.

The example I'm going to tell you happened a number of years ago. I was at a church picnic in a large gathering of church people on a Sunday afternoon, if I remember correctly. I was talking to a lady there I've known for a number of years. We are going to call her Susie for our purposes today—that's not her real name. Susie was sharing with me what she was going through and what was a struggle for her. It was not a trial that she was going through, rather it was watching a close friend of hers going through a difficult trial. Susie had a good friend who was terminally ill with cancer and it was very upsetting for her to watch her friend go through this because she had known this lady for many years. They had a close relationship and, as Susie was telling me, she broke down as we're talking at this picnic and said, I just don't understand. I don't understand why God won't heal her. I don't understand why He won't take this trial away from her. She is a really good Christian. I have known her for years. She sets a great example, she's a good wife, she's a good mother to her children and she's a model Christian. I know this from years of knowing her. I just don't understand why God doesn't want to bless His children with good things. Why He would allow her to go through this trial and not take it away when so many of us are praying and fasting for her and wanting this to be taken away and He won't take this trial away from her.

A few months after we had this conversation her friend died. She had early teenage children at the time who had to grow up without their mother. So, it was a very difficult trial for all parties involved. It was disillusioning for Susie at the time. Her expectation of this was that God, being a loving, kind God, why wasn't He going to take these difficult, painful, awful things away from Christians? Wasn't He going to protect Christians from having to go through this? The people that obey Him and are striving to want to be like Him? Wouldn't He want to take that pain away from them? If we have a realistic expectation of the Christian life, we have to realize that often, that is not how it works. God tells us from the very beginning of our Christian life, that this is going to be difficult, this is going to be painful, this is going to be a struggle and you're going to have to overcome this. We have to face this with those types of expectations.

Notice this in Matthew 7:13

Matthew 7:13 *Enter by the narrow gate; for wide is the gate and broad is the way that leads to destruction, and there are many who go in by it.*

14) *Because narrow is the gate and difficult is the way which leads to life, and there are few who find it. (NKJV)*

He tells us right off the bat, the Christian life is hard; it's going to be difficult and something you have to struggle through and endure. Notice He says it's the way that leads to life. The reason I point that out is because He doesn't say this is one of the ways that leads to life. He doesn't say a select few are going to have this hard, difficult path and everybody else is going to get an easy slide. It's going to be a lot easier for them and they're going to have an easy, fun way to do it. That's not what He says. He

says the way—the one and only way that leads to life—is narrow and difficult and you’re going to struggle and have to endure through this. Notice He says there are few who find it. By virtue of saying that, He’s telling you that this path is difficult enough so that there is a significant attrition rate that will come as a result of this. There are a number of people who won’t make it because they won’t successfully endure to the end through this path. If you follow the scriptures that talk about this issue throughout the Bible, there are very consistent, very clear and very dogmatically stated expectations we can get from them. I won’t take the time to go through all the parables, but if you look in Matthew 20 and Matthew 22, you will see two parables that Christ gave, which talk about the Kingdom of God. He started them both off by saying, the Kingdom of God is like—He’s telling us what the path to the Kingdom of God is like. He ends them both with the statement, many are called but few are chosen. Even in one case, it’s specifically describing in that context, those who are not chosen being bound up, cast into the lake of fire, and the weeping and gnashing of teeth is talked about. It’s very clear what He’s talking about. He’s telling you there is a significant attrition rate. You’ll find this stated all throughout the Bible. You’ll see the parable of the ten virgins, being the picture of the significant attrition rate. I’m not trying to say it’s fifty fifty, like the parable of the ten virgins. I don’t think the percentages are the exact point. The point is, there is a significant attrition rate.

To give you an example that ties back to our subject today, a number of years ago I was having a conversation about these scriptures with a good friend in the church. I was making the points which I’ve stated today and my friend said, no that just can’t be. It just can’t be and his reason was a loving God just wouldn’t do that. The point my friend was arguing was, that if a loving God thought there was going to be a significant attrition rate He would have to throw in the lake of fire, then He wouldn’t even start making mankind. He just wouldn’t do that, if that’s the way it was going to end. In making his point, he gave me parenting analogies, he gave me manufacturing analogies, he gave me all sorts of analogies which appeal to logic and very little in the way of scripture.

I was trying to think, as we went through this conversation, of how I could break through this detail that he had on the subject. So, I decided to get a little sarcastic with him in trying to make an example. We had a relationship that we could do this with each other. I said, so what you’re saying is, a loving God would never, never even consider, doing something like, creating a class of angelic beings—millions, if not billions of them—to have to then later turn around and take an entire one third of them and throw them in the lake of fire. He would never do that because that just wouldn’t be loving—you sure about that? Of course, he started to back pedal when I said that. I’m not making a hypothetical example there, that’s something we can dogmatically prove from scripture. My point was, think about it, get your expectations from what it really says. Where he got that idea from was by not reading all the scriptures relevant to the subject and then coming to a conclusion as a result of that. What he was doing was taking his physical definition of what a loving God was like—how we think about it physically and emotionally—and projecting it onto God. How we typically define love and what doing good is often comes from asking the wrong question. The question we are asking is, does it feel good. Because if things are bad enough and it doesn’t feel good and it

seems painful to us, that couldn't be love, that couldn't be a good thing, so we think that couldn't be love. God's question is typically, does it do good. Often what does good, doesn't feel good for us. We have to remember that God is always focused on the end result and the good He can accomplish in the long run. That can be painful for us in the short run. We, as physical human beings, are feeling the pain and we think if it's gets too painful, then it can't be love. Then we start projecting what we want to see onto a situation and that's where the disillusionment comes in.

We have to realize that the Bible very clearly tells us as Christians, that we should expect our relationship with God, our path to the Kingdom of God, to be a difficult struggle full of trials. It just blatantly tells us that is exactly what we should expect.

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; 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. (NKJV)*

Notice He says, don't think it's something strange—in other words this is a normal expectation. Think that through. If we are in a fiery trial and we think that this is something strange and weird, what were we expecting? We were expecting that this couldn't happen to a Christian. This couldn't happen to someone trying to obey God, He's supposed to protect us from pain. That's not what He says. He says He is never going to leave us or forsake us and He will deliver us through everything. He doesn't say it's going to be pain free. In fact, He promises us the exact opposite. He says it's going to be a struggle and it's going to be hard and you are going to have to endure through this.

He makes the comment about Christ's sufferings because that is a requirement for salvation that we suffer as Christ suffered. We're going to see it is clearly defined that suffering will happen, even when we've acted righteously. Even when we're faithfully obeying. We're being persecuted, is what it means. Think about what we call persecution. If someone is suffering because of their own sins, their own bad decisions and they have brought something on themselves, do we ever look at that person and think they're being persecuted? No, they brought that on themselves. You made all these bad decisions and got bad results, you kind of had that one coming. That's how we look at it. If a person has been good and trying to do right and they are unjustly suffering or being picked on, we call that being persecuted. The Bible tells us very specifically that if you are going to pursue salvation, you're going to face persecution. It directly, dogmatically and very clearly tells us that this is what's going to happen and what we should expect. In 2 Timothy 3:12 you really can't get it any clearer or more all-inclusive than this scripture.

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

If you go through the wording of this scripture, there is just no other conclusion that you can come to, than this all-encompassing, dogmatic statement. There's just no wiggle room in this scripture whatsoever. Think about it; He's talking about all those who desire to live a Godly life in Christ Jesus. Acts 4 tells us that there is only one name under heaven by which you can be saved. In other words, the only route to salvation is accepting Christ as the sacrifice that covers our sins, Who reconciles us to the Father, so He is the only Mediator of the New Covenant; He mediates for us in the relationship with the Father where we can pursue salvation. There is no such thing as the route to salvation through Christ and then some other route. There is no other way. There's only the one way, through Him, the only path. We're talking about everyone who goes to pursue this path—what's going to happen to them? They are going to suffer persecution. When are they going to suffer that? When they are desiring to live Godly in Christ Jesus. In their day of salvation, they are going to suffer this. It's a dogmatic, all-inclusive statement and He gives no wiggle room.

As I started off this sermon, I gave you an example of my job as a corporate recruiter and how I'm often talking to candidates. There are always some people who, no matter how clear you are with them, in their mind they feel they will be the exception. For one of the most common ways that this happens for me is, for example, dealing with internal candidates. (I work for a very large organization, so at times I'm talking to external people who are trying to get a job with us and sometimes with internal people seeking promotions, looking to move up in their career). The exact details don't matter for our purposes but let's just say with internal promotions, there are policies and procedures and often parameters around how large a raise a person who is going from one part of their career to the next step up, can get. When someone is pursuing that, I try to set their expectations right up front. I let them know that I'm not promising the ceiling in this, but here are the parameters where this is going to fall. So set your expectations that your raise is going to be somewhere in this range. If you shoot outside this, you're setting yourself up for some disappointment, because that's not going to happen. I'll even get blunt and tell them I've been doing this job for this company for twelve years, so let me tell you, it's going to fall within this and it's not going to be beyond that. However, there are always people who think they are going to be the exception. They are going to be so impressed with me that they're going to offer me the moon. Even when you bluntly tell them multiple times, you can tell by listening to them that they think they are going to be the exception. Then later, when it doesn't happen, they are disillusioned and disappointed.

Even when you read scriptures like this which very clearly say this throughout the Bible, you still see these situations where someone gets hit with a hard trial and thinks this shouldn't happen. God was supposed to make things comfortable; He shouldn't have taken that away from me, I shouldn't have to face this trial. You go back to these scriptures and realize; in their minds they were going to be the exception. It was going to be different for them, even though it clearly says all this throughout the book—in a very consistent, dogmatic picture. Still in their minds, it's going to be different because He's a loving God and is going to take my pain away. We start taking our physical version of what a loving God is like and projecting it onto scripture. We do not let Him

define for us, the expectations of how the process works. If we're going to have a realistic picture of it all, then we have to base it on scripture and not be the guys who were talking to Christ. When we are disappointed, Christ would say, if you had been getting your expectations from scripture, you would be expecting what has happened. They were expecting what was never going to happen because they weren't getting their expectations from scripture.

As I mentioned, this scripture we just read is a dogmatic and an all-encompassing statement. It tells us that we are going to face persecution. What it is getting at, is suffering as Christ suffered. We're told to expect this as Christians. This is just part of the calling and it is clearly defined for us.

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

Notice it's referring to suffering wrongfully.

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, if you take it patiently, this is commendable before God. (NKJV)

Notice the next statement.

21) For to this you were called ... (NKJV)

In other words, a fundamental part of your calling is this whole concept of having to suffer wrongfully, being persecuted, having to take it patiently and even when you didn't do anything to deserve it.

21 continued) ... because Christ also suffered for us, leaving us an example, that you should follow His steps:

22) Who committed no sin, Nor was deceit found in His mouth"

23) -who, when He was reviled, did not revile in return; when He suffered, He did not threaten, but committed Himself to Him who judges righteously;

24) who Himself bore our sins in His own body on the tree, that we, having died to sins, might live for righteousness—by whose stripes you were healed.

25) For you were like sheep going astray, but have now returned to the Shepherd and Overseer of your souls. (NKJV)

He is telling us, suffering as Christ suffered, is taking it patiently, even when you suffer and you didn't deserve it. How else could Christ have suffered? This is an individual who never sinned a day in His life. It was never an issue where He sinned and brought this on Himself and therefore was just reaping the consequences. If you've never sinned, that can't happen. So the very definition of suffering with Him, is suffering even when He's been righteous. We see that clearly defined.

We're also going to see that the Bible directly tells us this is a requirement for salvation. It is another all-encompassing statement.

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 ...* (NKJV)

Notice what comes after the “if” here.

17 continued) *... if indeed we suffer with Him, that we may also be glorified together.* (NKJV)

In other words, to be glorified together with Him, we have to suffer with Him. The definition of suffering with Him is going to be suffering even when we've been righteous. Even if we are good, obedient Christians and faithfully obeying God, we are going to have constant trials. We are going to have difficult, painful trials that we have to endure our way through. It doesn't mean God is not a loving God, it means this is what He stated for us as the expectations that we are going to have to accept to be able to make it into His Kingdom. Why did He do that? It's certainly not because He's a sadistic God up there Who just wants to torment His children and watch them squirm through difficult pain. That's not the kind of guy that He is. As I mentioned, He doesn't look at it in terms of, does it feel good, His question is, does it do good? He realizes that often times we are going through things that are challenging, difficult and even downright painful for us, but which can be good for our character development. It helps us to develop the character that He has and to develop His mind in us. That's why He does this, that's why this is a requirement. It's the very definition of how His mind and character is developed in us.

Romans 5:3 *And not only that, but we also glory in tribulations ...* (NKJV)

If we notice the rest of this sentence, we see why we would glory in tribulations. That sounds bizarre to us as physical human beings. We normally would glory when tribulations go away from us, when we can avoid the pain because we don't enjoy the pain. Why would someone glory in tribulations? Continue the sentence.

3 continued) *... knowing that tribulation produces perseverance;*
4) *and perseverance, character; and character, hope.*
5) *Now hope does not disappoint, because the love of God has been poured out in our hearts by the Holy Spirit who was given to us.* (NKJV)

What it says here, is the reason why tribulations can be a good thing is because they develop character in us. Having to strive and overcome these tribulations, builds the determination in us, the patience in us and lots of the character of God's mind in us. This is the tool that He develops in us and that's why it's a good thing. If we are looking at it from the perspective of does it feel good, tribulations and trouble don't feel good. We want them to go away. That's a natural human reaction; nobody enjoys going

through pain. The reason it's a good thing is because of what it can develop in us. This is a concept all throughout scripture. If we read through the New Testament, this is a very consistent concept.

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

The whole concept of counting it all for joy, when you have painful, difficult situations, goes against everything of how we are wired as physical human beings. How many of us think, oh boy, I have a painful trial, this is so exciting, I'm looking forward to this. That's not how I respond. I doubt there are many of you out there who would respond like that. We naturally think, what can I do to avoid this; how can I make this go away? What's our natural reaction when this happens? What's our first prayer? LORD, please take this away from me. What can we do to make this stop? That's a natural reaction for us, we don't enjoy pain and we want it to go away. If we're looking at it through God's eyes, He says count it all joy. Not because it's pleasant to go through, not because it's enjoyable as a physical human being to have to endure it, but, as He is saying, look at how the movie ends!

The question is, does it do good? Is it going to result in developing character? Whether it results in developing character is more an issue of how we respond to our trial than the trial itself. If we give in and let it destroy us, that could not accomplish good. It's an opportunity to accomplish good. We always have our free moral agency in all this and we can choose to take this on and with God's help, have it develop character in us. Or we can choose to give in and have it destroy us. It can have two outcomes and we play a major part in the outcome. We have to be a willing participant. If we do take this and allow it to develop character in us and strive to overcome, it can ultimately result in being in the Kingdom of God. If we look down in verse 12, we'll see that this is actually a requirement for us to be in the Kingdom of God.

12) Blessed is the man who endures temptation; for when he has been approved, he will receive the crown of life which the Lord has promised to those who love Him. (NKJV)

It's after you've endured the temptation and successfully gotten through it and been proven; proven that you will hang in there and endure to the end. That's when you'll receive salvation, that's when you'll receive the crown of life. It's just like we read in Romans 8. We're glorified together in Christ if we suffer as He suffered, if we endure through it and we stick to it even when it's painful, even when it's hard for us—that's when we are rewarded with salvation. The Bible directly tells us, enduring through this suffering and successfully enduring to the end is a requirement. We do this so that we can be worthy of the Kingdom of God. That is how it's stated in 2 Thessalonians.

2 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 counted worthy of the kingdom of God, for which you also suffer; (NKJV)

Once again, we're told that enduring through this persecution, through the suffering, suffering as Christ suffered, is something we have to successfully do to make it into the Kingdom of God. If it was carnally up to us—think about this—if we as physical human beings, being carnal were given our choice, what would we pick? We would want to have our cake and eat it too. Give me a comfortable, utopian life where all my problems—as long as I'm faithful to God and I obey—I'm protected from all pain and everything goes well and then I slide into the Kingdom and be rewarded with eternal life at the end. Wouldn't that be what we would all pick? I want my cake and to eat it too.

That's not what the Bible says. If we go through the requirements for salvation, there's one path through to salvation. It's the narrow and difficult path that requires that we suffer and endure through persecution and it's through much tribulation that we enter into the Kingdom of God. That's simply how it works. The reason it works like this because this is what develops the character of God in us. This is why we have to overcome and do this. It's not just an issue of building God's character in us—that's certainly a process that is developed—but it's not just a tool to spur us onto growth, it's also a test. God makes a very big point through the Bible that He tests us. It's part of who He is and what He does. He wants to test us to see, are we truly faithful to Him, are we going to be loyal, even when it's painful to obey Him.

Think about it—He says, to whom much is given, much is required. He's giving us the ultimate reward. To be born as one of His children, to be born as a God being is the ultimate reward that we can receive. He's going to put us through the ultimate test to be sure we're going to be faithful to Him. That we're going to do well with the reward if He gives us that opportunity. We will go to a few scriptures in the Bible which tell us very clearly that this is part of who He is. He tests us to make sure we're going to be loyal to Him.

Isaiah 48:10 *Behold, I have refined you, but not as silver; I have tested you in the furnace of affliction.*

11) For My own sake, for My own sake, I will do it; For how should My name be profaned? And I will not give My glory to another. (NKJV)

He says, I test you in the furnace of affliction. In other words, I think in situations where it's painful and difficult, and you're going to stick with it when it hurts, you are committed. If you give up the first time it hurts, you weren't really committed to this—you were just committed as long as it was comfortable. But if you're going to stick with something even when it's hard, then that's something you really believe in and something you're

committed to. In Psalm 66 look at several scriptures that speak to this. This is really just going to scratch the surface because this is a concept you will see all throughout the Bible.

Psalm 66:10 *For You, O God, have tested us; You have refined us as silver is refined.*

11) *You brought us into the net; You laid affliction on our backs.*

12) *You have caused men to ride over our heads; We went through fire and through water; But You brought us out to rich fulfillment.* (NKJV)

In other words, He tested them through adversity. That's what He does with us. He tests us through adversity and not only is He testing us, He's developing our character in the process. He's causing us to prove our commitment to Him through this. This is simply how His mind works and how He operates, you might say. In Proverbs 17 again, we're just briefly scratching the surface of the numerous stacks of scriptures that we could read, all backing up this same concept.

Proverbs 17:3 *The refining pot is for silver and the furnace for gold, But the Lord tests the hearts.* (NKJV)

This is just who He is. Those of you who know me, know that one of my favorite statements is, the best predictor of future behavior is past behavior. I get kidded about that a lot. If you look at God's behavior in the Bible, He directly tells us, I am the LORD, I do not change. When He goes through the Bible numerous times talking about how He tests us and how He tries us and how that's important to Him, we have to realize He's not suddenly going to change and doesn't need to do that anymore. He's not going to suddenly switch personalities at some point and suddenly decide that He doesn't need to test us anymore—that's not going to happen. He's consistent and He's going to test us and make us endure to the end and prove that we're going to be loyal. That even when it hurts, we're going to be loyal and faithful to Him.

A good example to look at and see this, is with Abraham. We're going to look at a very famous account in Genesis 22 that we're all familiar with. This is when God asks Abraham to sacrifice his son Isaac. If you look at the overall context of this, it comes at a point in Abraham's life after he has had a long history of being faithful to God. It's not like he just recently got converted and just started working with God, he's had decades. God told him to pack all his stuff and head out and I'll tell you when to stop and he obeyed. He gave up everything. He had been faithful to God for years and God tests him even further. He puts him to the ultimate test and tells him, you know that son you waited for all these years—whom I promised you—to the point that you had given up ever having kids? Then you finally have this son and now he's grown into an adult—take him to the mountain and kill him for Me. Imagine what a gut wrenching and emotional experience this had to be for Abraham. This is like the ultimate test to put him through. He did this to a guy who had a long track record of being faithful to God. But God is continuing to test him, to make sure he is going to remain faithful, even when it's

painful and difficult. We can see an important lesson with this if we jump to the end of the story. In verse 11 of chapter 22 we can see what God was looking for.

Genesis 22:11 *But the Angel of the Lord called to him from heaven and said, Abraham, Abraham!" So he said, Here I am."*

12) *And He said, Do not lay your hand on the lad, or do anything to him; for now I know that you fear God, since you have not withheld your son, your only son, from Me."* (NKJV)

He pushed him all the way, but what was He looking for? Now I know. Now I pushed you into a situation that was painful, it was difficult and gut wrenching for you and you were still willing to be faithful. You were still willing to put Me first even when it tore your guts out. God was testing him. He says now I know you're going to be fully faithful and you're fully committed. That is what God requires of all of us. He wants to know we are fully committed to Him. The only way you can do that fully, is put someone in a situation where it's painful and give them tests where it's not an easy slide and it's something they have to endure their way through, even when it hurts. That proves what we're really about. This is how the process to salvation works. We should never delude ourselves into thinking, I'll be the exception. The majority of people will be the exception. No, these are the rules, this is how it works, this is how it works for everyone. It's the one and only path to salvation. This is why, from the very beginning, when we start off in baptismal counseling, what are the expectations that are typically set before all of us? If you remember, if you were properly counseled for baptism, when you started into the process, you probably went through Luke 14 and the whole concept of counting the cost. We can see what expectations we were given from the very beginning of the process in Luke 14:25.

Luke 14:25 *Now great multitudes went with Him. And He turned and said to them,*

26) *If anyone comes to Me and does not hate his father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and his own life also, he cannot be My disciple.*

27) *And whoever does not bear his cross and come after Me cannot be My disciple.*

28) *For which of you, intending to build a tower, does not sit down first and count the cost, whether he has enough to finish it—*

29) *lest, after he has laid the foundation, and is not able to finish, all who see it begin to mock him,*

30) *saying, This man began to build and was not able to finish ?*

31) *Or what king, going to make war against another king, does not sit down first and consider whether he is able with ten thousand to meet him who comes against him with twenty thousand?*

32) *Or else, while the other is still a great way off, he sends a delegation and asks conditions of peace.*

33) *So likewise, whoever of you does not forsake all that he has cannot be My disciple.* (NKJV)

I'm sure most of you, when you were going through baptismal counseling, the minister who was going through this with you, probably read this to you and had a conversation about these scriptures. I know when I went through baptismal counseling, the minister talked to went through this in great detail and to this day I am very grateful for that. He sat down and told me, I want you to understand that you are agreeing and making this commitment that you are willing to give your own life, you're willing to give up your property, your friends, your family, your job—whatever may be asked of you—you are willing to give all that up to make it to the Kingdom of God. I want you to understand that's the commitment you're giving, because it may be asked of you. I'm sure most of you had a similar conversation when you were baptized. Again, what is it instilling? It is setting the expectations from the very beginning that this is going to be difficult. This is going to be hard and you may be asked to sacrifice very difficult, painful things.

How many times in life is it, that the thought that comes to mind is, a loving God wouldn't make me want to give up my family and give up my job and ability to support my family. We may have felt it in our own lives or watched other people who've gone through a very difficult trial and been put in a very difficult, painful situation—He wouldn't want to do that to me. You see these expectations and what comes out is, a loving God wouldn't do that. Well, He said He would. He said from the very beginning, yes, I want you to know that when you sign the contract, I'm going to ask you to do that. He's sets the expectations right out front. It is going to be painful and I am going require you to be willing to give up everything else in your life to follow Me. But then what happens later in life? We're put in a situation where it's literally so painful and we think, what happened to the loving God? He's being mean to me. He's asking me to give up my family or my friends or my job or other important things in my life, to follow Him. We think, He couldn't do this. He said He would—He set those expectations from the very beginning. That's exactly what it was going to be like and what we were going to have to go through. We have to realize that is simply how the process works.

As I mentioned previously, one of the pitfalls that I think we fall into is, if it was up to us as physical, carnal human beings, what do we typically want? This is in lots of areas in life. We typically want our cake and to eat it too. We want to have all the benefits, none of the downside—just give me all the perks and none of the responsibilities or downsides of a situation. It doesn't work like that.

One of the things we can do in approaching our Christian life is confuse Old Covenant promises with New Covenant promises. There is a very big difference in what God promised ancient Israel and promises us, in the fact that they were just being offered a physical, comfortable life. But for them, what was it? It was physical promises for physical obedience. If they kept the letter of the law, God promised He would give them a pleasurable, physical life. Life would just reign down blessings upon them as long as they were faithful to Him. He wasn't offering them salvation. If you think about it, if you're not being offered salvation and all you have is this life, what would be the definition of the best deal you could possibly get? That would be to live however long you have in this life with as much pleasure and enjoyment as possible and as little pain

and suffering as possible. That's the best deal you can get if salvation is not part of the equation. That's exactly what He offered them. We will take a look at that, in Deuteronomy 28. Leviticus 26 and Deuteronomy 28 are chapters often referred to as the blessings and curses. What He's going through with these is all the blessings they would get if they faithfully obeyed Him, and all the curses—all the bad things that would happen to them—if they didn't faithfully obey God. Let's keep in mind that salvation is not part of the equation for them. It's just a physical arrangement and the best deal they can get is a comfortable life, which is what He promised them.

Deuteronomy 28:1 *“Now it shall come to pass, if you diligently obey the voice of the Lord your God, to observe carefully all 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:*
- 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.*
- 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, 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 or the left, to go after other gods to serve them. (NKJV)*

Notice what He's saying. All these physical blessings—as long as they faithfully obeyed—the sky would reign down upon them constantly. He says you'll be on top only

and not beneath. In other words, good will just keep happening to you. If you read through the rest of the chapter, He says if you start disobeying God and you worship other gods and turn your back on Him, then here are all the calamities and awful things that will happen to you. If you notice through all of this, all this adversity—health problems, shortage of food, adversity and all sorts of trials that can come upon them—He says it will only happen to you if you don't obey—if you are not obeying God. We can think of it in those terms. That as long as I'm obeying God, things will always go well. You have to realize that, in the New Covenant when salvation is put on the table, that's a game changer. Now when you get to the New Covenant, the definition of blessings changes quite a bit.

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. (NKJV)*

Notice it's all of a sudden, blessed when these bad things happen to you and people are slandering you and treating you badly. We didn't read that in Deuteronomy. Salvation is on the table now. Now it's about building character. Notice Luke 6 has a very similar statement.

Luke 6:20 *Then He lifted up His eyes toward His disciples, and said: Blessed are you poor, For yours is the kingdom of God.*

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. (NKJV)*

We don't read this in Leviticus 26 or Deuteronomy 28 because this is be happy when you're persecuted and treated badly. Now the reward is salvation, now it's about showing you are faithful to God. It's not all about comfort now, it's about salvation in the Kingdom of God. We have to keep that in mind to endure, realizing that if we confuse these promises that we're going to have our cake and eat it too and we're going to live in a utopian environment where everything is going to be comfortable in our physical life and then we get salvation, we are setting ourselves up for disillusionment. We have to realize that in the Christian life, we have to be willing to endure through hard trials, knowing that they are going to happen, because now salvation is our reward. It's living forever in God's Kingdom and developing His character. Now He's going to try us much harder because He's offering us a greater reward. We have to realize the rules of the game have changed.

The key to all of this is setting our expectations accordingly. The Apostle Paul explained this in his own life.

Philippians 4:11 *Not that I speak in regard to need, for I have learned in whatever state I am, to be content:*

12) *I know how to be abased, and I know how to abound. Everywhere and in all things, I have learned both to be full and to be hungry, both to abound and to suffer need.*

13) *I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me. (NKJV)*

Paul had set his expectations. Christian life is going to be hard but Christ is going to strengthen me, God is going to see me through this, He is not going to put me in anything that He can't deliver me through, He's going to be there and be faithful to me through this. But it's not going to be a cake walk. I'm not going to get my cake and get to eat it too. I'm going to have to faithfully endure whatever is thrown at me and continually deal with it and develop God's character. But I will be greatly rewarded in the end. He gave us a very specific example of how he learned this.

2 Corinthians 12:7 *And lest I should be exalted above measure by the abundance of the revelations, a thorn in the flesh was given to me, a messenger of Satan to buffet me, lest I be exalted above measure.*

8) *Concerning this thing I pleaded with the Lord three times that it might depart from me. (NKJV)*

Paul did what we all would do when we're hit with a hard trial—Lord please take this away from me. I'm not enjoying the pain, spare me this. He did what we all do. Notice what happened.

9) *And He said to me, My grace is sufficient for you, for My strength is made perfect in weakness.” Therefore most gladly I will rather boast in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me.*

10) *Therefore I take pleasure in infirmities, in reproaches, in needs, in persecutions, in distresses, for Christ s sake. For when I am weak, then I am strong. (NKJV)*

Paul was looking at this with realistic expectations. Paul is the one who told us, that all who want to live Godly lives in Christ Jesus, this is what is going to happen to them? They're going to suffer persecution. This is part of the process and what you're going to have to go through. He had the same reaction that we all do. He got hit with a hard trial. God please take the pain away; I don't enjoy this. When God told him no, you're going to have to endure through it. He said that it is part of the Christian process and I've learned to be happy in whatever situation I find myself in, because what I'm focused on is salvation. Paul also gave us the key in Romans 8, our last scripture starting in verse 16 again. We previously read this, but look at the whole context.

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, if indeed we suffer with Him, that we may also be glorified together. (NKJV)

We read this previously. If we want to receive salvation and be glorified with Christ, we have to suffer with Him—that's part of the process. But he gives us verse 18 as well.

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. (NKJV)

He's telling us, this is going to be hard, you're going to have to suffer through this, you're going to have to endure, it's going to be hard. There are going to be times when you feel like giving up but you have to stick with it and endure to the end because the reward is worth it. Through everything that you went through in this life—you will get to see what it's like to be a God-being and receive salvation and you will look back and say it was all worth it. If that's what I had to go through to get here, it was worth it and I'm glad I stuck it out. That's what he's telling us. Paul is telling us, to get through this we have to have realistic expectations. We have to realize in our physical, carnal thinking, yes, we would love to have our cake and eat it too, but we have to look at the process of salvation and realize that's not how it works.

That works in an Old Covenant setting where they were promised physical promises for physical obedience because, what was it about? Having a comfortable, physical life? When it's about salvation, now it's about building God's character and being tried and tested to prove our loyalty and our faithfulness to God. That we are going to stick it out, even when it's painful, even when it's hard, even when we're pushed to the brink to do it. We have to realize that God is going to be with us through the whole process. He says, I will never leave you nor forsake you—I'm not going to put you through anything you can't endure. I'll be right there with you to help you through it, but it's going to be hard. Let Me promise you, when you get to the other side and receive salvation, you're going to look back and say, this was worth it because this is so much better than everything else I went through. I'm glad I stuck it out.

As we look at our Christian life, and particularly the times we go through the hard trials, let's look at it with realistic expectations and realize we signed up for the ultimate reward and the ultimate reward requires the ultimate sacrifice. We have to be willing to suffer to receive that reward.