

Jan. 6, 2002

"The Future Reflected in the Past"
Isaiah 28-30

Couples Class
Wendell Alford,
Teacher

I. The astute observer who stated that "history repeats itself" could have been revealing an insight into the prophet Isaiah's message introduced in Chaps. 28-30 of his prophecy. One recurring theme in Isaiah's message is the woes of God brought about by the disobedience of his people. Chap. 28 declares a woeful disposition upon the people of the Northern Kingdom of Israel. Israel is called Ephraim in 28:1, referring to that portion of Canaan named after Joseph's second son, Gen. 41:50-52. Ephraim means "faithfulness" which Joseph felt truthfully characterized God's blessings upon him in Egypt after his having been sold as a slave by his brothers through spite and hatred. Isaiah must have used Ephraim to indicate the irony of Israel's response to God's love and grace following his delivery from Egyptian bondage. This response is pictured by Israel as a glorious, beautiful flower which had faded even though that flower was growing in a fertile valley. The Israelites were led by a proud group of leaders who were drunks, overcome with wine. The leaders in 28:8 are pictured as a group of slobbering drunks seated around conference tables too drunken to make wise, or even any, decisions to guide God's people in God's way. The wine and strong drink had them vomiting and depositing filth on the tables. The leaders act as infants, unable to render sound teaching. In 28:5 the term "in that day" gives evidence that Isaiah had in mind not only the events then taking place, but also the day of the Lord's wrath and the establishing of his kingdom on earth, the day of rest, Heb. 4:9. The beginning of the day of rest is to involve God's judgment, 28:6. But even before the beginning of that day, God will reveal precept upon precept, line upon line, here a little and there a little (God's Word), Isa. 28:13; John 1:1-5. The Jews will be given a very unusual sign, "For with stammering lips and another tongue will he (God) speak to this people," 28:11. Just after Jesus our Lord returned to our heavenly Father, the Spirit of God fulfilled that prophecy at Acts (and Joel's at 2:28-32) 2:17-18. Peter's first message after Jesus' departure continues Joel's prophecy (Acts 2:19-21) also revealing the first part of the day of the Lord even as Isaiah's message reveals. Isaiah at 28:12 states bluntly that, even though God proves the reality of his love and mercy through Jesus Christ (Acts 2:36), Israel will not listen, Acts 3:24; 4:3. I believe that God wanted the "another tongue" incident to be unique to the apostolic period for emphasis. Such activity was abused in the first years of the church, I Cor. 14:21-25.

II. Isaiah condemns Israel (the Northern Kingdom) in Chap. 28, but he tells Judah (the Southern Kingdom) that they are scorning Ephraim (28:14) while they, too, are to see God's wrath. Although God will lay in Zion (David's stronghold) a foundation, a precious corner stone, the Jews will defy God's plan by choosing death (spiritual) rather than accept God's plan of redemption, an awesome, unusual act, 28:21. Chap. 29 begins with a reinforcing of the woe due the Southern Kingdom, Ariel (Jerusalem). Ariel means literally "lion of God," and obviously here Isaiah is using the term to refer

to Jerusalem as the chief city of God's people or the "hearth of God," i.e., where burnt offerings were offered to God. Here Isaiah is revealing that God will permit the Southern Kingdom to be invaded and overthrown even as will happen to the Northern Kingdom. Israel was overcome as a nation in 721 BC by Assyria and Judah in 586 BC by Babylonia. Therefore, Jerusalem (Judah) should not be haughty. Many nations will be the enemies of Jerusalem, even as the dust surrounding her. Her destruction will be in "an instant, suddenly," 29:5. The occasion will be to the people of Jerusalem like a horrible nightmare. To the nations fighting the Jews it will be like a sleeping hungry man who dreams that he is eating voraciously only to awaken still with hunger pangs, 29:8. Even so will the Lord pour out upon the Jews a deep sleep as one unconscious through consuming too much alcohol, 29:10,13; Psa. 69:22-23; Rom. 11:8-11. Israel as a people will remain asleep even though a book (God's Word) is made available to them, 29:12-18. Note very carefully Isaiah's prophecy at 29:18 which meshes exactly with Rom. 11:25-36, but such will not happen until "in that day," 29:18! "In that day shall the deaf (Jews) hear the words of the book, and the eyes of the blind shall see out of obscurity, and out of darkness," Rev. 5:6-13. Isaiah in 29:19-24 reads like the Blessed Attitudes of Jesus at Matt. 5:3-12.

III. In Chap. 30 Isaiah begins a condemnation (woe) of God's children who are rebellious in turning to Egypt for counsel and strength instead of relying upon the Lord. They are putting their faith in plans made without regard to God's Spirit, and in so doing they add sin to sin. Depending upon the strength of Pharaoh will bring only shame and confusion. The immediate danger to Judah was the Assyrians, but the prophet states plainly that the Jews' problem was their rebelling against their God through lying and not practicing the law of the Lord. The Jews could have confessed their sins and God would have been faithful and just to forgive their sins. God was the same then as he is today, and we too have the same promise they had, I John 1:9. Our relationship with God has been even more vividly demonstrated through God's having sacrificed his own Son to redeem us. We have more than the Law, we have a full revelation of God's merciful grace, John 1:17-18; Eph. 2:4-10; Heb. 1:1-3. Nevertheless, we are prone to forget God's promise to be with us and supply our every need even as the Jews did in Isaiah's time. When these thoughts come to us, we should consider the fowls of the air and the lilies of the field, Matt. 6:24-34. In every case we are being Christlike when we depend upon God through Jesus, his Son and Savior. God is ever faithful, even when our faith in him is tested, I Cor. 1:9; II Thes. 3:3. Isaiah's pronouncement concerning Judah's reliance upon Egypt was that such was to be in vain for security. Though the Israelites should send donkeys and camels laden with what to God was contraband for bribery, the Egyptians' strength would "sit still," 30:6-7. Only God can bring genuine and lasting deliverance for his people. Only the voice of the Lord can defeat the enemies of his people, 30:30-31. And sometimes our lack of patience, waiting upon the Lord, can be a real hindrance in serving the Lord and receiving his promises. Self-effort can have dire results.

Jan. 13, 2002

"The Shadow of the Rock"
Isaiah 31-33

Couples Class
Wendell Alford,
Teacher

I. Chap. 31 continues the woe (condemnation) of God upon the Jews who, in their fear of Assyria to their east, turn to Egypt to their west for help. Isaiah's admonition was that Israel's salvation was really a spiritual problem, not physical might. Jesus said that God is Spirit, and those who worship (honor God's will) him must do so in spirit, unflinchingly, John 4:24. The Jews were, according to Isaiah, depending upon their own ingenuity for strength against Assyria. They were literally playing both ends against one another to protect the middle, themselves. God's people (us) are not to depend upon their (our) own strength even though they (we) have nuclear armament. All of the physical strength mankind can muster is less than a pittance and not to be compared with the Creator's who made them. Humanity stands completely vulnerable to the Jehovah God who made them and holds them accountable to be and function according to his own design and will, Rom. 9:6-33. This context couches Isaiah's pronouncement that "Now the Egyptians are men, and not God; and their horses flesh, and not Spirit. When the Lord shall stretch out his hand, both he that helps shall fall, and he that is helping shall fall down, and they all shall fall together," 31:3. Isaiah goes on to quote the Lord: When a lion with hungry offspring comes for a sheep for food, a host of shepherds cannot deter the beast with loud noises. If only the Jews would yield to the Lord's strength, the Lord of hosts would come down to uphold their cause, i.e., if their cause were equal to their Lord's cause, 31:4-5; Lk 11:13; John 14:13; 15:16; I John 5:14. The plea of the Lord is that his people will return to him, and thereafter he will protect them and pass over them with protection, 31:5. Then Isaiah glimpses again to "in that day" when all, every man, shall turn from idols of their own making and God's people's enemies will be brought low, 31:7-9; II Kings 19:32-37.

II. Chap. 32 presents information which contrasts with the preceding chapter as though one leaves one room furnished in one decor and enters another room in an entirely different decor. Isaiah reveals in that second room that a king will come forth who will reign with justice, who will provide a shelter from the tempest, provide life-giving water in the spiritually dry earth (John 4:14), and afford a shadow from the weariness of a hot noonday sun. That shadow will be from a Rock. Here we probably should examine some passages having to do with the Rock and Jesus, Psa. 118:22-26; Matt. 21:42-46; Eph.2:4-20; I Pet. 2:4-10. The eyes of those who seek and find rest with this Rock will not be blurred, and their ears will receive and conform to the message they hear, 32:3. Chap. 32:5-8 in the King James translation is somewhat difficult to understand. The Living Bible makes the message clearer in the language we speak today: "In those days the ungodly, the atheists, will not be heroes! Wealthy cheaters will not be spoken of as generous, outstanding men! Everyone will recognize an evil man when he sees him, and hypocrites will fool no one at all. Their lies about God and their cheating of the hungry will be plain for all to see. The smooth tricks of evil men will be exposed, as will

all the lies they use to oppress the poor in the courts. But good men will be generous to others and will be blessed of God for all they do." Isaiah then, for the second time in his prophecy (see Isa. 3:12,16-4:1), gives special attention to the part the women played in the evil condition of the Jews in Isaiah's time. The prophet invites the women to hear and heed his message regarding God's position of woe on the Israelites. He characterizes the women as complacent and as those who do not realize that, although vines are planted, there will be no harvest. At 32:10-12 Isaiah pictures the Jewish women as candidates for fear, because they signify that all is well by their attitudes in dress and body display. (cf. vs. 12 here with the words of Jesus at Lk 11:27-28 and Lk 23:26-31, and Paul at I Tim. 2:9; and Peter at I Pet. 3:3.) But judgment will come producing righteousness, bringing peace, quietness, and assurance even in the midst of catastrophic hail (destruction from above).

III. Isaiah in Chap. 33 prophesied about the mistreatment of two of God's major concerns, people especially related to him by covenant and the land where they lived and which supported their physical well-being. God was and is concerned about his people's diet and the soil and water which support that diet. Much of the Law is devoted to the food which the Jews were to eat. In fact, the Jewish diet was interwoven with religious rituals in Hebrew worship, e.g., Lev. 7. While the diet laws had practical implications, they were to remind the Jews that Jehovah God had first priority in all they did or thought. However, these dietary laws became a spiritual diversion as is evident from Jesus' admonition at Matt. 9:10-17; 23:25-26. We believers in Jesus as the Messiah (Savior) are free from the dietary laws of the Old Covenant, Rom. 14:17; I Cor. 8:8; I Tim. 4:1-5. Concerning conserving the soil of the earth which God created, God's Word early made mankind a steward of it, Gen. 2:15. The earth also has a special affinity with human beings, because God created humankind's physical being from it, Gen. 2:7. And so, Isaiah made the eighth woe in this series of woes against those who spoil the earth, especially Jerusalem and God's covenant people there. In particular, Assyria was the people against whom the woe was directed, but the application is still applicable, I believe. My belief is based upon God's everlasting covenant with Abraham and his descendants through Isaac, Jacob, and Judah, Gen. 12:1-3. And, of course, Jesus, our Savior, came through that lineage as far as his physical, human nature was concerned. It is important to note Gen. 12:3 when God promised to bless those who give positive treatment to Abraham's posterity through Isaac and curse those who do not. God through Isaiah is saying in Chap. 33 that those who spoil his people will God destroy. (See also Lev. 19:18; Rom. 12:19-21.) Armament sometimes forces temporary peace between foes, but only God's way through Jesus Christ will ever bring permanent peace on earth. Isaiah states as much in 33:24.

O sometimes how long seems the day, and sometimes how weary my feet;
But toiling in life's dusty way, the Rock's blessed shadow, how sweet!

Beneath the cross of Jesus I fain would take my stand, the shadow of a mighty rock within a weary land;

I. Isaiah reiterates a recurring theme of his prophecy at the beginning of Chap. 34, i.e., all nations are subject to God's wrath and the indignation of the Lord. Simply put, nothing living or inanimate, will escape God's judgment. Even those who deny the very existence of God (Fools they are, one and all, Psa. 14:1; 53:1-6) are subject to his will. All of the nations' armies, navies and air forces are as naught, because the physical bodies of all military personnel are fragile and their mental and emotional determinations cannot withstand the awesome fear the Lord can instill, Rev. 6:12-17. Isaiah's language in 34:2b shifts the tense of the verbs to the past tense to indicate that God's intent and action is already as good as finished; he has utterly destroyed all of their armies, and he has delivered them to the slaughter. This cataclysmic action by God will cause the bodies of those using armaments against God's people to die, decompose and send forth an extremely offensive odor to be transmitted through the air. Their blood will cause the mountains to dissolve as the armies fall one by one, like leaves falling from trees burdened by the onslaught of winter, or figs so ripened that they no longer can cling to their mother tree. The place setting for this calamity of the Lord is given in 34:5-6. The Lord's vengeance will be expressed in Idumea or Moab, an area where Esau's descendents settled around the southern end of the Dead Sea, Gen. 32:3. There the fat of the slain armies will settle the dust of the wilderness (desert and bare mountains). In 34:8 Isaiah refers to this destruction as "the day of the Lord's vengeance, and the year of recompences for Zion (Jerusalem and the Jewish people) and for the cause of God's people." All those written in God's book (Mal. 3:16-17) will withstand God's retribution on the earth's unbelievers, Rom. 8:1,31,38-39; Rev. 20:6.

II. Having introduced God's salvation in the midst of his judgment at the end of Chap. 34, Isaiah follows in Chap. 35 with the announcement of the coming of a special kingdom honoring God's people because of their trusting him and his promise, Heb. 11:39-40. The barren wilderness will become fertile again, and from bare soil will beautiful roses spring so that the desert will rejoice with its restored ability to be like Sharon, the fertile tract of land which lies between the Jordan and the Mediterranean Sea. In 35:1 "the desert shall rejoice and blossom as the rose." Because of God's sure promise (Heb. 6:17-20), weak hands are to be strengthened and the wobbly knees are to be strong. Fearful hearts are to be assured of well-being by the fact that God will surely, as he has promised, come with vengeance against the enemies of his people and save those who are trusting him, Rom. 12:19-21; II Thes. 1:5-10. I believe that Isaiah in 35:5-6,10 is referring to the eventual recognition of Jesus as their Messiah (Savior) by the Jews as a people, [He is already ours.], Matt. 11:1-15; Rom. 11:25-36. When that kingdom of God is accepted by the entire earth, then peace will prevail. God will provide at that time abundant sustenance for everyone, even as he did for Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden at the beginning, Gen. 1:29; Rev. 22:2. God will then live with redeemed mankind

and remove all sorrow, misery and turmoil from their presence, Rev. 21:2-3. As Isaiah put it, lame men will leap like a fawn, the tongue of the dumb mute will sing a beautiful song of praise. In the middle of the desert clear, potable water will spring forth, and where the ground has been parched and dusty, a pool of life-giving water will form a lake. Through the desert will streams flow with reeds and cattails growing along their banks. Natural resources will be so abundant that everyone will have no need to practice greed and avarice at the expense of others. Their redeemed spirits will make such an existence fulfilling, enjoyable, satisfying, and pleasurable. Zion (Jerusalem) will be the seat of governing, Isa. 35:10; Rev. 21:2, 10-27.

III. As is true of much of the message of Isaiah, there are immediate, contemporary, historical significances to the people then living, but also there are interwoven into these short-term truths, prophecies foretelling God's plans for his people through the end of the ages. In Chap. 36 Isaiah returns to events which are about to take place which affect his covenant people, the Jews. They are about to suffer political and military confrontation with the powerful forces of the Assyrians. Here the prophet calls peoples, times, events and individual names specifically to mind. The events noted in Chap 36 are also chronicled in II Kings 18:13-37 and II Chron. 32:1-19. Note thereat II Kings 19:5-7 and II Chron. 32:20 also. This hostile approach of the Assyrian King Sennacherib to Judah happened when Hezekiah was king of the Southern Kingdom where Jerusalem was the capital. Hezekiah was the twelfth king of Judah and ascended to the throne at age 25 in BC 726. He was the best king of all Judah's kings, II Kings 18:1-8. When Hezekiah had been on the throne for only four years, Assyria under King Shalmaneser overran Israel (Northern Kingdom), sacked it, and carried the Israelites captives away from their homeland. Ten years later Hezekiah saw the might of Assyria under Shalmaneser's successor Sennacherib, and saved Jerusalem by stripping the Temple in Jerusalem of much of its gold, silver and treasures and giving them as homage to the Assyrian king. Shortly thereafter Sennacherib undertook to return the Assyrian armies to Palestine to take Jerusalem, because Hezekiah had made an alliance with Egypt and stopped sending a regular homage tax to Assyria. Sennacherib's field commander, Rabshakeh, was sent to Hezekiah from Lachish to lay down his proposition for Hezekiah's surrender. On the outskirts of Jerusalem, Rabshakeh received three of Hezekiah's representatives who were instructed to receive any message from Rabshakeh but to say nothing regarding Hezekiah's reaction to that message. Rabshakeh told Hezekiah's messengers that Judah was helpless, because the Assyrian forces were far superior to Judah's. Further, Egypt (They knew of the alliance!) was like a broken reed which, if leaned upon, would break and pierce the user's hand. Lastly, Rabshakeh said, "But if you say to me, 'We trust in the Lord our God' is it not he, whose high places and whose altars Hezekiah has taken away, and said to Judah and Jerusalem that you shall worship before this altar?" Rabshakeh yelled in Hebrew to those standing on the city wall, "Let not Hezekiah deceive you, for he shall not be able to deliver you!" Pay homage as before or you will be taken to the east like your kin to the north were. The three Jews said nothing, but told Hezekiah. Hezekiah tore his clothing in remorse when he received the message.

Jan. 27, 2002

"God's Way Will Win"
Isaiah 37-38

Couples Class
Wendell Alford,
Teacher

I. After Hezekiah's three representatives had heard from the Assyrian king's emissary, Rabshakeh, they tore their clothing in remorse. They then related the proposed doom of Judah to Hezekiah who not only tore his clothing but covered himself with sackcloth and went into the house of the Lord (Temple). He was well aware that King Sennacherib's armies were able to capture Jerusalem, and the Assyrian forces were standing by in nearby Lachish awaiting word from Hezekiah. Rabshakeh also knew that ten years earlier very much of Judah's wealth had been given to Assyria (II Kings 18:13-16) to prevent an invasion of Judah then. However, Hezekiah had been sending regular payments to Sennacherib since that time. Judah's standard of living had been lowered as a result of the tribute. Hezekiah's situation was desperate. He sent his chief aide, Eliakim, to see Isaiah the prophet for advice on what his political posture should be. Eliakim and his advisors outlined Hezekiah's predicament stating bluntly that annihilation was eminent. Isaiah's word to Hezekiah was that the position of the king of Assyria was blasphemy, because Rabshakeh had plainly questioned whether Judah's God, Jehovah, was able to deliver his people. In fact, Rabshakeh had claimed that the Lord was on his side, Isa. 36:10. Isaiah told Eliakim that Hezekiah need not fear the Assyrian troops, because the Lord would defeat him directly, sending him home without taking Jerusalem. At home he (Sennacherib) would be killed by the sword.

II. Rabshakeh left Hezekiah to make a decision while he returned to Sennacherib at Lachish with the Assyrian forces. To Rabshakeh's surprise he discovered that the king had left Lachish to go to Libnah to engage the Egyptian army, or so a rumor asserted, Isa. 37:7. In this interlude Sennacherib sent Hezekiah a letter stating essentially what Rabshakeh had told Eliakim: "Let not thy God, in whom you trust, deceive you, saying, 'Jerusalem shall not be given into the hand of the king of Assyria.'" Further, he stated that Judah's God is no better than the gods of all the other nations which Assyria has conquered. And what did Hezekiah do with the letter? "And Hezekiah received the letter from the hand of the messengers, read it, and went up to the house of the Lord (Temple), and spread it before the Lord," 37:14. Judah's king was in a quandry, should he believe the king of Assyria whom he knew to be militarily superior, or Isaiah who had announced that the Lord had promised deliverance? Hezekiah humbled himself and prayed directly to Jehovah God. In the prayer he recognized Jehovah as the only God and Creator of all the earth's kingdoms, and even heaven and earth also. Hezekiah referred the Lord to the reality of Sennacherib's claims about having wasted all of the other nations in the area along with their gods. "But now," Hezekiah prayed, "save us from his hand, that all the kingdoms of the earth may know that there is only one Lord, and you are the one and only true God."

III. Isaiah knew that Hezekiah had humbled himself in prayer before the Lord. The prophet, therefore, sent word to Hezekiah that the Lord had heard his prayer against the Assyrians and would perform

against Judah's foe. Through Isaiah the Lord told Hezekiah that he (the Lord) would "put my hook in your [Sennacherib's] nose" and "my bridle in your lips, and I will turn you back by the way which you came." God said that the assurance that the defeat of Assyria was the Lord's doing would be proven by the fact that three years hence his people (the Jews) would still be living around Jerusalem eating grain which they themselves had planted and enjoying the fruit from their own vineyards. Further, the Lord promised that Sennacherib would not enter Jerusalem, shoot a single arrow there, bear a shield therein, nor even build a bunker near the Holy City. Also, the Lord promised that Sennacherib's forces would not even come to Jerusalem on their way home, but return to Nineveh via the same route taken to Palestine. The Lord promised to defend Jerusalem for two reasons: for his own (the Lord's) sake and for the sake of the Lord's servant, David. Following is the method the Lord chose to fulfill his promise to Hezekiah. The Lord sent an angel (messenger or servant) into the camp of the Assyrians and killed 185,000 soldiers, practically the entire army! The next morning those who lived in the area were amazed to see those men whom they had feared and dreaded so fiercely, all dead corpses. With their spirits departed, they were no longer a threat to God's people, just as the Lord had promised Isaiah and Hezekiah. This action of the Lord sent Sennacherib back home to Nineveh to worship his false god Nisroch. While he was there worshipping, two of his own sons killed him with swords and escaped to Armenia (Ararat). Another son, Esarhaddon, succeeded Sennacherib as king, II Kings 19:32-37; II Chron. 32:9-22; Isa. 37:33-38.

IV. Chap. 38 is devoted to a deathly sickness which Hezekiah experienced. He was taken with an illness which was terminal in nature. Isaiah came to him with the word from the Lord that the king should put his house in order, for his time for physical death had come. In bed and in sorrow Hezekiah turned his face to the wall and again prayed to the Lord. Hezekiah confessed to the Lord that he had lived a life loyal to Jehovah God and according to the Lord's precepts. After pouring out his heart to the Lord, he wept with loud sobs. As before, Isaiah received a message from God concerning Hezekiah's condition and sorrow. Isaiah was to return to the king immediately and inform him that the Lord had heard his prayer and seen his tears. As a consequence, the Lord promised the king that his life would be lengthened for another fifteen years. Also, the Lord would protect Jerusalem from Assyria. The sign which the Lord gave to signify that the healing was the Lord's doing was to turn the sun back ten degrees. Although Isaiah had prescribed a medicinal cure for the king's physical condition (a life-threatening boil somewhere on his body), evidence was necessary to ascertain that the healing was, in fact, a special healing by the Lord, II Kings 20:1-11; Isa. 38:21. At any rate, Hezekiah was extremely pleased with the extension of his life. Chap. 38:9-20 relates a song which Hezekiah composed and had sung in the Temple during the remainder of his life. The song contrasts one's ability to praise and serve God while still in the flesh over against the lack of such ability after physical death. Praise God from whom all blessings flow! Let all the earth keep silence before him!

Feb. 3, 2002

"Man's Weakness And God's Strength"
Isaiah 39-40

Couples Class
Wendell Alford,
Teacher

I. Hezekiah was a great man in human affairs. After ascending to Judah's throne in BC 726 at the age of 25, he immediately exercised his kingly authority to turn the nation back to God. At II Kings 18:5 we have already learned that he trusted the Lord God of Israel and was above all other kings of Judah in demonstrating that trust, II Chron. 31:20-21. His first act was to purge, repair and reopen the Temple of God with splendid sacrifices. He even destroyed the brazen serpent used by Moses, because the people had made an idol of it to worship rather than worship God himself, Num. 21:9; II Kings 18:4. Because the Northern Kingdom had fallen, Hezekiah invited citizens from there to come and worship, II Chron. 29:30-31; 31:6. He reestablished Levites to the priestly offices thereby bringing back legitimate worship. He fought and was victorious over most of the Philistines (except Gaza), II Kings 18:8. Remember last Lord's Day we thought about the security of having water available within fortified city walls. Hezekiah made a wise decision to tunnel through solid stone to bring a stream (Gihon) on the northwest side of Jerusalem under the city wall to the area just south of the Temple, II Chron. 32:27-30. Even though Hezekiah had given much riches to the Assyrian king not to take Jerusalem, Judah's king had accumulated considerable wealth. During this latter period of Hezekiah's life after God's twenty-five year extension, the forces to the east were reshaping and changing leaderships. Assyria was losing its power and prestige to a rapidly rising Babylon.

II. As upright and strong as Hezekiah was, he still was a human with frailties. As Paul told the early believers at Rome, Rom. 3:23, "all have sinned and come short of the glory of God." In Chap. 39 Isaiah reveals one of Hezekiah's weaknesses. The Word makes clear that the king was devoted to the will of God, but here and at II Chron. 32:31 we are told that Hezekiah appreciated his own importance and was given in this instance to boast about his accomplishments. The king of Babylon had heard about the defeat of the Assyrian forces down near Jerusalem and how Hezekiah had been healed of the death threatening malignant boil. Baladan's son, Berodachbaladan (worshipper of Baal), king of Babylon, sent letters and a present to Hezekiah. The letters were purportedly courteous, belated get-well cards, because he had heard that the good king of Judah had recently recovered from a serious illness. The king of Babylon's feigned graciousness so favorably affected Hezekiah that he showed Babylon's emissaries all of Judah's treasures and armaments; the gold, the silver, spices, precious ointments, and even the entire armoury. He bragged about everything he had, to the last detail. The visit of the Babylonians came to the attention of Isaiah who confronted Hezekiah about them. The king, of course, told the prophet exactly who they were, why they had come, and his own response to their "evidence of friendship." Isaiah understood precisely what was happening and gave Hezekiah the Lord's assessment of the visit. As a result of the interchange with the Babylonians, Judah would be captured and all of the riches of God's

people would be carried to Babylon, nothing would be left. Hezekiah's sons after his generation would be made eunuchs to serve the king of Babylon in his palace. Hezekiah then told Isaiah, "At least there shall be peace and rest for me as long as I live." His son, Manasseh led the Jews away from God and proved to be the most wicked king who ever sat on the throne of Judah, II Kings 21:1-7.

III. Beginning with Chap. 40 God reveals through Isaiah the profundity of the Lord's mercy, grace, and love. In the remaining prophecy God reveals that his love will be expressed in a way that is alien to mankind's banal judgment. Humility will be God's method of revealing himself finally to humankind. Even in view of all the evil which mankind had, was and is exerting in defiance of God's Fatherly instructions, the Lord told Isaiah to, "Comfort ye, comfort ye my people, saith your God. Speak ye comfortably to Jerusalem, and cry unto her, that her warfare is ended, that her iniquity is pardoned: for she hath received of the Lord's hand double for all her sins." That Isaiah is having revealed to him, the Jews and to us evidence of the coming second and last Covenant of God with mankind is made clear by 40:3, for at Matt. 3:1-3 the Gospel declares that John the Baptist is the one who will be, "The voice of one crying in the wilderness." (See also Mal. 4:5-6; Matt. 11:11-15.) The contrast with this evidence of God's mercy and forgiveness with what we have been studying in Chaps. 1-39 leads some to disbelieve that the latter part of Isaiah's prophecy could possibly have been written at the same time and by the same person. However, there are sixty-six direct quotations from Isaiah in the New Covenant, with twenty-seven books having those direct quotations. Early in Jesus' public service he stood in a synagogue in Nazareth, his home town, and read publicly from Isa. 49:8-9; 61:1-2. Luke (God's Word) states that Jesus was reading from "the book of the prophet Isaiah." Others may not, but I believe that Isaiah wrote the entire book. Jesus knew the book intimately and realized that in it Isaiah knew of Jesus' first and second comings to earth. The glory of the Lord will be revealed in due time in a way not revealed before, John 1:17; Heb. 1:1-2; 8:7-13. God will bring this New Covenant of grace into being, because he is able to do so without consulting with anyone else. When he created the heaven and earth, he did not need to consult with others, because he is alone so qualified. With whom could he have consulted? He has no equal! All of the nations of the earth are like a drop of water in a whole bucket full, like fine dust on objects to be weighed on a scale, or all the land between the oceans of the entire earth when compared with the mightiness of God Almighty. Men are like the lower animals when they carve wood or melt metal into what they consider to be gods and then worship those idols. Men like to compare themselves to the Creator God by "creating" gods worthy of worship. How vain can people choose to become! And yet, from the beginning God has shown himself through his creative abilities and made his wishes known for all mankind to understand. God is God alone, and his creation including mankind are many. Earthly judges can only be vain (imperfect) at their very best. Men have no excuse, because God has not been weary nor has he fainted so that mankind should not know his will for them, Isa. 40:27,31; Rom. 1:20.

Feb. 17, 2002

"God's Promise of Comfort Continues"
Isaiah 41-42

Couples Class
Wendell Alford,
Teacher

I. Isaiah in Chap. 41 continues to reveal the comfort which God wants his people (those who trust him) to realize and rejoice in. The chapter admonishes his people to keep silence (Psa. 46:4-11), even those beyond Israel's borders, and be gathered together with Abraham's descendants. God promises to raise up a righteous man not of Abraham's offspring, but a Gentile who will do God's bidding. This man will come from the east and destroy those who are the enemies of God's people, the Jews. Since the man referred to in 41:2 is specifically named in next Sunday's lesson at Isa. 44:28, we give more attention to him later. The reason he is mentioned here in Chap. 41 is to note that, although God loves the Jews, his called people, he is in control of all people and all nations, Exod. 19:5; Psa. 50:10-12. In 41:4 Isaiah proclaims that from the beginning of mankind's creation God has been in control of creation's destiny, because the Lord was before his creation and will be there as it continues forever. Further, all people (isles) know of the Lord's existence and have used God's creation approvingly, i.e., the righteous person mentioned above in vs. 2. Turning away from the Gentiles Isaiah now turns the spotlight of the Lord on the Jews, Jacob. They are the servant of God to represent the Creator to all peoples, chosen because of Abraham's faith in God's promise, Gen. 12:1-4; 15:6; Rom. 4:3,9. The highest spiritual compliment that can be given to a person is attributed to Abraham in Isa. 41:8. Abraham was chosen by God to be the Lord's friend. Isaiah stresses that the reason God chose Abraham was that Abraham, through his faith in God's promise, should be a servant of God throughout Abraham's posterity. They were to represent God by their attitudes and actions and thereby win the hearts and minds of all of the earth's peoples. Nothing should have caused the Jews to fear as they carried out God's mission. They were to rely upon God's promise to strengthen and uphold them with his right hand of his righteousness [emphasis mine - WA]. The Jews were not to rely upon their own righteousness, but God's alone, Rom. 9:30-33. Their fear was to be quelled by God alone, not by things, by other people, or even by themselves. To emphasize the truth of this declaration, Isaiah states bluntly that, compared to God's strength, the Jews are as a worm, 41:14. (Remember when we Baptists used to sing Isaac Watt's (1674-1748) hymn, "At the Cross," Verse 1, "Alas, and did my Saviour bleed, and did my Sovereign die? Would he devote that sacred head for such a worm as I?" It was later changed to "- - for sinners such as I?" This comparison of a person's strength as compared to God's is noted elsewhere in Scripture at Job 25:4-6.) God promises through Isaiah that he will make a new "threshing instrument" with sharp teeth that will sift (separate) the good from the bad with a scope that covers the entire earth. Those who recognize how badly their spirits need to be renewed (water for their spiritual thirst, Matt. 5:3,6; John 4:10-26), will be supplied ample water. Their every need will be met by God. People should believe that God has provided their needs, for God knows what has happened, is happening, and will happen. God's knowledge of a thousand years from now is as vivid as a human being's of five minutes ago. In 41:3 the Lord

tells us that those who consult idols (false gods) are to be left without proper guidance whether the idols indicate that the one who is depending upon them is doing right or wrong.

II. At 41:25 Isaiah again mentioned the forthcoming historical incidence regarding the "righteous man from the east" of vs. 2. "From the rising of the sun" he will come with a host of help for Judah even though the Jews have been without hope for many years. This immediate historical promise is the basis of another promise far into the future. Chap. 42 brings a promise of a permanent Servant who is identified as universal in that he will relate to all people giving justice to include even the Gentiles. That Servant will come [the first time] quietly, or as we would say today, in a low key. He will not seek to force himself upon the consciences of individuals, for he will be God in human flesh, Immanuel, John 1:14; Rom. 8:3. Just as God permitted Adam and Eve and every human since, the free choice to choose or not to choose God's promise and way of life, so will this Servant of God relate to every person who hears the Good News, the New Covenant, and accepts God's plan for people's spiritual salvation. One of the unusual qualities of God's prophet Isaiah was that he had the ability to see the distant future through God's view as well as the current events in the affairs of mankind. Isaiah could talk of peace during the Messianic reign to come, and suddenly burst into a scorching condemnation of the wickedly immoral activities and unfaithfulness of those around him. The evidence is that Isaiah had an integrated personality that could brave the storms of a hectic age and remain unaffected by the evils of those about him. Remember in Chap. 6 we learned that Isaiah "saw the Lord sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up," but he admitted that, "I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips." This information reveals the condition under which Isaiah prophesied during his long life, (ninety years?). The prophet in Chap. 42 looks at the idolatry of the Gentiles in vs. 8, how they are blind and should have been warned by his chosen missionary people, the Jews. Because they (the Jews) have failed as God's representatives on earth, the Lord will stir the Jews to jealousy, vs. 13 and Rom. 10:18-21. When our Lord Jesus was here in the flesh, he was threatened by the Jewish leaders with physical death before he had completed the Father's work assignment. Matthew in his Gospel at 12:14-21 quoted from this chapter of Isaiah to make this truth known. In that passage the evidence is made plain that while the Jews first reject God's Messiah (Savior), the Gentiles will accept him with their trust. Clearly 42:19-25 reveals that the Lord gave Israel and Jacob up for plunder and spoil, because they had sinned against God's will for them. They had ignored God's Law and failed to walk in God's ways. Therefore, "God will pour upon them the fury of his anger, and the strength of battle." Still the Jews refuse to accept the Lord's Lord, Psa. 110:1; Matt. 22:41-46. We Gentiles need to heed God's word at Rom. 11:11-24 regarding our period of God's grace and our attention to that grace.

Amazing grace! how sweet the sound, that saved a wretch like me!

I once was lost, but now am found, was blind but now I see.

'Twas grace that taught my heart to fear, and grace my fears
relieved;

How precious did that grace appear the hour I first believed!

February 24, 2002

"Israel Will Be Restored"
Isaiah 43-44

Couples Class
Wendell Alford,
Teacher

I. Following the comfort pronounced in Chap. 41 because of the greatness of God's stability and further comfort because of God's promise to send a unique Servant in Chap. 42, God proclaims through Isaiah that Israel as a people will be restored following times of dire circumstance. That national redemption is promised because God states plainly that he created the Jews, both Israel and Jacob (Judah), and gave them a special name which related them to their Creator, Jehovah. Therefore, God states that they are his. God had brought them through the water (the Red Sea), had brought them through the fire (God's awful presence at Mt. Sinai), and had been their Saviour as the Holy One of Israel. [This very concept aggravated the Apostle Paul's thoughts as God directed him to write the letter to the small band of believers in Rome while he (Paul) was at Corinth in about 55-56 AD. Remember that Paul wrote the Roman believers, because he knew that in that assembly were both Jews and Gentiles and that he also would be visiting them later. I introduce these facts into the prophecy of Isaiah, because it is through Paul's Roman letter that God makes known how we believers (trusters) in God's Messiah (Jesus of Nazareth) fit into God's future plans for Israel and how that plan relates to the future of us believers. Romans (God's Word) relates considerable details to the "Gentile interlude" in Chaps. 9-11. There in 11:25 God's Word uses the clause "until the fulness of the Gentiles be come in." In Rom. 11:25-32 God tells us again of God's promise to restore Israel.] Back to Isaiah 43: God had sacrificed Egypt, Ethiopia, and Seba (area occupied by descendants of Cush, Ham's son) for the sake of Israel. God's loved ones (precious to him), the Jews, were not to fear, because in due time God would reconvene the seed (nation) of Israel from the east, west, north, and south, all of God's sons and daughters "from the ends of the earth," 43:5-6. All peoples (nations) are to recognize that Israel is the Creator's special people, that the only Lord has declared such to be truth. Such testimony is the absolute witness of Israel's Holy One, the Creator of Israel, the King of Israel. Even at the very time Isaiah was prophesying these words, God was preparing the situation in Babylon and Chaldea for the benefit of his chosen people, the Israelites. The alien armies will be brought low, because God is to do a new thing. The wild beasts of the forests will appreciate God's provisions, but Israel will be reluctant to do God's will (bring fitting sacrifices according to God's Law). Only God can blot out Israel's sins (as a nation) against him, and that he will do in a time chosen by God himself, Isa. 43:25; 44:22; Acts 1:6-7; Rom. 11:25-32.

II. In Chap. 44 Isaiah outlines a further strong argument against those who will build and worship the products of their own hands. God begins by referring to the people of Israel as his servant whom he has chosen as his own. God developed Israel from a small embryonic beginning and calls them in vs. 2 "Jeshurum." Jeshurum is a poetic or pet name found here and at three other places in the Old Covenant, Deut. 32:15; 33:5,26. It means literally (yashar-El), God's "righteous little people." Vss. 3-8 are highly significant,

I believe, because they give information concerning God's "pouring out his [Holy] Spirit" upon the Jews in a way that he had not done before. As believers in Jesus as God's Messiah (Saviour), we immediately think of Jesus' promise in John 15:26-16:15 and the special coming of God's Holy Spirit at Acts 2:1-21. Note especially Peter's explanation of the outpouring of God's Holy Spirit at the beginning of the church (those to be called out by God's Holy Spirit until the time when "the fullness of the Gentiles be come in," Rom. 11:25 as noted above). Peter stated that this event is like the prophecy of Joel 2:28-32 in which God is to pour out his Holy Spirit. [Emphasis mine - WA] Rightly dividing the timing of Joel's prophecy and Peter's application of that prophecy on the day of Pentecost is of critical importance, I believe. The context of Joel's Chap. 2 which begins by stating "the day of the Lord cometh" and which we have learned earlier in Isaiah, especially in Chap. 2, to be a final physical and spiritual purging of the entire earth by God before God's special One (Jesus the Messiah, Saviour) comes to reign in person and thereby bring peace to the whole world. Peter's quote includes events which have not happened yet. Jesus at Matt. 24:27-31 reveals that when "the tribulation of those days" comes, then will the "sun be darkened, the moon shall not give her light, and the stars shall fall from heaven, and the powers of the heavens shall be shaken. And there shall appear the sign of the Son of man in heaven; and then shall all the tribes of the earth mourn, and they shall see the Son of man in the clouds of heaven (Acts 1:11) with power and great glory." It is evident that Peter's quote from Joel included events (the catastrophic cosmic upheaval) which are even yet to come in 2002 or later. It is, no doubt, at the end of the age just before Jesus returns that God will pour his Spirit upon all flesh. On the first special pouring out of God's Spirit, many scoffed and assigned the unusual speaking of the believers and other unusual phenomena to alcohol consumption, but, nevertheless, about 3,000 did believe and were added to God's chosen group. It is no wonder that Isaiah declares that "the Lord of Israel" is the first, the last (Rev. 1:7-8)," and "beside me there is no God." In 44:8 God's proclamation appears comical when he says, "Is there a God beside me? well, there is no other Rock (God); I know not any," that is to say, [If there is another, I certainly don't know it!] But there are those who make graven images which are nothing and call them precious, even their gods! Their so-called gods are not alive; they can neither see nor know anything. When someone fashions an idol and considers it to be alive, there is no profit whatsoever, in fact, his or her friends will be ashamed to be called an associate. For example, a blacksmith will work hard ('til he faints) with his tools around a forge and receive a product (an idol) which he considers precious and calls it his god. Likewise, a carpenter will go to the forest and meticulously measure, plane, and lay out a manly figure to be carved from a cedar, cypress, oak, or ash. The finished figure he calls god to be worshiped, but really the only real use the carpenter receives from his efforts is the warmth he gets from the leftovers for cooking and/or warming himself by a fire. These idols cannot forgive the sins of anyone nor restore anyones soul. God, on the other hand, can forgive transgressions and make one who trusts him whole. Vs. 28 of Chap. 44 where Cyrus is named is best left for Chap. 45.

Mar. 3, 2002

"Gentiles Will Also Honor God"
Isaiah 45 - 46

Couples Class
Wendell Alford,
Teacher

I. We had reference at Isa. 41:2,25 and at Isa. 44:28 to a man whom God "will raise up in righteousness" and who will come "from the rising of the sun (east)." At the latter reference Isaiah calls this unusual person by name, Cyrus. [The person who divided the Old Covenant into chapters and verses should have, in my opinion, made 44:28 the first verse of Chap. 45. The problem for not having done so was probably created by the fact that the role of Cyrus is begun up in 44:26 where Cyrus is referred to as "my servant" and designated as one who will do God's will, i.e., "perform all my pleasure" as told in 44:28. The present division of the whole Bible into chapters was first made by Hugo de St. Cher about AD 1250. The present division into verses was introduced by Robert Stephens in his Greek Testament, published in AD 1551, and in his edition of the Vulgate, in AD 1555. The first English Bible printed with these chapters and verses was the Geneva Bible of AD 1560, which was the first English Bible to omit the Apocrypha (hidden secret). The Apocryphal books of the Old Testament were added to the Roman Catholic version of the Bible known as the Vulgate, a translation of the entire Bible into Latin by Jerome in AD 385-405. The present English version of the entire Bible officially approved by the Roman Catholic hierarchy is the Rheims-Douay version done by English Roman Catholic refugees who settled in Rheims, France (N.T., 1582) and in Douay, France (O.T., 1609). The Rheims-Douay version does include most of the O.T. Apocrypha. Since the Apocryphal books were not in the Hebrew Canon, Jerome omitted these books from his Latin translation from the Greek. However, the Roman Catholic Council of Trent, April 15, 1546, publicly set its seal of authority on eleven of the sixteen O.T. Apocryphal writings. I do not consider these books to be Holy Spirit inspired, nor are some similar N.T. Apocryphal writings. These N.T. spurious writings are a collection of legendary Gospels, Acts of the Apostles, and Epistles. They are entirely inferior to the truly inspired books and are full of nonsensical and unworthy stories of Jesus and the apostles. It is said that Mohamed obtained his ideas of Christ entirely from these spurious "gospels." He did not believe that Jesus was the Son of God, nor, of course, do his followers, the Muslims (most Arabs, descendants of Abraham and his Egyptian maid, Hagar - Ishmaelites) of today.]

II. In Chap. 45 Isaiah continues his words of comfort begun in Chap. 40. The reason for comfort here in Chap. 45 relates to events which are to happen about 200 years after Isaiah wrote about them. The Jews were to spend about 70 years in Babylon as captives, Jer. 25:12, and then, as we noted in the last two lessons, be released back to Jerusalem. To outline the events and even to name explicitly the ruler from the east who will save the Jews, is much too much for many Bible scholars of today. For many Jews today, belief in the miraculous saving of the Jewish nation by a benevolent Gentile must be difficult to accept. Nevertheless, that is exactly what Isaiah prophesied and precisely what happened about two centuries after Isaiah's day. Cyrus (the sun) was the founder of the Persian

Empire, II Chron. 36:22-23; Dan. 6:28; 10:1,13, and the son of Camby-
ses who was of the royal family of Achaemenidae. Cyrus' courage
and genius became evident as he grew up, and he was early placed
at the head of the Persian military forces. His conquests were
many and brilliant. He defeated and captured the Median king in BC
559, and in BC 546(?) he defeated Croesus making the kingdom of
Lydia his. Then Babylon fell before his army along with Assyria
in BC 538. The prophet Daniel's home was for a time in his court,
Dan. 6:28. The edict of Cyrus for the rebuilding of the Temple
at Jerusalem was, in effect, the beginning of Judaism, i.e., the
great changes by which the nation was transformed into a religious
assembly (with coherence) are clearly noticeable beyond that time,
II Chron. 36:22-23; Ezra 1:1-4; Jer. 29:4-13.

III. The words which Isaiah chooses to refer to Cyrus, as God sees
the coming king of Persia give evidence that Cyrus' power and compas-
sion for the Jews made him a symbol of Christ. In Chap. 44:25 God
declares through Isaiah that Cyrus will be "my shepherd and perform
my pleasure: even saying to Jerusalem, 'Thou shalt be built;' and
to the Temple, 'Thy foundation shall be laid.'" Note that in
Rev. 21 God through Jesus Christ will build a new tabernacle in
a new Jerusalem where all trusters in Jesus Christ will dwell in
contentment and peace as his (the Lamb's) wife. Again, Cyrus is
to be known as God's anointed and whose right hand will be empowered
by God to subdue the nations which will come against him. Those
contrary nations will be made to open their doors (to their fortres-
ses) and permit the Jews to return to Jerusalem. Cyrus' favor
to the Jews will come from that king's recognition that Israel's
God is protecting him and giving him strength to overcome his ene-
mies. Cyrus had not known that Israel's God is unique, the only
true God, Jehovah, but now this Persian king realizes that Israel's
God is the only real Lord, Ezra 1:3. There is no other God but
Jehovah. Since the Lord created the earth, all mankind is to work
for and with the only Lord and not "strive with his Maker." Rather
than question ones father or mother about the whys of mankind's
existence, one should trust God for his or her welfare. One should
seek God's guidance, because the Lord is the Maker of every person.
Just as a pot cannot question its maker as to why the pot is fashio-
ned this or that way, Jer. 18:6-8; Rom. 9:18-24, neither can mankind
question their Creator's judgment regarding his (the Creator's)
creation of which mankind is a part.

IV. The sovereignty and complete freedom of God to choose the out-
come of the climax of his creation is probably stated more numerous-
ly in Isa. Chaps. 40-48 than anywhere else in Scriptures. To lay
a firm foundation for genuine and permanent comfort, the Lord, throu-
gh Isaiah, felt it necessary to make the truth indelibly clear
that God's promises are surer than any material mankind experiences
in his or her physical life, surer than gold, silver, platinum or
anything else. When the Lord through John on Patmos described the
glories of heaven which Jesus promised that God is preparing for
believers (trusters) in Jesus as God's Messiah (Savior), he used
precious metals and precious jewels for substances, because those
were the most enduring substances then known to people even though
we are told that no one can know heaven's splendor, I Cor. 2:9,
except through God's Holy Spirit. Faith in Jesus is more precious
than anything humanly imaginable!

Mar. 10, 2002 "Babylon Destroyed And Judah Chastened" Couples Class
Isaiah 47-48
Wendell Alford,
Teacher

I. In this class we once discussed the part that rivers played in the affluence of early civilizations, and how the standard of living available to the peoples on rich river basins was enhanced. The Nile River in Egypt is an example. In Isa. 47 Babylon is described as "The Lady of Kingdoms," for she was rich in goods with ample food and circumstance. She was the envy of the desert nations surrounding her and was emulated in religion by those neighbors. The human tendency to become self-reliant with affluence has been universal among peoples throughout the earth's history. Perpetually riches cause kingdoms to rise and fall. Babylon as a nation occupied the rich land lying between two rivers, the Tigris and the Euphrates. Babylon the city and capital of the nation was situated on the east bank of the Euphrates at a place where the Tigris was only a short distance to the east. The prophet Isaiah with God's guidance could predict absolutely that Babylon would be defeated with the prosperity she enjoyed. In her sense of self-worth, she made and worshipped her own gods, idols. Back in Chap. 46 Isaiah noted that Babylonian idols were fabricated and dedicated to Bel and Nebo. Bel is the shortened form of Beelzebub which is one of Satan's names, Matt. 10:25; 12:22-30. Nebo means "speaker or prophet," and when Paul and Barnabas went to Lystra at Acts 14:6-18, the people thought Barnabas was Bel or Jupiter and Paul was Nebo or Mercury as the talker of the two. Satanic worship which is being practiced in our country today is an example of the idolatry promoted by and practiced in the rich nation of Babylon, I believe. Babylon is, in the Bible, often designated as the seat of idolatry. The prophet Isaiah at Chaps. 13,14,21, and now here in Chap. 47, tells us of the ultimate and final fall of Babylon and her idolatry. John, the apostle of our Lord, foretells of the last and forever elimination of the effort to replace the one and only Jehovah God with a man-made god, Rev. 18. God will eliminate Babylonian idolatry through Jesus, God's Messiah (Savior) and God's only begotten Son. God through Isaiah tells Babylon to "sit in the dust" much like one would command a trained dog, "Sit, fido," 47:1. The time will come when Babylon will no more be pampered and spoiled with riches. Their nakedness will be displayed revealing their deplorable trust of idols (false gods) rather than the God and Savior of Israel. Vengeance will be meted upon Babylon with no man as a mediator, but the Lord himself will deal directly with Babylon. No more will she be known as "The Lady of Kingdoms." While she was enjoying power and prosperity, Babylon looked upon herself as eternal. Never would her children be destitute, because she said, "I am, and [there is] none else beside me," vs. 8, and, "I will be a lady forever," vs. 7. Finally, two things will happen to Babylon, widowhood and loss of children. This happening will come to her "in a moment, in one day," because of "the multitude of thy sorceries, and for the great abundance of thine enchantments," vs. 9; I Thes. 5:2-6; Rev. 18:8,10. The final Babylon (to be expressed in world government) will be headed by the very epitome of evil, the son of perdition as indicated in II Thes. 2:3-12; Rev. 13:8; 17:7-9. Note especially in II Thes. 2:7 that the iniquitous activities which

will ultimately produce the idolatrous man of sin were already underway at the time Paul wrote this letter to the Thessalonians, about AD 53 or 54. Evidently this element of error was being introduced and mixed with the true Gospel, and bogus letters were being circulated with forged signatures of Paul affixed to give his credence to the mixed errors, II Thes. 2:2. I believe that the error was mixing the truth of spiritual grace as a gift from God with the "self-earned spiritual salvation" through ones own merit and efforts. Paul stated (God's Word) the same concern also at Gal. 1:6-9; 2:4,11-21; 3:11-14; Col. 2:16-23. Being fooled by believing that one can earn ones favor with God is, in my opinion, the Babylonian idolatry of the Christian Era. Such idolatry promotes Materialism, greed and egoism (self-centeredness). In our time what makes one justified before and pleasing to Jehovah God (the God of the Jews and Father of Jesus the Messiah, Savior) is to honor, praise, worship, trust, and recognize Jesus as God's only begotten Son whom the Lord raised from death. Nothing should be taken from nor added to God's grace which comes only through faith in Jesus Christ. Eventually Babylonian idolatry will cease to aggravate God's people. At Isa 47:10-12 the prophet condemns Babylon as one naked but unaware that others can see her nakedness, "none seeth me." Babylon has established what it considers to be "wisdom" and "knowledge," but that very supposed wisdom and knowledge have perverted (led) thee to believe in thine heart, "I am, and none else beside me," a repetition of the same false proclamation made by Babylon in 47:8. Because of this false feeling of safety, evil will come upon them. The destruction will come so suddenly that Babylon will not realize what is happening. None shall save her.

II. In Chap. 48 Isaiah turns from the destruction of Babylon to declare that the Jews will not be destroyed but punished for swearing by the Lord's name and talking about the God of Israel. Their recognition of their Lord was not sincere and in truth, nor in righteousness, vs. 1. The Israelites identify themselves as citizens of the land which was given to their forefathers (Jerusalem) and that they are relying upon the God of Israel. Their profession of trusting God is a continuation of the same such profession of their forefathers. However, God knew that they were like the Jews before them, obstinate and with a neck sinew like iron, and a brow of bronze. God had forever pointed out this stubbornness of the Jews throughout their history in order to keep them from creating idols. The Lord did not want them to fashion idols (false gods) and then blame these graven, molten images as scapegoats for their sins and their idolatry, Exod. 32:1-10; Deut. 31:27. In Isa. 48:6-7 the Lord tells the Jews what he has done (prewarned them) and now asks them to admit their errors. God promises that he will defer his anger, restrain for the Jews sake, and not cut them off, all because the Lord desires for the Jews to glorify his own name. God repeats in vs. 11 concern for his own reputation as mankind views him to be. "For mine own sake, even for mine own sake, will I do it: for how should my name be polluted? And I will not give my glory to another." He then asks the Jews to pay attention to what he is asking them to do, reminding them that he is the Creator, that he was first (before his creation, mankind included), and that he alone will continue to be, even if his creation no longer exists. The Lord encourages the Jews not to imitate the Babylonians, because there will be no peace for the wicked in their idolatry and evilness.

Jan. 15, 1995

"God's Messiah Is Proclaimed"
Isaiah 49-50

Couples Class
Wendell Alford,
Teacher

I. After declaring that Israel will be chastened for their stubbornness, Isa. 48:4, (See also John 8:13,44-51) God through Isaiah reveals the Lord's future plan to send a Savior for all people including nonJews, i.e., Gentiles as well. God's prophet, Isaiah, announces to those beyond the coastlines (the Gentiles) that the Lord is to bring about the birth of a special person, commissioned from conception in his mother's womb, to have a special relation with Jehovah (only begotten Son). Before birth, that Anointed One demonstrated that relationship by bringing joy to another, also awaiting prenatal development and birth, Lk 1:39-56. (For further Scriptural revelations concerning Mary, see also Matt. 12:46-50; Lk 2:19,34-35,51; John 2:1-5; 19:25-28; Acts 1:12-14) That Anointed One (Messiah, Savior) will speak with God's authority and represent the Lord's very shadow. Humanly he will be a product of the Israelites, and in this regard the Lord will be identified with Abraham who, because of Abraham's faith in Jehovah, received God's first Covenant of faith. That Covenant was to be honored by the keeping of God's Law as given to the Jews by Moses. The Second Covenant will be manifest by the sending of God's only Son, a Jew by human progeny (Mary), and will make Israel thereby a servant of God, 49:3,6 and bring glory to Jehovah God. This latter Covenant will be made before Israel as a nation will see the culmination of God's promise to Abraham and the Jewish people as a nation, Isa. 49:5-6; Heb. 11:39-40. During the period, the Christian Era, God will not forget the Israelites but will remain faithful to gather Jewish individuals also to himself who have the childlike faith in the Messiah to be sent as God's Son to the earth, Rom. 9:30-33; Philip. 3:1-9. No, God will not forget the seeds of Abraham during the time of the Second and last Covenant with mankind. All of the earth's land, Isa. 49:11-12, will hear of God's mercy before the Messiah comes to fulfil God's promise to Abraham and the nation of Israel, Matt. 24:14-15.

II. While many of the earth's peoples are rejoicing because of God's Covenant through Jesus Christ, Zion (Jerusalem, the Jewish people) will be saying, "The Lord hath forsaken me, and my Lord hath forgotten me," vs.14. The Lord replies, "Can a woman forget her sucking child, that she should not have compassion on the son of her womb? Yea, they may forget, yet will I not forget thee," vs. 15. "See, I have inscribed thee upon the palms of my hands; your walls (protection) are never out of my vision," vs. 16, and also Psa. 22:16. "Your posterity (children) will [experience a time] when they will make haste [to do God's will, i.e., acknowledge Jesus as the Messiah], for those who destroy you will no longer be effective," vs. 17. The Gentiles will take up my (God's) cause as follows: "Thus saith the Lord God, 'Behold, I will lift up my hand (swear) to the Gentiles and set up my standard to the people: and they shall bring thy sons in their bosoms [love the Jews] and thy daughters shall be carried upon their shoulders,'" vs.22, Gen. 12:1-3. And how would God bring about this historical miracle among the earth's people? The activities of the world's nations will

nurse God's will throughout history. Much patience must be exercised beyond Isaiah's day, but the kings and queens (the world's political leaders) will nourish God's will throughout history [whether or not those political leaders realize that they are performing their duties according to God's command], vs. 23. Isaiah's brash statement concerning God's climax of human history in which the Jewish nation will be restored to God's will (accepting Jesus as God's only Son and Savior) is, "I will feed them that oppress thee with their own flesh; and they shall be drunken with their own blood, as with sweet wine: and all flesh (all the people of the entire earth) shall know that I the Lord am thy Savior and thy redeemer, the mighty One of Jacob," vs. 26. In Chap. 49 God through Isaiah makes clear to those of faith that God's Messiah will have a cosmic mission to lay the foundation for Israel as a nation finally to know God in all God's glory through Jesus as God. In addition to the final restoration of the Jews, we Gentiles will have the glorious privilege of knowing the Lord of the Jews as Savior and Lord. Paul in his letter to the Roman believers in Chap. 11, spells out explicitly the final creative, historical activities of God in caring for his people. The apostle has a particular caution for us Gentile believers, especially at Rom. 11:11-32. "O the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments, and his ways past finding out!"

III. In Chap. 50 the Lord says, through Isaiah, that he (God) is not divorcing Israel. [The Jews knew how easy their law (See John 10:34 where Jesus referred to the law as your, the Jews', law.) permitted the husbands to divorce their wives.] God states clearly in vs. 1 that he did not separate himself from Israel, but rather Israel by sinning had severed their relationship with Jehovah. The wife, Israel, was not sold in bondage, but God's spouse (Israel) was only put away because of her transgressions against God. Vs. 2 states, "Wherefore, when I came, was there no man? When I called, was there none to answer? - - - behold, at my rebuke I dry up the sea, I make the rivers a wilderness (desert) - - -" The Israelites have been stubborn against God throughout their history, and when the most crucial time of all came when the Lord sent his only begotten Son to earth to establish the Kingdom of God and to become its Lord and King, God's people, the Jews, reacted as follows: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. All things were made by him [Jesus Christ]: and without him was not anything made that was made. In him was life; and the life was the light of men. And the light shineth in darkness and the darkness comprehended it not. That was the true light, which lighteth every man that cometh into the world. He came unto his own, and his own received him not. But as many as received him, to them gave he the power to become the children of God, even to them who believe on his name; who are born, not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God, John 1:1-5,9-13.

"For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life."

Mar. 24, 2002

"Israel Is Promised a Kingdom"
Isaiah 51 - 52

Couples Class
Wendell Alford,
Teacher

I. In Chaps. 49-50 God makes the idea clear that before Israel receives the ultimate blessings promised to Abraham and his descendants, considerable patience must be exercised. Beginning in Chap. 51 Isaiah cautions the Israelites to pay close attention to the history of their people. Be constantly aware of what aroused God's pleasure in the very first person of God's covenant with the Israeli nation. God's delight was the faith Abraham placed in God's promise, Gen. 12:1-4; Heb. 11:8-10. In 51:1 note that God's Word refers to Abraham's faith in God as a rock. The Israelites are to continue to secure their future upon that rock, faith in God. Vs. 2 restates the same feature of the future hope of Israel. In that vs. 2 Isaiah repeats his admonition to "look unto Abraham" as the exercise of faith that honored God's will. This "rock of faith" did not change in the New Covenant ushered in by God's only begotten Son, Jesus Christ. That continuum of relating properly to ones Creator through faith is reinstated in the New Covenant. In Matthew's Gospel where Jesus had finished his extensive teaching (the Sermon on the Mount), he cautioned against false teachers, 7:15-23, and then gave a parable concerning two home builders. One of the builders built his home on a rock where it was safe, but the second builder built upon sand which foundation caused the home to fall and no longer afford sound lodging. Accepting Jesus as Lord causes one to love him and follow his teachings. But how does one enter into that proper relationship with Jesus as Christ (Savior)? By resting solidly upon the rock of faith as related in Matt. 16:13-20. To the questions of Jesus, "Whom do men say that I the Son of man (a human being as the Son of Mary) am?" and, "Whom do ye (plural, or you all) say that I am?" Peter, answering for the group of apostles, said, "Thou (singular, alone) art the Christ [Messiah, Savior], the [only begotten] Son of the living God." Jesus commended Peter for having listened to and believed God's Holy Spirit regarding Jesus' person and position, and said to Peter that his (Peter's) name could be translated "a pebble" which is symbolic of the big [important] rock [of faith] upon which Jesus would build with individuals whom Jesus would assemble from the earth's people to become his own bride, the ecclesia or church, Acts 2:39. Maintaining faith in God's promise was a problem for the Jews (still is, Rom. 9:30-33), and seeking to become members of Jesus' ecclesia has also been a problem for many in the Christian Era because of false teaching. False teachers have insisted upon the necessity of believers' having to add to God's sacrifice (Jesus' death and resurrection) by earning something additional, but Jesus paid it all! We are to follow Jesus' teachings, because we are his children through faith and love, not in order to become or maintain an offspring relationship. Once we become a child of God through faith in Jesus Christ, we are his children forever!

II. At 51:3 after having stressed relying upon the faith which Abraham displayed and acted upon, Isaiah offers comfort to Israel. "The Lord shall comfort Zion (symbol of the Jews) and make Jerusalem and its environs to produce joy, gladness, thanksgiving and harmony."

God tells his nation to pay close attention to what he is saying to them. He says that he will send forth a message of my will for you and that message will be a light of my people, the Jews. That message should be looked upon as direct from heaven to earth, as final, as just and more permanent than the heavens and the earth itself. Again God says, "Listen, do my will, and do not fear what others will say about your Godlike conduct. Those who judge you for being mine will be devoured like an old garment eaten by moths or worms." God's arm of strength will not cease to uphold Israel, and if you will have faith in my promise, you will be comfortable even if nonbelievers consider you to be only mortal, Eze. 37:9-14; John 11:25-27. Things that are impossible for mankind can be natural for God (God is the Creator of nature), e.g., God's strong arm brought the Jews from Egypt, parted the Red Sea, and brought God's people safely across the sea floor as dry land. Therefore, it is no difficult thing for God to redeem those whom he loves. Why should a person fear anything, even mortal death, if his or her God is one of such ability, even the one and only Creator himself, the Almighty, Matt. 10:28,31. There is nothing more comforting than to be in the good grace of the Creator, Isa. 51:16; Rom. 8:1.

III. After calling Israel "his people" in vs. 16, God now again, as at vss. 4,7, and 9, asks them to cease sleeping, awake, and stand up, vs. 17. The prompting of God, Isaiah prophecies, will not be heeded by his people. Rather, the Jewish people evidently need someone special to guide them, to lead them to the forgiveness of God, to satisfy God's wrath aroused by their continual sinning against (displeasing) God's will for them. One could interpret vss. 17-23 as a burden of Israel which will be lifted after their return from Babylonian captivity, but the history of the Jews from that day even until now, proves that they are still seeking the peace which we know can come only through faith in Jesus, God's only Messiah, Savior, John 14:1-3; Phili. 4:4-7. Eventually, I believe, the Jews will accept Jesus for who he is, God's Messiah. What a day of rejoicing that will be for all of God's people, including us! They so need to know God's forgiving, loving grace through God's only plan for spiritual salvation, John 1:17; 14::6. When Jesus first visited the earth as a man, the Jews were blind to him as we noted last week, but the day will come (in that day, the Day of the Lord) when, in a time of one-of-a-kind destruction of the earth, these stray people of God, the Jews, will turn to Jesus for forgiveness and spiritual salvation, Matt. 24:21-22; Rom. 11:26.

IV. Chap. 52 begins with another alert to be strong during their period of captivity. The Jews are reminded that they have sold themselves with no promise of payment for their value. God gave them a chance to do his pleasure after delivering them from Egyptian bondage. Because God's name is associated with the Jews, God's reputation is called to question. In fact, God's name is blasphemed continually, daily. God promises that "in that day," vs. 6, the Jews will know God's plan of salvation [through Jesus Christ]. Paul in his letter to the Roman believers at 10:15 quoted Isa. 52:7 to make the point that Israel did, in fact, reject God's Messiah when he came the first time. In Isa. 52:10 God tells us that, over time, he (God) will show "all the ends of the earth the salvation of the Lord."

Mar. 31, 2002

"God As Mankind: Humble"
Isaiah 53-54

Couples Class
Wendell Alford,
Teacher

I. Chap. 53 should begin with vs. 13 of Chap. 52, I believe, for it is there that the "my servant" is introduced with the third person personal pronoun "he." Note that the introduction is of an individual, not a nation or group of people, and an individual is discussed throughout Chap. 53. Only God's Holy Spirit could have inspired Isaiah to reveal God's plan to send his Son with such minute detail some seven hundred years before our Lord was born in Bethlehem. That this passage is foretelling the person of Jesus Christ is declared at Matt. 8:17 where Isa. 53:4 is quoted by the apostle Matthew. Further, the evangelist and recently ordained deacon Philip, declared Jesus to be the person referred to at Isa. 53:7-8 when he was invited by the Ethiopian Treasurer to explain the passage at Acts 8:26-40. When the Ethiopian believed Jesus to be his Messiah (Savior), Philip immersed him in a nearby stream, and the new child of God went on his way rejoicing. Again, Peter, at I Peter 2:18-25 (vs. 22) quoted Isa. 53:9 likening Jesus to a servant who is at the same time also the Shepherd and Keeper of every person who trusts Jesus for eternal life.

II. At Isa. 52:13 God declares that the Messiah (Jesus Christ) will be wise, exalted, lifted above, and uniquely, singularly important (one of a kind). Note carefully the context of 52:14 where we are told that many will be astonished at Jesus [as an humble, suffering Servant], so much so that he will be, by them, considered to be ugly, i.e., not comely as they expected [not a Savior as the world believes he should be]. Also, note the word "sprinkle" in 52:15 which does not mean (as some Biblical literalists believe) to baptize by sprinkling. Although the King James uses "sprinkle," the word today means the same as "astonished" in the preceding verse, i.e., surprised, filled with wonder, amazed, perplexed, disturbed, bewildered, or dumbfounded. In other words, how can God's anointed be so humble and unpretentious, Phili. 2:5-11. This idea of amazement is the basis for the first vs. of Chap. 53, "Who has believed our report that such an humble Servant can be the embodiment of and exert the very power of the Lord God Almighty?" At John 12:37-43 the apostle applies this passage to what was happening to Jesus when the Lord came to earth. Isa. 53:2 repeats the same idea as that in 52:14, that the Savior will grow up, not as a royal person but as an ordinary commoner and without kingly appearance, John 18:36. Jesus was (and is) despised and forsaken by mankind generally even though he was pierced through (slain) for our sins (that which separates one from God). Our spiritual peace rests entirely upon his shoulders, for it is by his suffering and death alone that individuals can be reconciled to the Holy God who created them (atonement). Not one person can claim to be reconciled to his or her Maker except through the Messiah's being "struck down" and "afflicted" by God himself, vss. 4,6. During the human life of the Messiah (Jesus Christ) when he was oppressed, afflicted, and brought as an innocent lamb to be slaughtered, he remained mute regarding his own danger - as quiet as a sheep being undressed by a shearer. He was buried as all mortal, sinful people are who have died from

the results of sin, yet without one sin, Heb. 4:15. The burial site chosen by others for his resting place was furnished by a rich man, Joseph of Arimathaea and a member of the Jewish Sanhedrin, who begged the Roman official, Pilate, for the body of Jesus, Matt. 27:57-60; Mk 15:42-46. Again, in vs. 10 as in vs. 4 the statement is made that "yet it pleased the Lord to sacrifice (crush) the Messiah, put him to grief, make his life (soul) an offering for sin, see his seed [for a generation, a New Covenant], sustain his [physical] life [until his mission was finished], and the Lord's will to be accomplished through the Messiah." I believe in order to understand better the terms "generation" in vs. 8 and "seed" in vs. 10, one should examine other Scriptural passages. For example, in Psa. 22 God's Holy Spirit relayed much of the same information regarding the coming of God's Messiah as the Spirit gave to Isa. in Chap. 53. Jesus, while on the cross suffering for our sins, quoted this Psalm. He said in Aramaic, "Eli, Eli, lama sabachthani?" which in English is the first vs. of Psa 22, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" Many have problems with this statement of Jesus (How could The Father have forsaken his Son?!), but I believe that Jesus quoted, not only this initial part of the Messianic Psalm, but most, if not all, of it. If one reads the entire Psalm 22 meditatively, he or she will realize that the question asked in vs. 1 is answered by reassuring the Lord Jesus that his suffering was special, because, "I will declare thy name unto my brethern; in the midst of the congregation will I praise thee. Ye that fear the Lord, praise him; all ye the seed of Jacob, glorify him; and hold him in awesome reverence; all ye the seed of Israel. For he [God] hath not despised nor abhorred the affliction of the afflicted; neither hath he hid his face from him; but when he [God's Messiah] cried unto him [God], he heard," Psa. 22:22-25. Now, relate together Psa. 22:30; Isa. 53:8,10; Lk 21:31-32; Gal. 3:16; Gen. 22:18, and you can better understand the overall role that the Lord Jesus has played, is playing, and will play in mankind's redemption, John 1:17.

III. Isa. 54 is devoted entirely to the fact that the Lord will ultimately restore Israel to his (God's) favor. Paul quotes vs. 1 in his letter to the Galatian believers at Gal. 4:27 to prove that favor with God is due solely to God's grace. We believers, even as Isaac was, are God's "children of promise." Isa. 54:2 indicates that God's plan is to enlarge his family of faith by, "stretch(ing) his dwellings (I Cor. 3:16) by lengthening the cords and strengthening the stakes." God's seed, Jesus (God's Messiah, Savior), will inherit the Gentiles and make the desolate cities to be inhabited, vs. 3. Israel "shalt forget the shame of thy youth (former time) and shalt not remember the reproach of thy widowhood any more," vs. 4. The time will come when, "No weapon that is formed against thee shall prosper - - - their righteousness is from me, saith the Lord," vs. 17.

I will sing the wondrous story of the Christ who died for me,
How he left his home in glory for the cross of Calvary
He will keep me till the river rolls its waters at my feet.
Then he'll bear me safely over, where the loved ones I shall meet.

Apr. 7, 2002

"God's Universal Invitation to Life"
Isaiah 55-56

Couples Class
Wendell Alford,
Teeacher

I. In Chap. 53 Isaiah relates the astounding proposition that God stresses and approves the importance of humility and complete self-control if one is to please the Creator, Jehovah God. In Chap. 54 the prophet extends to the nation of Israel God's invitation to conform to the wishes of God by trusting in his promise for spiritual reclamation and thereby sharing God's plan with others as demonstrated by their attitudes, witness and actions. Now we discover in Chap. 55 that God's Word goes beyond the nation of Israel with his invitation to share God's mercy and grace. In this wide and open calling forth of all people on earth to share God's love and grace, the Almighty makes his proposition indelibly clear that becoming reconciled to himself is a gift, not something available by earning that reconciliation. "Ho, (pay close attention) every one that thirsteth, come ye (all of you) to the waters, and eat; yea, come, buy wine and milk without money and without price," vs. 1. We should note again, as we did in earlier passages in Isaiah (and elsewhere), that pleasing God is accomplished through faith in his promise. We do good things because God has accepted us through our faith in his promise, which made us his children. We cannot be made his children by doing good. In other words, our faith in Jesus Christ makes us one with God (atonement), and we desire to do good things to please God because of that relationship which was made fact through our faith. Jesus explained spiritual salvation as God's free gift while he was talking to one of the Jewish leaders (a Pharisee) one night in Israel. Nicodemus approached Jesus seeking to understand Jesus' position regarding a person's relationship with God. Nicodemus began the discussion by admitting that the miracles (signs) which Jesus was performing was a clear indication that God was with Jesus. The Lord told Nicodemus that a person must be made alive spiritually (spiritually quickened) by God (from above) before he or she could have God as his or her Lord (King, enter the Kingdom of God). The Jewish leader understood Jesus' proposition as a physical happening, not spiritual. Jesus knew that Nicodemus was well acquainted with the Old Testament so he used an occurrence from there to illustrate what is involved for one to become reborn, i.e., be born spiritually. Jesus said, "As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, Num. 21:4-9, even so must the Son of man be lifted up (crucified, sacrificed) that whosoever (anyone) believeth (trusts) in him should not perish (remain separated from God spiritually), but have everlasting (spiritual) life (together with God, the Creator of all things, even ones spirit)," John 3:1-15. In John 3:16 Jesus revealed why God's gift of grace is free, because God loves his creation. But one must exercise faith in God's promise to receive that eternal, spiritual life.

II. Isaiah in 55:2 asked the question, "Wherefore (why) do ye spend money (results of your own efforts) for that which is not bread? and your labor for that which satisfieth not? Listen to me carefully, and eat ye that which is good, and let your soul delight itself in abundance," (See also John 4:13-14, 24-26.) Then in Isa. 55:3

the spiritual nature is made clear, "Listen to me, come closer, and your soul shall live; and I will make an everlasting (eternal) covenant (binding agreement) with you, even the sure mercies of David." In vs. 3b-5 God, through Isaiah, tells those who read that he (God) will call forth a nation (nonJews) who will heed his gift of free grace and heed the Holy One of Israel [David's successor by lineage, Jesus the Christ]. The poetic beauty of Isa. 55:6-13 is exceeded only by the truth of its content: "Seek ye the Lord while he is near: Let the wicked forsake his way, and the unrighteous man his thoughts: and let him return unto the Lord, and he will have mercy upon him; and to our God for he will abundantly pardon. For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, saith the Lord. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways, and my thoughts than your thoughts. So shall my word be that goeth forth out of my mouth: it shall not return unto me void (empty, without fruit), but it shall accomplish that which I please, and it shall prosper in the thing whereto I sent it. For ye shall go out with joy, and be led forth with peace: The mountains and the hills shall break forth before you into singing, and all the trees of the field shall clap their hands," Isa. 55:6-9, 11-12. The above reference to God's Word making a difference in the history of mankind was given only after the revelation in Chap. 53 of God's sending to earth his Suffering Servant, Jesus Christ. The Jews did receive the Good News (Gospel of Jesus Christ), but it was given also to the Gentiles (people of the isles) only after the Jews (as a nation) had rejected it. During the current period of human history (the Christian Era) any individual can accept God's offer of eternal life through faith (trust) in God's Messiah (Savior). This offer is to every individual without regard to race, color, nationality, social rank, material possessions, religious group, or denominational affiliation, Isa. 45:23; Rom. 14:7-12; Phil. 2:5-11.

III. Chap. 56 continues the idea of God's enlarging his grace to all people, but he asks that he be worshiped by those who profess him to be their God to live righteous lives, to exercise justice, and to remember the sabbath (that day, The Day of the Lord). A special consideration is given to foreigners (nonJews) beginning in vs. 3. Even those who are sexually impotent (eunuchs) are to know that they can also be included among those who have a proper faith in God. (Remember the eunuch in Acts 8:27 whom we discussed last Sunday, and see also Deut. 23:1-2.) They are to be included in God's family as they honor and accept God's Covenant. They too will be members of those acceptable in God's place of worship, "for mine house shall be called an house of prayer for all people," Mk 11:15-18. In Isa. 56:8 Isaiah mentions the "outcasts of Israel" who are to be gathered to the Lord God, but, "Yet will I gather others (nonJews) to him, beside those (Jews) that are gathered unto him."

My hope is built on nothing less than Jesus' blood and righteousness
I dare not trust the sweetest frame, but wholly lean on Jesus' name
When darkness seems to hide his face, I rest on his unchanging grace
When he shall come with trumpet sound, O may I then in him be found.
Dressed in his righteousness alone, faultless to stand before the
throne.

Apr. 14, 2002

"Right, Wrong, and Mercy"
Isaiah 57-58

Couples Class
Wendell Alford,
Teacher

I. As we noted that the end of Isa. Chap. 52 should have been the beginning of Chap 53, so should the last five vss. of 56 have been made the beginning of Chap. 57, I believe. The Lord invites the carnivorous beasts of the forest to devour those who refuse to listen to God's will and do his bidding. One of the reasons that the people (Jews) are not heeding God's warnings is because of the shortcomings of the religious leaders of the people. Isaiah's castigation of those leaders (priests), Mal. 2:1-3; Matt. 15:7-20, is devastating: these watchmen are blind, ignorant, mute as dogs [regarding spiritual discernment, they cannot bark], asleep and dreaming unreal suppositions, lying down on (not performing) their responsibilities and even enjoying their laziness, greedy and insatiable in their materialistic appetites, and they occupy the shepherd positions but turn those positions into their own personal gain, Matt. 23:14. These [false] shepherds tell the people to become drunk with wine and strong drink, because nothing will change except that tomorrow will be even more abundant than today, II Pet. 3:3-4. [Our world will get better and better, so don't fret.]

II. As a result of the lack of spiritual leadership, "the righteous perisheth and no one cares." The persons who live in awe of God and who walk humbly with him are belittled, made fun of, and chided for their disciplined living. [Those poor, ignorant dummies never, ever have any fun. They are living "sacrificial" lives for nothing. Oh well, some people just believe that they have to be "goody-goodies."] Isa. 57:1b-3 makes the situation clear by contrasting those who live lives with regard to God's claims, the upright, with those who "are offspring of whores," the wicked. The upright who discipline (today's disciples of Jesus Christ) their lives according to God's will, live in peace and are able to sleep (relax), but in vss. 3 ff anxiety is promised to those who are "offspring of falsehood," John 8:13, 31-51. The Prophet Isaiah noted some of the evils which the people were committing. They set up idols to worship under trees, came to them, and worked themselves into an ecstatic frenzy, "inflaming yourselves," and in that state of ecstasy sacrificed (killed) their infants to the false gods down in valleys between cracks in the rocks. Indulging in such activities is devoting oneself completely to self-gratification without regard to coming judgment against such selfishness. Today mankind practices those activities (sins) through devoting their lives to covetousness (materialism), Isa. 57:17; Col. 3:5, including the unwillingness to be encumbered with parenting the coming generation. The danger of bearing and caring for children will become an especially acute problem just before the Day of the Lord begins, Lk 23:26-31; Matt. 24:19. Note the reference to self-righteousness in Isa. 57:12, "For I will declare thy righteousness, and thy works; for they shall not profit thee," Rom. 9:31-32. The Lord at 57:15 alludes back to the spirit of the Lord Jesus in Chap. 53 and states that what pleases the "high and lofty One that inhabits eternity, whose name is Holy; I dwell in the high and holy place, with him also that is of a contrite (subordinate) and humble (not proud, haughty, arrogant, assertive)

spirit, to revive the spirit (make alive spiritually) of the humble, and to revive the heart (attitude) of the contrite ones." (Note again Jesus' admonition at Matt. 15:18.). God states, "For the iniquity of his (Israel's) coveteousness was I angry, and struck (punished) him. I hid myself and continued angry, but Israel continued on his way and turned away from me and went the way of his [own] heart, [did his own thing], vs. 17. Although this alienation exists, note that in vs. 16 God states that he will not continue indefinitely to tolerate Israel's rebellion, nor will God remain angry forever, Rom. 11:25-32. Israel's (and all believers') hearts will fall (become broken and contrite) before God, Rom. 14:8-12. Eventually, after the great tribulation, Israel will be healed, be led of God, and God will restore his comfort (peace), vss. 16, 18. In vs. 19 God says that he is in control of those who are near (Jews) and far (Gentiles) and will finally bring genuine and lasting peace to those with faith [in God through Jesus Christ]. However, the wicked (unfaithful) are like the troubled sea, when it cannot rest, whose waters casts up mire and dirt. There is no peace, saith my God, to the wicked," Rev. 20:11-15; Philip. 4:3. The chief reason that there is no peace for the wicked (unbelievers) today, I believe, is that their whole "comfort" and "satisfaction" is dependent upon the world order continuing as it is today. The Word of God is explicit that the current system will come to an end, II Pet. 3:8-18, and the only hope lies in him (God) who is eternal. The problem of a growing sentiment in today's world is that more people are denying the very existence of their Creator, Psa. 14:1, and, consequently, they are relying upon themselves, nature, false prophets (soothsayers), etc. They have no fear (awe) of God and no shame for practices which are contrary to God's holy will as given in his Word. For instance, adultery, fornication, self-abuse (drug use), homosexuality, pedophilia, false testimony, killing, stealing, coveting (idolatry), using God's holy name in a vain way, and not remembering God's special day as holy (Sabbath or Sunday), etc., are in this country and abroad considered acceptable by a large and growing number, I believe.

III. Chap. 58 is a revelation of how God views hypocritical practice of ones religious faith. How does God feel about the persons who, individually or collectively, profess to know and serve their Creator, but whose life witness is, in fact, self-serving, hypocritical? These people fast and practice rites which appear to respect God's seventh day, the Sabbath or Sunday, but God knows their hearts. God anticipates that portion of eternity in which he will bring about a peaceful kingdom on earth, but he wants such a Kingdom of God (Heaven) to be accepted volitionally by humankind both Jews and Gentiles, all mankind, II Pet. 3:9. "Yell loudly, hold nothing back, cry out like a trumpet, tell my people of their transgression, and the house of Jacob their sins," 58:1. The vss. which follow tell of how the Jews exercised fake fasts and abused the Sabbath, especially vs. 13, i.e., recognizing God's creative acts and perogative to direct the affairs of mankind. Their attention to the Law of God involved interpreting that Law to further their own self-fish goals. For a better understanding of the letter vs the spirit of the Law, note Matt. 5:20-22, 27-28, 31-32, 33-34, 38-39, 43-44; 6:1,3-4, 5-8, 16-18, 19-20; 7:1-2, 12, 21-23; 8:11-12; 9:11-13. Honor God and "I will cause you to ride upon the high hills - - for the mouth of the Lord hath spoken it," Isa. 58:14.

Apr. 21, 2002

"Israel's Sins and Restoration"
Isaiah 59-60

Couples Class
Wendell Alford,
Teacher

I. A recurring theme in Isaiah's prophecy is the fact that God will not turn away from those whom he covenants to guide and protect. Remember, however, that a covenant involves no less than two parties. God's covenant was with Abraham and his descendants through Isaac and Jacob, and the provisions of that covenant were provided by God through messengers. Mankind was not permitted to set the parameters or conditions of their relating to their Creator, because at the beginning, with Adam and Eve, people demonstrated that with absolute freedom of choice, they would not always choose what was best for them. So, over time, God gave his people (the Israelites) a set of rules to guide them and messengers to pronounce those guidelines and encourage the people to honor God by worshiping him and living lives according to the laws God gave them. This covenant continued between God and his people for thousands of years, and during the entire period God's people cycled far and near to keeping their part of the covenant. Mostly, the people fell short of God's requirements of the agreement. The refusing to keep God's covenant, the Bible (God's Word to mankind) calls sin, staying away from God's will and way, John 14:6-7. One overwhelming fact that is established beyond any doubt whatsoever is that God did not turn away from (forget) his people because of their sinning against him and his will. This tenacity of God in relentlessly keeping his children in his consciousness even though they disobey him is poetically expressed in a poem by the English poet Francis Thompson (1859-1907). The poem entitled "The Hound of Heaven" stresses the central truth of Jonah's prophecy, no matter the site a person chooses, no matter the illicit attitude one assumes, once God's covenant is engaged, God will never forsake the object of his love, a believer and truster of that covenant. As a hound follows the tracks of his prey, so does the Lord follow and care for those who are his, Deut. 31:6; Isa. 41:17. Today we believers and trusters in God's only begotten Son, Jesus Christ, are watched over by that "Hound of Heaven," God the Father, Heb. 13:5-6; Rom. 11:1-18. And, according to the truth found in that Rom. 11 passage, God has not forgotten the nation of Israel with whom he made the Old Covenant. Nor will he ever forget those of us who have covenanted with him by trusting Jesus Christ (God's New Covenant), because the Old Covenant which was based upon the Law has been suspended, Heb. 8:7-13.

II. I believe that the above preliminary information is helpful in understanding the prophecy of Isaiah in his Chaps. 59 and 60. In Chap. 59 Isaiah proclaims that "the Lord's hand is not shortened that it cannot save; neither his ear heavy, that it cannot hear." God is steadfast in his concern and love for Israel, but in 59:2, "your iniquities have separated between you and your God, and your sins have hid his face from you, that he will not hear." Note that what blinded God and made him deaf to their voices was the Jews' sins, not the lack of God's desire to fellowship with them. The list of Israel's sins follow God's stating that he will remain faithful to his agreement in his covenant even though his people were

not true to their part of the covenant. They were practicing murdering those whom they hated and taking their possessions with their guilty hands. Their words did not reflect the truth and their actions were unjust while grumbling that "justice should be done." Injustice was so rampant, "None calleth for justice nor any pleadeth for truth: they trust in empty words, and speak lies; they conceive evil, and bring forth iniquity." Then notice the picturesque language in 59:5-6 where Isaiah likens the Jews' activities as the hatching of venomous snake eggs, i.e., their actions bring forth that which applies venom that kills. People eat the snake eggs as one would chicken eggs for food, but instead of nutrition, they produce sins (other poisonous snakes) which separate the people from God. The spider web is used also as that which appears to be substantive, positive, and good, but that web is made of a foam which is not stable and decomposes readily. It is not usable for making cloth for clothing. The people were living lifestyles which ignored God's will for them. It is no mystery why God would not, could not, see or hear them lest he became unwilling to relate to them at all. Such a period is demonstrated during the intertestamental period between Malachi and Matthew (hundreds of years) when God through Malachi told the Israelites that they were plagued with corrupt priests (spiritual leaders), wicked practices, and a false sense of security supposedly based upon their "privileged" relationship with God. Malachi, as Isaiah did before him, told the people that they were practicing hypocrisy, infidelity, religiously mixed marriages, divorce, false worship, and arrogance. God promised the Israelites through Malachi that he would send a messenger "before the great and dreadful day of the Lord" to them. God did send John the Immerser as he had promised through Malachi, but the Jews would not hear him either, Matt. 11:11-15. The first person of the pronouns in 59:9-13 indicate that they did recognize their sins against God, and therefore "the Lord saw it" and "wondered that there was no intercessor," vss. 15-16. The Lord then promised that "the Redeemer shall come to Zion; and this is my covenant with them, saith the Lord," vss. 20-21; Rom. 11:26.

III. Immediately following the promise to send a Redeemer in Chap. 59, Chap. 60 reveals the coming of the "glory of the Lord" which will "rise upon thee," Chap. 60:1. However, there will be a period of darkness for Israel during which "the Gentiles shall come to the light, and kings to the brightness of thy rising," vs. 3. The events prophesied by Isaiah in 60:4-10 appear to be so contemporary to our day. In 1948 Israel was reconstituted as a nation due, primarily, to the political activities of Great Britain and the United States from the human viewpoint. We believers, on the other hand, know that all ultimate decisions are due to the Creator. The current period of history presents an interlude which has some of the elements, to a much lesser degree, that will prevail during the period of the glorious kingdom which Jesus the Christ will rule on earth following the severe destruction noted in Matt. 24:21. In vs. 12 the Word again states candidly that "the nation and kingdom that will not serve thee (God's people) shall perish; yea, those nations shall be utterly ruined." The earth will have undergone a tremendous transformation as indicated in vss. 19-20. The Lord will be the earth's (habitat of God's faithful ones) direct source of needed energy. See also Rev. 21:1; 22:5.

I. Jesus, our Lord, was born in Bethlehem just south of Jerusalem in Judea but grew up in Nazareth up north in Galilee. After Jesus had taught and performed many miracles around Galilee, many people believed him to be "the Prophet" [Messiah], John 7:40, but others questioned whether the Messiah could come out of Galilee according to Scripture (Old Covenant). They were, of course, unaware that Jesus was, in fact, born in Bethlehem as the prophet Micah (5:2) had prophesied, John 7:42. The Jewish police were divided about whether Jesus should be seized and delivered to the ruling body of Jewish leaders, the Sanhedrin. The Sanhedrin considered Jesus' status, and Nicodemus spoke up and suggested they not condemn Jesus before he had been heard. This outspoken Nicodemus was the same one who had come to Jesus for a one-on-one lesson from the Lord at night in John 3. The Sanhedrin accused Nicodemus of being an ally of Jesus by questioning whether both were from Galilee, John 7:43-53. At any rate, Jesus' public appearances had made him a popular and respected person whom the Jewish leaders by now hated, despised, and wanted dead. One of the reasons the Jewish leaders disliked Jesus was because of his condemnation of their religious positions, e.g., his Sermon on the Mount, which we mentioned at the end of last week's outline, and in the assertion claimed early in his public service at Lk 4:16-22 when he read from Isaiah at 61:1-2. Jesus in a synagogue on the Sabbath in Nazareth, read, "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he hath anointed me to proclaim the Good News to the poor [in spirit]; he hath sent me to heal the brokenhearted, to proclaim deliverance to the captives, and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty them that are oppressed. To proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord. [emphasis mine-WA] Jesus had stood to read from the scroll, and after he had read this portion of Isaiah's prophecy, he rerolled the scroll and handed it back to the attendant. You could have heard a pin drop as every eye in the synagogue was fixed steadily upon Jesus. How Jesus interpreted this passage from Isaiah was even more earthshaking than the Scripture itself. "This day," Jesus said, "is this Scripture fulfilled in your hearing." Since he was back in his home town, some of the synagogue attenders later asked, "Is not this Joseph's Son?" As usual, Jesus' teaching enraged his home town people also, and they tried to kill him by throwing him over a cliff. Nevertheless, he escaped their wrath. To understand what Jesus was telling his neighbors in Nazareth that Sabbath, one must notice not just what he read, but what he did not read. In fact, he stopped reading after the first clause of a compound sentence. If he had read the full sentence, he would have continued with, "and the day of vengeance of our God; to comfort all that mourn." This same concept was prophesied by Joel at Chap. 2:28-32. This Joel passage was Peter's text in the first formal message pronounced after Jesus returned back to his heavenly Father, and God had answered Jesus' prayer (John 14:16) of sending his Holy Spirit. Notice, however, that now that God's plan of salvation through the death and resurrection of his only begotten Son had been completed, God allowed Peter to announce the continuation

of the intent of God, "to show wonders in heaven above, and signs in the earth beneath; blood, and fire, and vapour of smoke: The sun shall be turned into darkness, and the moon into blood, before the Lord come." It is also significant that in this same message Peter accused the Jewish leaders directly of crucifying the Lord Jesus, vss. 2:23,26. He likewise made the same accusation shortly thereafter at Acts 3:15. To summarize the message of Isa. 61:1-2; Joel 2:28-32; Lk 4:16-19; Acts 2:14-21: Jesus was to come to earth in humility (Isa. 53) first, followed by an "acceptable year of the Lord," afterwards to be followed by "the day of vengeance" when Jesus will come a second time to mete God's justice upon the whole earth, to be followed finally by a time when all the faithful (in Jesus as the Messiah, Savior) will enjoy a blessed period of wonderful peace. Jesus said that the length of time between these periods is entirely the prerogative of God the Father himself, Acts 1:6-8. I have spent much time here on this aspect of Isa. 61, because I believe understanding much of Biblical prophecy is so dependent upon "rightly dividing" (II Tim. 2:15) these Scriptural passages.

II. Although Jesus' activities are not given in the Bible from about age twelve through thirty, we do learn from Lk 4:16-22 that he was a regular attendant at the synagogue at the Sabbath meetings while he was growing up in Nazareth. Had this not been true, he would not have been honored by having received the holy scroll of Isaiah and allowed to read publicly and comment on its contents. Also, it is noteworthy that Jesus found the text which fitted the occasion and his part in the circumstance immediately. On that day in the synagogue at Nazareth, he chided his home town people for not accepting his Messiahship and quoted from I Kings 17:1-16 and II Kings 5:1-14. In these passages Jesus pointed out that God had been selective in meeting the needs of certain individuals rather than meeting the needs of everyone with the same needs. Jesus' knowledge of the Scriptures (O.T.) was natural since he created the world and maintains it, John 1:1-3; Col. 1:15-18; Heb. 1:1-3.

III. God revealed to Isaiah, and thereby to us who are enlightened by his Holy Spirit, that during this "acceptable year of the Lord" we can be made right with our Creator as individuals by accepting God's plan, namely, by trusting Jesus as God's Savior. God's love is incomprehensible in all its dimensions without the aid of faith and the leadership of God through his Holy Spirit, John 14:26; Eph. 2:18; 3:17-21; Col. 1:26-27. But Isaiah warns all mankind that following this "acceptable year of the Lord" there will come a time of that terrible "day of vengeance" when God will defeat all opposition to God's will on earth. There will be no place to hide in that day anywhere on the earth from God's vengeance, Deut. 32:35; Rom. 12:19; Rev. 6:12-17. Out of this time of ultimate trouble will come a period of peace, joy, and contentment for the people of God, those who have placed their faith in Jesus Christ. The Jewish nation will relate their continued prayer for the peace of Jerusalem (Psa. 122:6) to trusting Jesus as their Messiah which will come to them during the severe tribulation of God. Isaiah is telling the Jews this truth today in his Chaps. 53, 61-62. In 62:1-4 God states that, following the coming of the Humble One [Jesus and the "acceptable year of the Lord"], "the day of vengeance" will follow, and God will not rest until he is reconciled to Jerusalem (no more forsaken) and married (Beulah) to Jerusalem (the Jews)!

I. The beginning of Chap. 63 has a significant reference to the historical setting of Isaiah's time as well as a portrayal of future event. Nations to the east were growing in strength, and the Palestine area was the perpetual target of both Syria and Assyria. Israel was a prime area because of its military and commercial strategical relationship to the Mediterranean Sea, Europe and Africa. Only during one relatively short period was Israel able to take advantage of the strategic geographic position, during the military expertise of David and his son, Solomon. David's exploits and Solomon's political and executive abilities carried Israel to its zenith of national importance. God's commission for the Israelites was to convey to the other peoples of the world his (God's) desire for living lives that would honor their Creator and also be safest and most satisfactory for themselves. This commission was, as history relates, sorely abused by the Israelites. Even David and Solomon were far short in their moral activities of God's perfect will for them. Solomon himself was David's second son by Bathsheba who became David's wife only after committing adultery with her and then having her husband murdered while serving his country in battle. Solomon was noted for his profound wisdom by Israel and other nations, but late in his life he lost or ignored his spiritual discernment. For the sake of political advantage and voluptuous living, he later succumbed to utter apostasy, i.e., turned away from God's law and will. His policies of oppression and luxury brought the last period of a united kingdom to the verge of dissolution, and when his son Rehoboam came to the throne, the actual split of the kingdom occurred. In spite of this ungodliness practiced by Israel's leaders, God still loved his people and watched over them. This faithfulness of God was the emphasis of our lesson Sunday before last. The message of Chaps. 63 and 64 introduces the element of the judgment of God.

II. Chap. 63 begins with a gory picture of Israel's enemies slain with their blood staining the clothing of Israel's Redeemer. Assyria was about to come from the east through Moab and Edom, and Isaiah depicts that attack as one which the Redeemer (Messiah) will take vengeance on Israel's adversaries to redeem his people (those who trust God's plan of redemption). Remember that God has already revealed to Isaiah (and now to us who believe) in Chap. 53 that when the Messiah comes [the first time], he will be as a Lamb, meek and humble "with no beauty that we should desire him." However, at the outset of Chap. 63 God portrays that same Redeemer as treading upon Israel's enemies until there is no life left in them, with their life blood flowing like grape juice in a wine press. Since this will be the action of God's Redeemer [Jesus Christ], it is obvious that Jesus' first coming could not be the reference in Chap. 63:1-6. Further, recall our last week's lesson how Jesus early in his ministry at Nazareth in quoting from Isa. 61 made a distinction between "the acceptable year of the Lord" and (by omission) "the day of vengeance of our God." Surely the "day of vengeance" is the time of the "winepress" judgment made known in

Chap. 63:4 with a parallel announcement in Rev. 14:15-20. In Isa. 63:5-6 God says, "And I looked, and there was none to help: and I wondered that there was none to uphold: therefore mine own arm brought salvation to me [God in the person of his only begotten Son, Jesus the Messiah]; and my fury, it upheld me. And I will tread down the people (enemies of God's faithful ones) in mine anger, and make them drunk in my fury, and I will bring down their strength to the earth," Deut. 32:35-36; Rom. 12:19-21; Rev. 14:7; 16:4-7. God was in Jesus Christ [the first time he came] reconciling the world (all who will trust him) unto himself, II Cor. 5:17-21, and when Jesus comes the second time, he will come with sure and final judgment on the entire earth, II Thes. 1:5-10.

III. With vs. 7 of Chap. 63 a reader is immediately struck with the contrast of the ideas there and those given before in vss. 1-6. "I will mention the lovingkindness of the Lord, and the praises of the Lord, according to all the Lord hath bestowed on us, and the great goodness toward the house of Israel, which he hath bestowed on them according to his mercies - -." He goes on to declare the Jews to be his people, and that their affliction causes the Lord also to be concerned. Moses had been endowed with God's Spirit to enable Moses to shepherd (lead) his people. Although the Jews can claim that God is their Father through his creative action, they no longer exercise the faith of Abraham, 63:16.

IV. Chap. 64 relates end-time relationships between God and his people, and while some reference applies to those who become trusters (believers) in God's Son, Jesus Christ, the main context relates to the end time when the Jews as a people will turn to Jesus Christ for becoming right with God, the Father. There is to be a time of peace following this reconciliation of the nation of Israel by God. Isaiah talks about these calamitous events in vss. 1-3, and in vs. 4 states that following those calamities, a glorious period for God's people will begin. At the time Isaiah recorded this information, he did not, I believe, understand the implications of what he wrote. Later, during the time of God's New Covenant with mankind, the Lord revealed what was meant in Isa. 64:4ff. The reason for the understanding later came about, because God poured out his Spirit on all believers in Jesus as the Messiah (Savior). Paul, led by God's Holy Spirit, revealed this to believers in God's Christ in his first letter to the Corinthians. At I Cor. 2:9 Paul quotes Isa. 64:4 and indicates in the context of I Cor. 2:1-3:4 that only God's Holy Spirit can reveal the glory that is to be available to all who trust Jesus Christ, who rely upon God's promise. This goodness and blessing will be available, because the Lord will become the Father of believers through remolding individuals as a potter fashions clay into something very valuable, 64:8. These individuals are not worth remaking. They are as worthless as a filthy rag, 64:6. [The Hebrew translates literally: "filthy as a menstruating woman's rag."] However, after we are "the work of his hand" (born from above, reborn) through faith, 64:8b, we are promised untold blessings, "what he (God) hath prepared for those who wait for him," 64:4b! We will be clothed in white robes of God's righteousness because of our faith in Jesus' righteousness, Rev. 7:14-17. God's unquestionable judgment is noted in Rom. 11:33-36.

May 12, 2002

"The Consummation of History"
Isaiah 65-66

Couples Class
Wendell Alford,
Teacher

I. Week before last we saw in Chaps. 61 and 62 how Jesus came to fulfill that part of Isaiah's prophecy first in 62:1-2a. Then last week in Chaps. 63-64 Isaiah prophesied that the Lord can and will exercise judgment or mercy according to his good pleasure. No one can question that prerogative of God, because all have sinned and fall short of the Creator's glory, i.e., God's will for everyone, Rom. 3:23; Gal. 3:22. We come today to God's revelation in Chaps. 65-66 which concludes God's projection of the lot of mankind even to the occasion of the provision of a new heaven and a new earth. This completely new arrangement will be so "brand-new" different that the former times will not even be remembered. At the beginning of Chap. 65 in vs. 1, Isaiah relates God's confirming that he will be desired by those (the Gentiles) who in the time of Isaiah wanted nothing to do with God's ways, Rom. 1:18-32. Those very Godless people would turn to the eternal Lord God of heaven and trust him, even a people (nation) who had not been called God's people but had openly served idols, Rom. 10:20-21. However, God's own people whom he had herded and cared for especially through the centuries, had refused his outstretched arms. They, the Jews, were rebellious and, as such, did not walk according to God's way's but "walked in a way that was not good, after their own desires." In such activities God's people provoked the Almighty to anger blatantly (to my face) and continually. They practiced idolatry by sacrificing in gardens (on their own, away from God's designated holy places) and burned incense upon self-made brick altars. They defied God's Law by associating with the dead (among the graves), bowed before monuments while eating forbidden food (swine meat and the broth of other forbidden food), and, finally, practicing a religious caste system that, by their own assessment, made them better than others religiously. They were evil before God and proud of it, which blasphemed the Holy One of Israel.

II. After announcing that the Gentiles are coming to God and enumerating Israel's sins in 65:1-7, the Prophet proclaims that the Lord will not turn away from the Jews entirely. Vs. 8 states that God will honor those individual Jews who are faithful to him even though the majority and leaders are not faithful. As Isaiah puts it, "as the new wine is found in the cluster, and one saith, 'Destroy it not; for a blessing is in it:' so will I do for my servants' sakes, that I may not destroy them all." This determination of God to recognize a faithful remnant is noted in I Kings 19:14-18, and that reference is quoted by Paul at Rom. 11:1-12 to give the idea a proper perspective during "the acceptable year of the Lord." At 65:17 God's Word declares that a period will come when God will "create new heavens and a new earth: and the former shall not be remembered, nor come to mind." This new creation is repeated at 66:22 in connection with the restoration of Israel. A major center of activity for God's relating to his people in that period will be Jerusalem. The same facet of God's creating all things new is divulged also at Rev. 21:1-5. An unusual circumstance which is related in 65:20 is that people will not age as we do today.

as we do today. The longevity of the life of humankind in the early days of God's creation (Remember Methuselah lived for 969 years.) will prevail again on God's new earth. Those whom God has elected to enjoy this new creation will not have to move from here to there to have all needs met, for "as the days of a tree are the days of my people, and mine elect shall enjoy the work of their hands." In fact, "it shall come to pass, that before they call, I will answer; and while they are yet speaking, I will hear. The wolf and the lamb shall feed together, and the lion shall eat straw like an ox; and dust shall be the serpent's food. They shall not hurt nor destroy in all my holy mountain," saith the Lord, 65:24-25.

III. Beginning in Chap. 66 the Lord reminded Isaiah (and us) that God is headquartered in heaven and that the earth is merely a part of God's creation. In fact, the earth can be likened to a footstool upon which God rests his feet! Remember in Chap. 6 when King Uzziah died how Isaiah "saw the Lord sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up, and the train of his robe filled the temple." God declares that all mankind knows he (God) made everything that exists (including mankind). Those that recognize this fact and humble themselves as a result, God will claim as his own (to him or her "will I look"). In I Kings 8:27 when Solomon was considering the Temple which he had built at the request of his father David, the Ark of the Covenant had been brought for placing in the new Temple. In Solomon's dedicatory prayer he asked the questions: "Will God indeed dwell on the earth? Behold, the heaven and the heaven of heavens cannot contain thee; how much less the house that I have built?" The answer is, of course, that God is infinitely more glorious than all of his creation. He can bring to pass any activity which is pleasing to him. This reiteration of God's ability Isaiah uses to introduce the fact that God will bring shame to Israel's enemies by reestablishing Israel so suddenly that the happening will be as though a woman were giving birth, even before labor pains came. "Before she travailed, she brought forth; before her pain came, she was delivered of a man child - - Shall the earth be made to give birth in one day? or shall a nation be born at once? for as soon as Zion travailed, she brought forth her children." When Zion (the Jews) see this happening "your heart will rejoice, and your bones shall flourish like grass," Ezek. 37:1-14. The Lord will come with fire and slay hordes of people, II Pet. 3:8-10. He will plead with all people before the great slaughter and gather all nations together to see God's glory. Israel will be gathered from the whole earth to God's holy mountain in Jerusalem. There they will honor Jesus as God's Messiah, Savior. The Jews will be inhabitants of the new heavens and new earth and will be identified again as the people of God. Note the common denominator in 65:9 and 66:22 where the word "seed" is used, in the first instance to identify a seed out of Jacob and in the latter instance, the seed is identified with the people of Israel, the Jews. Humanly, Jesus was a Jew (the son of Mary) and divinely he was (and is) the Son of God, i.e., God in human form. Those who have believed and trusted God and waited for his salvation, will worship the Lord forever, but those who have rejected God's offer will remain forever separated from God (spiritually dead), 66:23-24.

May 12, 2002

"Isaiah: A Review"
Isaiah 1-66

Couples Class
Wendell Alford,
Teacher

I. Practically all nonChristians and many people who profess to be Christians treat Isaiah's prophecy primarily as a report of history of the Israelites in the period around which the prophet lived. For that reason most of such people consider the sixty-six chapters to treat only events just before, during, and after the Babylonian exile of the Jews (597-537 BC). Further, many scholars of Isaiah emphasize the poetic elements in the book as a collection of poems whose literary license expose the information to a wide scope of possible interpretations. A believer in Jesus as God's Messiah (Savior) and who thereby has been born from above (John 3:3) should recognize that Isaiah as the most quoted Old Covenant Scripture in God's New Covenant, because of its references to the messianic age and to the witness, rejection, suffering, death and exaltation of the chosen Servant of the Lord, is much more than a mere recording of history. That portion of Isaiah given primarily to history, per se, is Chaps. 36-39 which many refer to as a historical interlude. One of the tests of the validity of being a true prophet of God was whether a given prophet's predictions came to pass. This historical interlude includes such tests of Isaiah's authenticity when he prophesied that, at a time when the Assyrian army was completely surrounding the city of Jerusalem, "Therefore thus saith the Lord concerning the king of Assyria, he shall not come into this city, nor shoot an arrow there, nor come before it with shields, nor cast an embankment against it," Isa. 37:33. Again, in Chap. 38:1-8 Hezekiah's coming death had been proclaimed, but Isaiah prophesied that Hezekiah's prayer to God would be heard and that he would be granted an additional fifteen years of life. God even assured Hezekiah of the reality of God's promise by reversing the sun's shadow by ten degrees! Isaiah was, and is, indeed a true prophet of God. Therefore, all who read his prophecy should know that his word regarding God's promised Savior would come to pass. We believers in that Messiah, Jesus Christ, know that Isaiah's prophecy did come true and that the other promises made by him will also come to pass.

II. The central theme of the first thirty-nine chapters of Isaiah stress the holy majesty of God Almighty, Jehovah the Holy One of Israel. God will not tolerate injustice and depravity among his people or their leaders, nor accept worship which is less than a wholehearted response to God's ethical holiness. The final chapters of the prophecy (40-66) relate Jehovah's imminent inauguration of a new relationship with his disciples, those who accept God's plan of spiritual salvation through God as a suffering servant and, eventually, God's Old Covenant people (the remnant of Jews) after a cataclysmic purging of the entire earth. Many of Isaiah's prophetic events are yet to happen (beyond 1995) as revealed in much of the New Covenant, especially God's revelation to the Apostle John on the Island of Patmos. In considering a review of the entire prophecy of Isaiah today, one should not overlook the criticism of the book in the last hundred years or so. I mentioned above the reduction of the prophecy to a simple historical summary. Partially based

upon the historical premise, others have denied the authorship of Isaiah for the entire sixty-six chapters. One evidence which aids one in reaching such a conclusion is the fact that Isaiah announces at 44:28; 45:1 the very name Cyrus whom God calls "my shepherd and he shall fulfil all my purpose." Cyrus did not appear in history until almost two hundred years after Isaiah wrote of him. Therefore, many Bible students elect to assert that Isaiah could not have written Chaps. 40-66 and refer to these latter chapters as Deutero-Isaiah. Personally, I have no problem with God's knowing such information before hand and revealing it through Isaiah to the Jews. Isaiah also revealed that our Lord Jesus would come and much more about him: his advent, 40:3-5; his virgin birth, 7:14; Galilee to be the main scene of his teaching, 9:1-2; his deity and the eternity of his throne, 9:6-7; his suffering, 53; dying with the wicked, 53:9; buried with the rich, 53:9; might and gentleness of his reign, 40:10-11; righteousness and beneficence of his reign, 32:1-8 and 61:1-3; his justice and kindness, 42:3-4,7; his rule over Gentiles, 2:2-3; 42:1,6; 49:6; 55:4-5; 56:6; 60:3-5; his vast influence, 49:7, 23; idols to disappear, 2:18; a warless world to be established, 2:4; 65:25; the earth to be reordered, 24; 26:21; 34:1-4; death to be destroyed, 25:8; 26:19; God's people to be called by a new name, 62:2; 65:15; a new heaven and new earth to be created, 65:17; 66:22; the righteous and wicked to be eternally separated, 66:15, 22-24.

III. Isaiah is the longest of the prophetic books of the Bible and contains the fullest Messianic predictions to be found in the Old Covenant. No doubt Peter had Isaiah in mind when in I Pet. 1:10-11 he wrote, "of which salvation the prophets have inquired and search diligently, who prophesied of the grace that should come to you: searching what, or what manner of time the Spirit of Christ which was in them and was indicating when it testified beforehand the sufferings of Christ, and the glory that would follow." The prophets of the Old Covenant were of supreme importance as God revealed his message to the people of Israel. Both the spiritual leaders and the political leaders of the nation turned away from God's will to either pacify the people, enhance their own advantage, or both. These wise prophets were dedicated to God's message and received insights from God to call an erring people to repentance. It became their responsibility to lay before the people not only the coming glories into which they were to enter in the Messiah's day, but also to impress upon them the necessity of preparing the way of the Lord by turning from their sins to righteousness, and from their idolatrous vanities to the eternal, living God who had so graciously and wonderfully manifested his power on their behalf throughout Israel's history. There are many predictions in Isaiah's prophecy which he did not understand, I believe, but which the New Covenant has disclosed to us who believe and trust Jesus Christ. However, there are future events mentioned in Isaiah as is true of John's Revelation which we cannot comprehend, but which will become apparent to those who trust God's plan for humanity as is necessary at the time these revelations are to take place. God has promised never to leave nor forsake those who love and trust him, Psa. 27:10; Isa. 49:15. Remember Jesus' words, "But that on good ground are they, which in an honest and good heart, having heard the word, keep it, and bring forth fruit with patience, Lk 8:15.

May 19, 2002

"Congregational Differences"
I Cor. 1

Couples Class
Wendell Alford,
Teacher

I. Examining Paul's first letter to the saints at Corinth immediately following a study of his letter to the Ephesian believers is a natural flow of doctrinal thought, because Paul sought in Ephesus a unity among the believers regardless of their religious background, especially whether Jewish or Gentile. Now we look at a letter to a congregation made up primarily of converted Gentiles who had little, if any, knowledge of Old Covenant history, doctrine, or tradition. Cohesive factors were very weak, and in such matters relating to general disagreements, lawsuits, immorality, questionable practices, abuse of the Lord's Supper, the resurrection, false apostles, and spiritual gifts, the congregation needed and asked Paul for answers. In the letter Paul admonishes the saints at Corinth concerning the Lordship of Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit's leadership of believers and the results of not following that Lordship and leadership, I Cor. 6:15-20. For the Corinthians to seek Paul's counsel in basic doctrinal matters was logical since he had founded the church there on his second journey as a missionary. He was there in about 52-53 AD and stayed there for about eighteen months, and this letter was written in Ephesus probably about 56-57 AD, some 3-4 years after his first stay in Corinth. The Corinth which Paul knew had been founded as a Roman Colony during the century before Christ. It was strategically located in the Roman province of Achaia about forty miles west of Athens on a narrow strip of land between the Aegean and Adriatic Seas, with two adjoining ports. The city's location made it a center for trade routes passing from west to east, and the resulting prosperity brought both luxury and immorality. "To live like a Corinthian" meant to live in gross immorality, and many pagan temples located in the city encouraged this licentious way of life through temple prostitution. The population of Corinth was about four hundred thousand, a mixed multitude. Sailors, merchants, adventurers, and refugees from all over the Roman Empire filled its streets. Religion was also thought of as a commodity. A magnificent temple was built for Venus (Greek, Aphrodite), the chief local goddess. About a thousand priestesses served in this temple and administered a base, heathen "worship experience" which consisted of nothing more or less than licentious sexual activities (whore-mongering), all in the name of religion!

II. It is no wonder that I Corinthian's theme is the supremacy of Christ and the Lordship of Jesus through the leadership of God's Holy Spirit. Essentially Paul emphasizes that loyalty to God's eternal Son is the answer to all of their questions, for Jesus had said, "If you love me, your life will reflect my teachings," John 14:15; I John 5:3. Paul begins his letter by declaring that he is indeed one of God's few apostles, commissioned by the will of God himself to serve the Lord Jesus Christ. The apostle addresses the communication to "the ekklesia of God which is at Corinth, to them who are sanctified (set or called apart) in Christ Jesus, called to be saints along with all (believers) in every place [who] call upon the name of Jesus Christ our Lord, [i.e., both their Lord and

ours]." Paul in so stating that the inclusion of all believers, wherever located on the earth, make up God's ekklesia without physical proximity or without leadership from other than God's Holy Spirit, is a very important point, I believe. Note that in the first three verses of greetings and in the following six verses of Paul's prayer of thanksgiving that Jesus Christ is called by name in every verse (by pronoun in vs. 5) which underlines my assertion above that the apostle's theme for the Corinthians' lifestyles (and ours) should be anchored in the person of Jesus Christ, and his teachings should be followed because of our love for him.

III. In vs. 10 Paul introduces the body of his letter by pleading with them in the name of "our Lord Jesus" that the Corinthian believers "be perfectly joined together" in their doctrine (beliefs) and conduct (same mind and judgment). Please remember that not all of the members met at the same place, but in private homes in various locations. The apostle's news about their situation in Corinth had come to him from the family of one Chloe, a woman about whom we know nothing except that Paul trusted her family's testimony. Apparently at least a part of the misunderstanding among the Corinthian believers was due to loyalties to different leaders whom they had known or heard about, Paul, Apollos, Peter, and even Christ himself. Paul then asks them some rhetorical questions regarding such loyalties. "Is Christ divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Were you immersed (baptized) in the name of Paul?" Note that some believers could have become confused about the relationship of immersion and their salvation (being sealed in Christ). The general sentiment expressed by Paul in vss. 14-17, to me, relegates immersion to a less important place certainly than it has come to have for many who profess to be Christians today. Some denominations claim that baptism is the rite that makes one an official believer, even if one is baptized before one's own will can be exercised, i.e., as an infant. In vs. 17 Paul states simply that baptism is not the important thing, but proclaiming the Gospel (so that it can be believed) is, and what he (Paul) came to do. Had the Corinthians come to look upon baptism as more than it was originally intended to be, a symbol for signifying a new believer's belief in the death, burial, and resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ? It appears that some believers had become confused about the part baptism has to do with putting one's faith in the Lord and had substituted the rite of baptism for faith in the sacrificial death of our Savior. This concept of intellectually weaving human logic into the simplicity of the Gospel, is assuming the Good News to be somehow too unsophisticated a foundation for eternal life. In some way humanity must do something for or herself to insure God's grace, Rom. 9:30-33. The part of human interference in God's salvation plan begins in vs. 13 and continues on into the next chapter. Paul says that the cross (sacrifice of Christ Jesus) is sheer foolishness to unbelievers, but to those relying upon God's free grace [for which he (God) alone has paid the price], the cross is the very power of God. Paul quotes Isa. 29:14 in vs. 19 which defies the so-called "wisdom" of some men as compared with the complete knowledge of the Creator. The Jews demanded of Jesus a sign which would make faith unnecessary (Matt. 12:38-45), but Jesus told them that belief in his own death, burial, and resurrection would be their only hope. The Greeks want to be able to reason their way to truth, but "the power and wisdom of God" is "Christ crucified," vs. 24. No human can glory in God's presence, but for believers God has made Jesus Christ to be wisdom, righteousness, sanctification, and redemption. We believers should "Praise God from whom all blessings flow - glory only in the Lord."

May 26, 2002

"Spiritual Language"
I Cor. 2

Couples Class
Wendell Alford,
Teacher

I. Since Corinth was the most important city in Greece in Paul's day, many philosophies were considered to be the chic and "cutting edge" for the more sophisticated inhabitants. The mix of peoples who had found their way to this metropolis created an atmosphere of a "melting pot," much like that being experienced in the United States of America today. Corinth's religious milieu supported a polyethnic following, because geographically the city was influenced by the remnants of Greek religions and the Roman versions of the same heathenism. If Paul had tried to lay a groundwork for a believing faith in God's Savior, Jesus Christ, by argument or disputing, the result would have been much like the message he brought to the Greeks on Mars Hill, Acts 17:17-33. In fact, Paul's first visit to Corinth occurred immediately following that Mars Hill experience at Athens, Acts 18:1. Having this information in mind makes the first Corinthian letter much easier to understand. We stressed last week how Paul in the first ten verses repeated references to the person of Christ Jesus over and over, in every verse. Nothing about the Greek's superstitions, their unwillingness to accept Jesus' resurrection, and their own unrighteousness in God's sight were given by the apostle to encourage them to unite and pull together in their faith. The end of Chap. 1 concluded with the concept that God had made Jesus Christ to be wisdom, righteousness, sanctification, and redemption for all believers. Believers are all in Christ Jesus, period, and if they are to realize any glory in being right with God, their Father in heaven, they can see that glory only in the person of the Lord Jesus Christ.

II. Paul in 2:1 further stresses his determination to put Christ Jesus at the forefront of his total message. Loyalty to the Lord Jesus is the basis for all the admonitions which follow through the entire letter. In Chap. 1 he noted that the Corinthians believers were divided in their loyalties to various individuals, including Jesus himself. Paul reminds them that at the very beginning when he established the body of believers there in Corinth, his communication had not been to prove his own knowledge of the world's philosophy and human logic couched in flowery terms and phrases. His message was simply what the Lord had told him (while he was in Arabia for about three years, Gal. 1:15-19). After the Athens episode, Paul was ever more determined to make his message one of sheer simplicity, i.e., "I determined not to know (impart) anything among (to) you, except Jesus Christ, and him crucified." Perhaps in Paul's dogged determination to make sure that the Corinthian believers began their believing lives firmly fixed on Jesus alone, he had left them with so many questions unanswered about applying their faith in daily activities. Nevertheless, his answers to their questions became a portion of God's Word for all subsequent believers who were to follow through the centuries, including us. This is proof that God knew exactly what he was doing in Paul's overall activities. In vss. 4-5 the apostle is saying that after he stated the Gospel simply (Jesus and him crucified), he then depended upon God's power through the wooing and convincing of God's Holy Spirit

to bring about God's bidding in each Corinthian hearer of the Word who became a believer, John 6:44. It is also obvious from these verses and the remainder of the chapter that it is possible for people to mix and weave their own unspiritually logical "wisdom" into the simple Gospel and make the total result man-made error. Today, God's written Word gives guidance and credence to the Holy Spirit's leadership, Lk 12:12; John 14:23-30.

III. After God's message (Word, Jesus Christ - John 1:14) came to earth to reveal God's love to all mankind, the princes (political leaders) and world-produced thinkers misinterpreted that message in order to further their own advantage and glory. They speak of God's action in their own worldly language. Had they accepted God's love and grace and given God the glory, all would be well with them, but they chose to change the message from the Holy Spirit's language into their own worldly language. Concrete evidence that there are two languages, worldly and spiritual, is what happened to the Lord Jesus. They took the physical life of "the Lord of glory," vs. 8; Acts 2:23,36; 3:15. Paul proclaims that he speaks the wisdom of God in a mystery (a revelation of God not known before), even the hidden wisdom which God predetermined ages ago for our (believers) glory. In vs. 6 Paul notes that this wisdom (knowledge) of God is understood only by perfect (mature) believers. The implication is that a believer must grow in God's grace before he or she can receive the spiritual wisdom to comprehend truly what God's grace has accomplished for believers in and through his Son, Christ Jesus, vs. 6; Eph. 4:15; I Pet. 2:2; II Pet. 3:18. Spiritual language gives the true meaning to the evidence which Paul gives as he quotes Isa. 64:4 in vs. 9, "Eye hath not seen, nor ear heard, neither have entered into the heart of man (or woman), the things which God hath prepared for them (believers, trusters in his Son, Jesus Christ) that love (waiteth for, cf Isa. passage) him." The language of the world cannot know what that precious quote means, "But God hath revealed them to us (believers) by his Spirit: for the Spirit searcheth all things, yea, the deep [hidden to the world] things of God," vs. 10. The importance of the agency of God the Father's Holy Spirit is made very paramount in this chapter of the Corinthian letter. Paul is revealing that the believing spirit in a human being can understand God's communication only as God's Holy Spirit interprets God's thoughts to him or her. Our channel of thought from God is not from worldly (human) thought but from God himself, vs. 13; Rom. 8:14-17. To understand what we believers need to know from God, we must learn to speak and think God's spiritual language which is different from what the world speaks or understands, vs. 13. The natural man (born of water only and not also from above of God's Spirit, John 3:6-7) does not understand the Spirit of God's language (It is foolishness to him.), because spiritual facts are understood only with the insight of God's spiritual language, vs. 14. One (a believer) who is led directly by God's Holy Spirit and follows his leadership cannot be judged by another human spirit (will), because that believer is led by the same Spirit that was in Christ, God's Holy Spirit, vss. 15-16. The emphasis here is the direct relationship of the individual believer with God through Christ Jesus, and not through another person or corporate group.

June 2, 2002

"Only One Foundation"
I Cor. 3

Couples Class
Wendell Alford,
Teacher

I. This chapter reveals some secrets about a believer's working relationship with God through Christ Jesus that are perhaps more explicit than elsewhere in God's Word. What about a believer who for some reason through neglect or misdirected priority does not grow in God's grace? Is it possible for a believer to be reborn (from above) and remain a spiritual infant or preteenager for twenty, forty, or even seventy years? If such is possible, what will be the final result of such a lukewarm spiritual life? For a believing person who is serious about his or her relationship with the Lord, answers to these questions should be of grave concern. Paul tackles these questions head-on in Chap. 3. He uses the divisions noted earlier in the letter about loyalties to certain Gospel messengers as an explanation for spiritual immaturity and for gradations or levels of service in God's kingdom. The apostle lists two groups of believers, those who are "spiritual" and those who are "carnal." They are both "in Christ," including those who are carnal. However, the carnal believers are referred to as "babes in Christ," vs. 1. The word "carnal" is the King James translation of the Greek word sarkikois and means literally, "fleshly." Our English word "sarcasm" comes from the same Greek word. Sarcasm means to "tear flesh" or "to bite ones lips in rage or anger, or sneer," i.e., "to demonstrate immature or childlike emotions." The King James word "carnal" has the same Greek base as our word "carnival." A carnival is a situation where a person is entertained, generally by games and activities with nonproductive, and no serious, goals. Carnal believers are those who "play" with their faith, not allowing that faith to be a serious and dedicated priority in their lives. Serious Bible study to them can be tolerated only if it is devised by some method to make the occasion entertaining and "fun," Matt. 11:11-19. Paul states that "baby believers" must be fed with milk and not solid spiritual food, vs. 2. Exactly how do carnal believers think and act as a result of their immaturity? Paul characterizes them in vs. 3: "For ye are yet carnal; for whereas there is among you envying, and strife, and dissensions, are ye not carnal (fleshly), and walk (conduct your lives) as [natural] men?" Further, aligning oneself with any particular messenger who brings the Gospel is likewise carnal. "Carnal" when related to "as men" refers to a person who acts as though he or she has not yet been born of God and become an indweller of God's Holy Spirit. In other words, they are believers in Jesus Christ but have not yet matured sufficiently to allow God's Holy Spirit to direct and control their activities.

II. Beginning with vs. 5 and through the rest of Chap. 3, Paul develops the perspective of one who brings the Gospel to others with the effect of that Good News, Gospel, on the hearers. Those who proclaim God's Good News of Jesus Christ are like farmers who plant seeds and tend the subsequent plants. One may plant and another provide water and nutrients, but the miracle of the seeds coming alive and becoming plants which reproduce their own kind is a miracle of God. Only God can create life. God alone is the one who quickens a person and makes him or her spiritually alive,

at one with God the Father through faith in his only Son, Christ Jesus. God is the Husbandman. Believers do not belong to the messenger but to the one who makes the message a reality. One who testifies to God's truth that faith in Jesus Christ assures eternal life, is serving (God's laborer) the Lord. If the messenger proclaims the Good News (John 14:6), and the hearer does not accept that truth, it is not the fault of the proclaimer or God, but the hearer's refusal to obey the leadership of God's Holy Spirit. Also, if a believer does not follow the leading of the Spirit, that believer alone is responsible for having grieved (saddened) God's Spirit, Eph. 4:30. One of the mysteries of all the ages is that God, the Almighty, decided from mankind's beginning (in the Garden of Eden) not to force any person against his or her own will to either recognize, respect, love, or worship him (God). Any person is free to choose or reject God or his will, but the Lord has not removed the appropriate consequences of making the proper or improper choice, Deut. 32:35; Rom. 12:19-20; II Thes. 1:5-10.

III. All true messengers of God are alike (vs. 8) in that only one foundation is available for receiving God's gift of eternal life and fellowship with God, and that foundation is Jesus Christ, vs. 11. It is on this foundation that the ekklesia, God's building, is being built. By God's grace believers become the building blocks which are to be God's building (kingdom). The apostles during the apostolic period produced and has made available through the centuries God's Word (message of Jesus Christ), and subsequently, persons (all believers) have been built on God's foundation (Jesus Christ). On that firm and only true foundation can one build (serve) in several ways, with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, or stubble, but those superstructures will be evaluated by God in due time. The test will be by fire and obviously the works of wood, hay or stubble will be consumed because of their unworthiness. The endurance and validity of the superstructure's reflection and glorification of the foundation (Jesus Christ) will be tried in fire (the judgment), Deut. 4:24; II Cor. 5:10; Heb. 12:28-29. Note very carefully that the service in the Lord's kingdom is to be rewarded (vs. 14), but those rewards are not to determine one's spiritual salvation, vs. 15. After stating that a believer is to be rewarded for kingdom service, the apostle further states that he or she may suffer loss, but he or she (as a believer) shall be saved, vs. 15. The basis for this truth is noted in vss. 16-17: "Know ye not that ye are the temple of God, and that the Spirit of God dwelleth in you?" Doing contrary to the will of God can even cause the destruction of the believer's temporary dwelling place (vs. 17a), but in that body God's Holy Spirit has joined together with the believer's spirit (atonement). That joining together of the believer's spirit with God's Spirit makes the dwelling place holy, separated or set apart for God's purpose and service. For one to think otherwise is self-deception. Such thinking is foolish by the world's (carnal) view of spiritual truth. An unbeliever will label these thoughts as gobbledygook, because they do not conform to carnal logic. In vss. 19-20 Paul quotes Job 5:13 and Psa. 94:11 to say, in effect, that the truth relating to those whom God has called and placed in the charge of his Son is not dependent upon who brings the message, but upon the foundation, Jesus Christ, our Savior, vss. 22-23; John 10:27-30.

June 09, 2002

"Found Faithful"
I Cor. 4

Couples Class
Wendell Alford,
Teacher

I. In Chap. 4 Paul concentrates further on the relationship that should exist between a believer and the one who was God's servant by whom that believer learned of God's love in Jesus Christ. There were those in the Corinthian believing group of called out ones (the ekklesia) who were "taking the bull by the horns" and, by aligning themselves with different proclaimers of the Gospel, claiming thereby to be superior to those who identified with another Gospel messenger. We noted this problem in Chap. 1:12. The specific act which identified a believer with a given proclaimer of the Gospel was who immersed (baptized) the particular believer. This relationship situation was by Paul evidently considered to be extremely important, for the first four chapters of this letter emphasizes problems associated with an improper view of a believer's feeling of superiority relating to who immersed him or her. In all probability Jesus had instructed Paul (down in Arabia, Gal. 1:15-20) about the problem of some believers becoming overly ambitious about their new membership in God's family of faith. I suggest this probability because of Jesus' reaction to an incident which took place as he was entering the Jerusalem area for the last time before he was crucified, Matt. 20:17-28. We should not, in retrospect, ignore the importance of the principle at play here. At the very outset of God's calling out his people in the earth through faith in his Son, Jesus Christ, how to be organized was a problem for some. I do not believe there should be a formal organization at all, but each individual is to be directed by the power of God's Holy Spirit. Jesus' own position was rather explicit in the Matt. 20:20-28 passage which we cited above. Believers were not to organize themselves like the Gentiles do, i.e., politically or bureaucratically. Certainly they were not to organize themselves as was happening among the Corinthians around this leader or that leader, and not Christ. The pattern of the association of believers among themselves and other congregations, during the time the N. T. was being given by God, made the local congregation autonomous, I believe. It is true that the beginning congregations, on occasion, would consult with one another, but there is no Biblical instance in which one congregation would dictate to another what their doctrines or practices should be. Perhaps the best Biblical example of one congregation conferring with another is found at Acts 15:1-35. At that time the congregation at Antioch and Jerusalem, through representatives, discussed the matter of whether Gentiles could become believers in Christ Jesus without first being circumcised. Probably the best example in church history when Jesus' admonition at Matt. 20:25-28 was most brazenly overridden was when the Roman Emperor Constantine, after his October 27, 312 AD "conversion," issued first in 313 AD, his Edict of Toleration. But in 325 AD he ordered his subjects (all Romans) to "embrace Christianity." After this time the church at Rome became the official seat of all "Christianity" with such strength and political influence that Constantine himself was driven eastward to Byzantium which he renamed Constantinople, "Capitol of the New Christian Empire." Ultimately, this organization of all "believers" was split into an eastern divi-

sion (Eastern Orthodox Catholic) and a western division (Roman Catholic). Today both divisions have chief executive officers and a bureaucratic organization, far from Jesus' plan in Matt. 20:20-28. Other groups who call themselves Christians have similar plans.

II. In I Cor. 4 Paul (God's Word) discredits any arrangement in which a congregation would rally around one leader who exercises authority, in any fashion, over other believers or congregations. He again insisted that apostles and pastors (elders) were simply servants of God in Christ, stewards of God's message of grace telling forth the mysteries which God was, through them, revealing to the world. Paul declared in vs. 1-5 that his position and activities were nothing more or less than fulfilling his duties as a faithful steward. His position should not be judged according to standards set by the world's organizing of human activities, i.e., politically, militarily, socioeconomically, etc. In vs. 5 especially, Paul appeals to believers to leave judgment of the work to implement God's growing kingdom until the Lord returns. Then, and only then, will the real motivations of people be known for sure. In this regard, examine carefully Matt. 13:24-30, 36-43.

III. Beginning with vs. 6 the apostle states that he is using himself, Apollos, and Cephas (Peter) figuratively to illustrate how that believers should not "think of men" above that which is written [now we can appropriately say, "in God's New Covenant"] about them. Believers should not "ride the coattails" of any given spiritual leader in order to feel self-pride and more important than another believer. The idea is essentially not to use "name calling" in an attempt to prove oneself to be better than any other believer. In Corinth the three persons listed above were considered by various ones to be their allies and who made them feel better than others. Paul states that the Corinthians, as believers in Christ Jesus, were indeed "kings without us," vs. 8, i.e., as ones led by God's Holy Spirit, they did not need anyone else as authority. (Note also 3:21-23.) The apostle, nevertheless, did not state that the Corinthian believers should ignore the sincere message (Christ and him crucified) which he, Apollos, and Cephas (Peter) were proclaiming to them. In Paul's own case he admitted that his service in furthering God's kingdom had made him the subject of much abuse. He had been despised by both Jewish leaders and Roman authorities. He had worked with his own hands as a tentmaker to support himself and others rather than be accused of proclaiming the Good News for monetary gain, Acts 18:3; 20:33-34. The King James terminology is very telling at vs. 13 where Paul refers to himself and the other apostles as "Being defamed (slandered), we encourage; we are made as the filth of the world, and are the offscouring of all things unto this day." Paul was quick to say that his self-effacement was not to intimidate them, but to indicate that their own false pride was not for their best spiritual welfare. He reminded them that they were his spiritual offspring, for he had led them to Christ Jesus. They should, therefore, emulate his service by doing the same service for other unbelievers. He notes in vs. 17 that he had sent Timothy to them. He too was Paul's spiritual offspring, and the apostle had hoped that Timothy's instruction for them would change their attitudes toward ekklesia leaders and make the true power, the Lord's power, preeminent in their thinking. Paul wanted to remain gentle on his next visit rather than be dogmatic and negative. They should strive to be like Christ Jesus himself, Phil. 2:5-11, and be faithful to him above all others.

June 16, 2002

"Immoral Believers?"
I Cor. 5

Couples Class
Wendell Alford,
Teacher

I. In Chaps. 1-4 of the first Corinthian letter, Paul lays the groundwork for understanding the disorder and dissension among members of God's ekklesia living there. Oddly enough, the basis for much (perhaps most) of the immoral choices being made by some of the believers was an improper alliance with various messengers of the Gospel of God. Various ones were following their infantile (babes in Christ), immature knowledge of Christ Jesus and of God's Holy Spirit's leadership, 2:10. It appears that, because they followed different human bearers of the Gospel, they felt free to practice different lifestyles which were according to their own carnal desires and designs, 3:3,5. Had they been loyal to Christ Jesus first and to the leading of his Spirit, their practices would have been different and more uniformly patterned after the Lord's will. This hodgepodge of various beliefs caused Paul to ask at 1:13: "Is Christ Divided?" These believers in Jesus Christ for eternal life and oneness with the Creator of the universe were engaging in immoralities which even unbelievers (Gentiles) would not. We are aware that Paul's message, his emphasis in fact, was that believers in Christ Jesus were free even as Jesus had said at John 8:36. Today in Chap. 5 we look at one such immoral practice and Paul's reaction to it, because being free does not give a believer license to do that which is against God's will. We shall see further evidence of this later in this letter regarding the eating of meat sanctified for idol worshipers. Jesus said that if we love him, we will follow his teaching, John 14:22-26. The Lord here is referring to those who accept him as Messiah (Savior) and are led by his Spirit. Paul's emphasis on the believer's freedom from the ceremonial, Jewish Law was misunderstood by some (Gal. 5:1), even as Peter noted at II Pet. 3:13-18. In this connection we should note also that, according to Paul (God's Word), Peter had trouble under certain conditions with his own freedom in Christ Jesus, Gal. 2:11-21. We believers in Christ should give a proper perspective to our emphases in our faith, e.g., note what James, a close worker with Peter, has to say about the relationship of our faith with our lifestyles, James 2:14-17. The big difference in these two emphases, I believe, can better be seen by observing two Biblical citations: James 1:1 where James (still God's Word) is addressing believers who had been Jews ("to the twelve tribes"), and Gal. 2:4-10 where Paul (God's Word) declares the freedom of believing Gentiles from the Jewish ceremonial and social Law. I include "social" as a part of the law, because it was Jews who had accepted Jesus as the Messiah (Savior), i.e., James, Peter, Barnabas, and John who were implicated as ones who took offense when socializing with believing Gentiles, Gal. 2:9,11-13,21.

II. Now, when we examine Chap. 5 of I Cor., we see a believer who is offending God's Spirit by trespassing, not his ceremonial Law, but his moral Law. Again, we believers should maintain a proper perspective of the ritualistic (symbolic) element of the Law and the moral element. Chloe and her family (1:11) apparently had informed Paul that there was one Corinthian believer who was cohabit-

ing with his father's wife. My belief is that the woman was the believer's step-mother, very likely not a believer, and certainly not his own mother. In any case, God's Law (Word) forbids such Lev. 18:6-8; 20:11. Not only does God's Law forbid such activity, but Paul (also God's Word) makes it very plain that God's Spirit will not lead a believer, in good conscience, to engage and live in such sexual immorality. Vs. 1 states that this arrangement of sexual sin was common knowledge (reported commonly) within the ekklesia as well as among outsiders, unbelievers. [Could it have been that such reports regarding some Gentile believers caused Peter and the other Jewish believers to have been reluctant to associate with Gentile believers as noted above?] Well, not only was a believer cohabiting with his father's wife, but at least some of the ekklesia members were proud of their "freedom, broadmindedness" to condone such sin which grieves God's Holy Spirit, Eph. 4:30! Rather than proud, Paul says that they should have mourned, because the offender should have been publicly denounced as not being in good fellowship (standing) with the congregation. With the full authority of (in the name of) our Lord Jesus Christ the congregation should, in business conference, deny that they, as a group, approved of such a lifestyle. The group, as a group, is to disassociate themselves from such sinning so that the offender's witness will be marked (destruction of fleshly witnessing efforts). His lack of rewards will be noted even though his spirit will be among the spiritually salvaged at the time of Jesus' return, vs. 5 and 3:15. Note especially that Paul nor the congregation has the power to relegate his spirit to hell (separate him from his Lord), but his severance from congregational fellowship is "with the power of (authorized by) our Lord Jesus Christ," vs. 4b. Paul did make his own position clear in vs. 3. Jesus gave instructions about such immoral actions by believers, Matt. 18:15-20.

III. In vss. 6-8 Paul outlines the very practical reason why a congregation should publicize fellowship expectations. If sexual immorality is overlooked by a congregation of God's people, believers in Christ Jesus, unbelievers will rightfully assume that such immorality pleases the God of that congregation. Congregational fellowship is compared by Paul to the leavening in a loaf of bread. A little evil leavening will in time create havoc throughout the entire loaf. The loaf should be leavened by sincerity and truth. If the loaf rises (grows) with false leavening, eventually the whole loaf will be perceived as being raised with old leavening, i.e., what difference is there between the believer and what he was before believing in Jesus Christ? Believers are indeed to feast (enjoy spiritual nutrition), but that nutrition should be identified with Christ and his crucifixion for our sins. Believers are to be passed over precisely because of the shed blood of God's sacrificial Lamb, Jesus Christ, who died that all who trust him will not be charged with their sins, Exod. 12:12,21-23; John 19:13-16. In vss. 9-13 Paul refers to an earlier letter he had written to the Corinthians (now lost) in which he had said that the believers there should not associate with unbelieving immoral people. Here in I Cor. he is telling them to witness to such unbelievers, but not to embrace a fellow believer as though he were a member in good standing in the ekklesia.

June 30, 2002

"Believers And The Law"
I Cor. 6

Couples Class
Wendell Alford,
Teacher

I. To understand how a believer in Christ Jesus should be affected by the law, we should at the outset define what law is. For our purpose in seeking to comprehend the apostle Paul's instructions to the first ekklesia at Corinth, law is divided into two segments. This division is based upon Jesus' admonition to us followers at Matt. 22:15-22. The occasion happened shortly before our Lord was sacrificed for our sins. Various groups of the Jewish religious leaders were attempting to trap Jesus in a faux pas which would make the Lord appear shameful in public. He has just driven the money changers out of the Temple, and therefore, many were watching him closely as he taught the temple crowds. First the Pharisees and Herodians together came to Jesus, and after flattering him, they asked him to commit himself concerning the legality of the Jews' being taxed by the Roman government. (Recall that the Jewish leaders' plan was to make Jesus to be an insurrectionist against the Romans during this Passover.) After announcing that his questioners were hypocrites, Jesus asked for a coin and about whose likeness was on the coin. They answered that Caesar's image was on the coin. Jesus then answered their question about whether they, as Jews, should pay taxes to Rome: "Pay to Caesar his due, and [likewise] pay to God the things that are his." Jesus' answer clearly involves an appropriate dual allegiance, one to the temporal, governmental law as well as a second to the law (will) of our heavenly Father. (We Baptists have traditionally interpreted Jesus' answer in this instance to mean that for believers there should be maintained two allegiances, and that they should be maintained as two distinctly separate entities. What this means is that governments should never infringe upon a believer's right to support his community of faith, the local ekklesia, nor should a government ever become, in effect, amalgamated with the church or churches, i.e., create a "state church." A believer is to support his or her government and, at the same time, support God's kingdom, and never put the government first, Acts 4:19; Rom. 13:1-4; I Tim. 2:1-5. When any state or government presumes to take the role of God (as his ekklesia or church), the result is unadulterated idolatry. We define law, then, as we believe Jesus stated such definition, to be twofold: One, the laws made by mankind for his segment of the earth's population, and, two, God's law for all on earth who will believe that he is (John 1:12-13; Heb. 11:6), that Jesus is his Savior (II Cor. 5:14), and that God's Holy Spirit gives direct guidance to those with faith in Jesus Christ (John 14:26; Gal. 5:18). Even though we can refer to God's will as God's law (Matt. 22:34-40; Gal. 6:2), our final status before God depends upon God's grace, not upon our keeping his law, Eph. 2:8-10. However, God is pleased when we adhere to his will as the Spirit leads, because of our love of Christ Jesus, John 14:15-18; Eph. 1:13; 4:30.

II. With the above as background, we now come to the sixth chapter of I Corinthians which begins with a question: "Dare any of you, having a matter against another [of your ekklesia], go to law [governmental court] before the unjust [unrighteous or unbelievers],

and not before the saints [believers, the local ekklesia]?" Paul then proceeds to illustrate that the use of the former legal authority by believers is preposterous, for "the saints [believers] shall [are scheduled to] judge the world? (Dan. 7:18,21-22; Rev. 1:5-8) If the world is to be judged by you (believers), are you then unworthy to judge in the smallest (everyday) matters? Even angels [God's special spiritual agents] are to be judged by you (II Pet. 2:4). How much greater wisdom will be needed to render such judgment than things pertaining to this mortal life!" You should be able to select from your group those who can make appropriate decisions regarding disputes and disagreements. What is happening is that you believers (saints) are bypassing the Holy Spirit's leadership and going before the Roman courts instead of reaching proper conclusions among yourselves. Such activities demonstrates utter failure on your part. You would be better off simply to overlook such disagreements, Matt. 5:40-41; 18:15-20. The kingdom of God is to be made up of citizens for whom the Lord Jesus Christ is King. We believers should not be deceived, because in that kingdom there will be no citizen whose attitudes and actions embrace such unrighteous (unGodly) characteristics as: sexual activity of an unmarried person, idol worshipers, adulterers (sexual activity of a married person with other than ones own spouse), homosexuals (Lev. 18:22; Rom. 1:24-28), sodomites (group homosexuality as at Gen. 19:1-5,24), thieves, covetous (Col. 3:5), drunkards, users of abusive language, takers of other peoples property through illegal ingenuity. Paul notes that some of the Corinthian believers had practiced the above evils, but now they had been, through their faith in Christ Jesus, made clean and set apart by God as righteous and justified in the name of the Lord Jesus, and by the Spirit of our God.

III. Paul in vs. 12 turns again to the effect of law on a believer. He states flatly that while all things are legal for a believer, all things are not helpful for the believer or the other members of the ekklesia. Even if all things are lawful for those in God's grace, Paul's own example is not to be brought under the power of anything contrary to the Spirit's leading. In vs. 13 Paul expresses the same idea as that which Jesus gives at Matt. 15:15-20, i.e., the most important thing for the believer is that which is spiritual (permanent), not temporal. The believer's body is not just for physical food or to satisfy ones temporal sexual appetites. Because God has raised Jesus, he will also raise all believers who are trusting his promise. Their bodies are, therefore, "engaged" to the Lord Jesus and are not to be joined to another. Believers are to be ready for the marriage feast of the Lamb, Rev. 19:7. They are to live lives according to God's will, because they are living eternal lives (spiritually together with God forever). Already God lives within the believer, and that makes his or her body to be a temple, God's dwelling place. That arrangement makes our bodies special in that God has purchased us, and we are to glorify him both in our bodies and with our spirits (wills). We are not to sin as God's children, but if we do, we have a solicitor who is at one with the Lord of all, John 10:25-30; I John 1:8 - 2:2.

"Take time to be holy; speak oft with thy Lord.

Abide in him always, and feed on his Word."

July 7, 2002

"Marriage of Believers"
I Cor. 7

Couples Class
Wendell Alford,
Teacher

I. Chap. 7 begins a change in subject matter in Paul's first Biblical letter to the Corinthian believers. Through Chap. 6 the main concern is the information Paul had received from the family of Chloe about the ekklesia at Corinth. Now in Chap. 7 and through the remainder of the letter, the apostle announces at 7:1 that he is answering specific questions which they had written to him. Those inquiries had to do with marriage (7), food offered to idols and proper worship of God through Jesus as Lord (8-11), spiritual gifts (12-14), the resurrection of the dead (15), and the special offering for the destitute believers at Jerusalem (16). The question relating to marriage must be considered in the context of the human sexual milieu of Corinth at the time the Gospel of God first reached that area. Please recall that we gave a cursory look at the situation on May 19 in our introduction to the Corinthian letter, the mix of nationalities, the constant passage of itinerant visitors including military and merchants, and the combining of religion with human sexual activities. The latter involved the magnificent temple dedicated to the worship of Venus, the goddess of love (carnal) and beauty. Most men had three to five wives who were considered servants and who served the various needs of the husband. The wives were considered to be primarily property of the husband, but sexual appetites were satisfied much of the time by visiting the temple prostitutes who were especially chosen for their physical beauty. This temple activity was considered an act of worship of the goddess Venus. To understand Paul's (God's) communication to the Corinthian believers in Chap. 7, it is imperative that these factors be kept in mind. Otherwise, one can miss the message completely, and the intended communication is lost entirely if one attempts to compare the thoughts there within our current historical setting. For example, in vs. 1 Paul admonishes a man not to touch a woman [outside marriage], but notice that in vss. 2-5 he encourages male believers to satisfy sexual appetites exclusively through cohabiting with their own wives. We should pay particular attention to the number of the noun "wife," i.e., that it is singular, one. In other words, the Word is telling believing males to have only one wife and to receive and render sexual needs between him and his wife alone. [The admonition for males is equally appropriate for the believing wife of a believing husband - WA.] Yielding to the temptation to be a believing fornicator with temple prostitutes, or anyone else, is not fitting for one who is trusting Christ Jesus for spiritual salvation. Such is idolatry. To practice sexual activity with other than ones spouse is improper (against the will of God). The privileges and joys of sexual intimacies is honored by God only under these conditions. The two, husband and wife, are to realize that they should feel completely free and shameless to share sexual affection for one another, understanding that such sexual affection is to come from no other person. God has declared them to be one flesh because of their singularly marital commitment to one another. Further, they are not to deprive one another of sexual activity unless they do so for short periods by mutual consent. To do so could create an occasion for Satan to cause an abuse of the

believer's self-control, vs. 5. In vs. 6 Paul states that he has spoken in vss. 1-5 by permission (as lead by God's Spirit), rather than by direct word from Christ Jesus (Gal. 1:12, 15-18).

II. Paul asserts in vs. 7-9 that he, personally, was able to control himself without practicing any sexual activity, and his suggestion to singles and widows (and widowers, as I believe Paul was) was that they should abstain from sexual activity. He recognized that this suggestion is not appropriate for all since some have strong inclinations for sexual activity. Those who cannot abstain should marry, for, Paul says (God's Word), that it is better to be married than to wrestle continually with passionate, sexual temptations, vs. 9. Now in vss. 10-11 the apostle states that the Lord himself has made divorce wrong for a believing married couple, but in vss. 12-16 Paul again specifies that his admonitions are through the Spirit rather than by direct, written commandment. When one spouse is not a believer, the other spouse who is should remain married if such can be done peacefully (vs. 15b), because the believer could possibly win the unbelieving spouse to a saving, personal belief in Jesus Christ. Then Paul makes clear that being married to a male believer who is circumcised or not makes no difference in the attitude a believing wife should have toward her husband. Further, the marriage of believers who are slaves does not alter the marital guidelines Paul is giving the other Corinthians. All believers are bought with the same price (Christ and him crucified) whether a believer is circumcised (Jewish), uncircumcised (Gentile), slave, or free. Not one of these statuses makes one believer better or worse than another believer. Vs. 20 underscores that becoming a truster of Christ Jesus does not require a change in ones status regarding circumcision or slavery.

III. The term "virgins" in vs. 25 refers to an unmarried daughter as it does through Chap. 7. Paul says that he does not have a specific word from the Lord about this particular problem during "the present distress," vs. 26, but he does believe that his judgment represents the mercy of the Lord. The "present distress," I believe, has to do with the deplorable, immoral conditions which prevailed there then. Couples were not free to "fall in love" and "move in together" or even to be married without permission. The decision regarding to whom and when a daughter should become a bride rested solely with the young woman's father. That is why Paul addresses the fathers in vss. 28-38 concerning a virgin's marriage. The first question is whether, under the conditions in Corinth, a believer should consider marriage at all for his daughter. Vs. 28 clearly makes marriage within the will of God, but the marital state could create unusual problems for a young female believer. Under such immoral pressures then extant, a believer, especially a young female believer could face tremendously difficult decisions, vs. 28b. Paul knew that those perverted moral conditions could not last for long, because they have built-in self-destructive features, vs. 31. The moral obligations of a believing married young woman are distinguishable from those of an unbeliever. The unbeliever has no compunctions about doing contrary to God's will while a believer is ever aware of whether she pleases her Lord Jesus, vss. 32-34. In vss. 36-37 Paul tells the young woman's father that if it appears that his daughter will become a spinster, the changed situation should be taken into account. The apostle leans toward the position that becoming an "old maid" could be preferable, because the believing woman (or man) is committed to God's will (Law) until/if a spouse dies, vs. 39-40. If she/he marries again, it should be to a believer.

July 14, 2002

"Diet And Faith"
I Cor. 8

Couples Class
Wendell Alford,
Teacher

I. We should perhaps give some review to Chaps. 6 and 7 to recognize the personality of the Corinthian believers as a family of faith. Remember, that Paul characterized the group as spiritual "babes in Christ," i.e., in Christ but immature, spiritual infants. In retrospect we can actually sense how immature a group must be to be feeling a pride in their "broadmindedness" toward a believer who was practicing incest, living carnally with his stepmother (Chap. 6). Then in Chap. 7 the members of that same family of faith were asking whether marriage was to be considered acceptable for believers at all. As we approach Chap. 8, another question has been submitted to the Apostle Paul by the Corinthian believers. In order to understand the import of the question involved, we need to examine dietary laws in general and the Jewish concerns for the eating of certain foods in particular. The latter people (Jews) would have had more influence on Paul (humanly speaking) than anyone else since he had been a strict keeper (Pharisee) of the Jewish Law before he trusted Christ Jesus for his spiritual salvation, Acts 23:6. Where polytheism (belief in many gods) prevails, there are many deities and there are about as many ways of serving those gods as there are gods. In fact, mankind's profound spiritual needs caused him to "create" gods to meet those needs. The people of Greece (Corinth was in Achaia, a region of Greece.) worshiped many gods which acts constituted, of course, idolatry in its most obvious expression. Many of the Roman religions simply aped the Grecian religions with different names given to them. For example, the chief god of the Corinthians was Venus at the time of Paul's writing this letter, but Venus was successor to the Greek goddess Aphrodite, goddess of sexual love and beauty.

II. Idol worship by humanity through the ages has been accompanied by social gatherings and activities. When the Israelites had been delivered from the Egyptians by the Lord and were in the wilderness, they turned to idolatry while Moses was on Mt. Sinai receiving God's Law, Exod. 32:1-9. Aaron (Moses' brother), at the insistence of the people, took the people's golden earrings and formed an idol, a golden calf, and the people bowed down and worshiped it. They gave the idol credit for freeing them from Egyptian slavery. The Lord God was outraged by their actions. I call attention to this idolatry to note Exod. 32:6 where the result of the idol worship follows immediately. After bowing down to the idol, the people "sat down to eat and drink and rose to play (dancing, sensually, Exod. 32:19)." Again, at Num. 25:1-9, the Israelites socialized with the Moabites and worshiped their gods. As they did so, they sat down with them and ate food dedicated to the idols of Moab. God was highly displeased, and a plague which killed twenty-four thousand followed the Israelites' idolatry. These incidents and other like occurrences, along with the strict Jewish dietary laws (Lev. 11; Deut. 14), established Jewish traditions which were to be perpetual, Lev. 3:17. No doubt this long tradition was what bothered the apostle Peter in Acts 10 when he was instructed in a dream by a voice from heaven

telling him to eat a number of meats from unclean animals. Peter was so insistent against following the voice that the Lord repeated the command, "Rise, Peter, kill and eat," three times before the apostle realized what the vision meant. The truth which Peter was being told by God was that Gentiles, too, can be saved spiritually by God if they trust Jesus Christ for eternal life. Eating, then, has had a major role in peoples' relating to God.

III. The Corinthian believers faced a real problem when they, as new creatures in Christ Jesus, were tempted to eat meat which they knew had been butchered for the express purpose of worshiping gods of idolatry. In the first verse of Chap. 8 Paul sets the tone for the proper attitude and action to follow by a believer when confronted with such a situation. He or she should be guided by agape love. The real truth is that idols are not real but imaginary, because there is, in fact, only one God, the Father of the Lord Jesus Christ. Therefore, any meat offered in sacrifice to a false god means absolutely nothing, truthfully. Not only is this reality applicable regarding food, but also all matters relating to idolatry. In Rom. 14 Paul deals with this same problem of relating to other believers who have qualms about giving any credence to superstitions (idolatry). Those who have placed their trust in Jesus Christ but are weak in the faith (immature) are not to be ostracized or despised, Rom. 14:1-3. A believer with mature faith should not judge a weak believer, "for God hath received him," Rom. 14:3b. We believers cannot escape from having to associate with believers of various levels of spiritual maturity and even unbelievers who disallow the very existence of God, John 17:14-15; Rom. 14:7; I Cor. 5:9-10. In relating to others we must remember that the Lord has reserved unto himself final judgment, Rom. 14:10. Therefore, we are not to judge, Matt. 7:1-2; Rom. 12:19; 14:3. Rom. 14:5 states that, [as the Holy Spirit leads], we are to be fully persuaded in our own consciences. We should not hate those who disagree with us, Rom. 14:14. According to Rom. 14:1-5 and I Cor. 8:8-13, the guiding principle for mature believers is that they should relate to immature believers motivated by love, not their own freedom. Discouraging fellow-believers destroys their witnessing, and Paul declared that he would be guided by how his own actions affected other believers, I Cor. 8:13. If we agree to follow Paul's example, and subject ourselves to the weaker believer's conscience, we are, in effect, adjusting our actions to his or her conscience. Recall now again vs. 1 where the basis of our relating to one another as fellow-believers is to be love. In other words, our first allegiance is to the Lord who gave himself that we may receive, through faith in him, eternal life with God, our heavenly Father. This problem of interpersonal relationships has to do with those things not explicitly documented in God's Word. For example, today we believers face such decisions as artificial insemination, artificial birth control, women's role in the work place other than the traditional motherly and homemaking responsibilities, extending human mortal life far beyond God's natural processes, the role of women in organized church activities including ordinations and pastoral ministries, men's responsibilities in fatherhood including effective support (physical, emotional, and spiritual) of the father's offspring, and many, many decisions which have to be made that make eating meat dedicated to idols seem remote and simple for us. Only love of the Lord Jesus Christ can lead a believer to make the proper, Spirit-led decisions.

July 21, 2002

"Paul As Apostle"
I Cor. 9

Couples Class
Wendell Alford,
Teacher

I. Perhaps the most sensitive problem for Paul was for people whom he had won to Christ and were now being spiritually nurtured by him, to be told that he was not a true apostle, i.e., he had not been sent by God but was acting on his own for money, prestige, etc. In Chap. 9 Paul speaks in no uncertain terms about his full credentials as an apostle, one commissioned and sent by the Lord. The chief reason for Paul's qualification as an apostle rested squarely upon the fact that he had been with Jesus Christ, the Lord. He asks in vs. 1, "Have I not seen Jesus Christ our Lord?" The Scripture verifies Paul's having been with Jesus on two occasions. First, Jesus confronted Saul (Paul) on the road between Jerusalem and Damascus as a dedicated Pharisee seeking to annihilate this new "sect" (followers of Jesus as the Messiah) of Judaism, Acts 9:1-9. Secondly, Jesus was with Paul for some portion of or all of three years, Gal. 1:6-24. During both of these meetings Jesus had already bodily ascended back to our heavenly Father (Acts 1:9-11), and we have only the briefest details of the mechanics of these consultations of Paul with our Lord. On the road to Damascus the Pharisee Paul was with others who heard the voice of Jesus but saw no one speaking, only a very bright light which apparently surrounded Saul, Acts 9:5,7; I Cor. 15:8. In the I Cor. 15:8 passage Paul states that he had seen Jesus "as one born out of due time." We are not told explicitly in Scripture what "due time" means, but I believe it means after Jesus' bodily resurrection. In Acts 1:21-22 Peter said that the apostle who was to be chosen (by election) to succeed Judas Iscariot must have been one who had accompanied Jesus during the entire period of his "going in and out among us" beginning with John the Immerser's immersion of Jesus in the Jordan until after Jesus' resurrection from the Mount of Olives. The fact that Paul had not done so caused some, I believe, to doubt the reality of his apostleship. Therefore, Paul said that his seeing Jesus was "as one born out of due time." Another rhetorical question Paul asks in vs. 1 is "Am I not free?" I believe this "free" is being free from any other person's direction to speak authoritatively for God. We can, then, take Paul's writings which we call Scripture or portions of the Bible to be, in actuality, God's Word. The Corinthian believers first heard and believed the Gospel from Paul, and that caused the fourth rhetorical question in vs. 1, "Are ye not my work in the Lord?" Before God had his Word codified (written), Paul's testimony was in this apostolic period God's only message to the Corinthians. They were his "work in the Lord."

II. Another questionable (by his critics) action exercised by Paul was that on occasion he used some offerings donated by those who had believed the Gospel through his proclamation for supporting himself. Many do not, I believe, catch the facetious point Paul in making in vs. 5. I believe that Paul was a widower and could not have been supporting a spouse on his missionary endeavors, but he notes that Peter and the Lord's half brothers, James and Jude, are doing so. Could Paul have been saying, in effect, "At least

I am supporting only myself, while others have families also to be supported?" Regarding missionary support Paul quotes Deut. 25:4. (See also at I Tim. 5:18.) Herein the principle is given that oxen should not be muzzled while threshing grain so that they can eat while threshing. Paul states that God is saying that people who labor in spiritual work should also be fed by those who reap spiritual gain. If Paul had not been willing to compare himself as a missionary with an ox, who else would? It certainly is a valid comparison in principle. He further illustrates this same principle by mentioning military personnel living from the taxes of the people they protect, a planter of a vineyard consuming the fruit therefrom, and herdsmen drinking milk from his herd. Should not Paul and Barnabus (Paul's helper) also be free to live from the efforts of those whom they served spiritually? Where there were serious questions (usually from nonbelievers or weak believers) about whether Paul was "working for money," he earned his own keep through his trade of tentmaking, Acts 18:1-3; II Thes. 3:8-10. In fact, Paul was in Corinth at Acts 18:1-3, and he made reference to the fact that he supported himself while among the Corinthians, vs. 12. In vs. 13 Paul notes the Old Covenant directive that those who serve others spiritually should be supported materially by the ones served, Lev. 6:16,26; 7:6,31; Num. 18:8-32. Paul's capstone of this principle was Jesus' instruction at Matt. 10:5-10; 12:1-8.

III. In vss. 15-27 God's Apostle, Paul, relates a very introspective view of his calling by God to spread the Good News that God has a plan through the Lord Jesus Christ to reclaim spiritually everyone who will trust that one and only begotten Son of God. In vs. 15 Paul expressly states that he has used none of the privileges of material support, because he would rather experience mortal death than have his testimony cheapened and considered unworthy (void or untrue). He takes no credit for being someone special, for it is the message he proclaims and the Lord of that message that is the essence of value in his (Paul's) activities. His greatest sorrow would be if, for any reason, he were not using every ounce of his strength to proclaim what Jesus himself had declared to him. This proclamation has a self-contained reward, and Paul considered his assignment to be what we call today a "window of opportunity." For Paul it was "now or never," a special "stewardship of the Gospel is entrusted unto me," vs. 17. He determined to "make the Gospel of Christ without charge" rather than [be seen as one who] "abuses his [apostolic] rights in the Gospel," vs. 18. Again, in vs. 19, the apostle declares his freedom from all men, but he has deliberately sought, by being socially (culturally) acceptable to all, to be more able to win everyone (who will listen) to accept Jesus as Savior and Lord. To illustrate his cultural freedom, he states that he does not shun the Jews (many wanted Paul dead), but he witnessed in their synagogues, Acts 16:1-3. Likewise, Paul was willing to accept Gentiles (nonJews) who had no understanding or knowledge of the Law (Pentateuch), Rom. 10:12; Gal. 2:11-12. If he needed to appear weak to win those who were weak, he did so. He associated with everyone ("all things to all men") to encourage them to accept the Lord Jesus Christ. This he did for the furtherance of the Gospel, and, notice the special remark, "that I might be partaker thereof with you," vs. 23b. A sports illustration then follows. In a race everyone conditions their bodies in preparation, but only one wins the race. Every believer should be prepared, honest, and self-disciplined so that their lives can best present Jesus Christ to those who do not know him as Savior and Lord of life. We should strive not to be "castaways," ineffective witnesses.

July 28, 02

"Liberty And License"
I Cor. 10

Couples Class
Wendell Alford,
Teacher

I. Liberty and license can perhaps best be illustrated by assuming that a government would enact a law removing all restriction on the speed a driver could maintain on the nation's highways. Some automobiles are capable of going one hundred fifty miles per hour or more, and undoubtedly some hot-rodders would delight in demonstrating their "prowess" with their speed. The point is that even though one would be licensed to drive at such speeds, should one choose to exercise such liberty to forsake the safety of self and others on the highway? Paul, the apostle of God, discusses the relationship of liberty with license for believers in Jesus Christ in the tenth chapter of his first Biblical letter to the Corinthian believers. He assumed that their then current belief was not correct regarding liberty and license, "I would not have you be unaware." Paul's approach was to review the history of the Israelites and what happened as they took unreasonable advantage of their freedom of choice, even though God had given them instructions to keep them safe and happy. The Jews were guided by a cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night as they journeyed from Egypt to the land God had promised them. In the first part of this travel they were led by God through the Red Sea on dry ground. They were baptized unto Moses, i.e., the Jews were immersed (surrounded) in God's leadership through Moses. The cloud and Red Sea were the water symbolically of immersion, and, following that, the Jews were further protected by God with "spiritual meat," manna, and "spiritual drink," water from a Rock supplied also by God. In vs. 4 Paul states very plainly that that spiritual Rock was none other than the Messiah, Jesus Christ. Remember, in our look at Chap. 8 we noted that while Moses was absent from the Jews receiving the Law for a short period, they demanded an idol to worship. They also complained about the manna and the scarcity of water, Exod. 16:9,28; 17:3-7. During this Exodus period, God was not pleased with the children of Israel, vs. 5.

II. In vs. 6 Paul gives his reason for recalling for the Corinthians this episode in Jewish history. We are to reflect on their experiences and choose not to complain or "lust after evil things as they also lusted." They expressed a desire to return to Egyptian bondage (Exod. 16:3) rather than carry out God's will for them as a free people. Nor are we to serve false gods as idolaters, covetousness, Col. 3:5. Paul here repeats the two occasions which we examined in Chap. 8, Exod. 32:6 and Numb. 25:1-9 when the Israelites socialized sensually while reinforcing each others idolatry and sexual immorality. In vs. 9 Paul admonishes us believers not to put Christ to the test as some of the Jews tested God, Exod. 17:2,7. Also, we are not to murmur (complain) as they did, Exod. 16:2 and Numb. 14:36-38. The bad things happened to these Israelites because they were disobedient to God's will. Their physical lives were terminated and their effort could no longer influence others (the nonJews) for God. These experiences are recorded as evidence that those who, privileged by God to follow his will throughout the earth and thereby spread God's spiritual peace and reclamation to all mankind, should not become derelict in that assignment of God.

If God's people do not continue to practice his will and share the Good News with others, the end result will be that God will end the Gospel era, II Thes. 2:3-12; II Pet. 3:8-10. We as believers in Jesus Christ are God's final witnesses in the world, "upon whom the ends of the ages are come." We are not to regard our privilege of being God's children and evangelists as immunity from evil temptation. We are not assured of being free from temptation of sensual immorality and covetousness (idolatry: the love of money, materialism, secularism, Matt. 6:19,21,24,32-33; Col. 3:5b; I Tim. 6:5-10). Yielding to the temptation to serve self in these ways can take away part or all of our time and effectiveness as witnesses of what God has done for us through our faith in his Son, Jesus Christ. As such defective witnesses, we are not able to "go ye therefore, and teach all nations, immersing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit: Teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you," for it is only as Christlike witnesses will Jesus Christ be "with you always, even unto the end of the age." We are to maintain our fellowship with God the Father by following (the will of) his only begotten Son, Jesus Christ.

III. Even as God remained faithful during the early period of their history, the Israelites were tempted to disfavor God's will for them by yielding to those temptations. Now when we as believers in Jesus Christ are tempted as were the Jews, we have God's assurance that he will not permit us to be tempted beyond his willingness to empower us to overcome (endure) that temptation (testing). Vss. 14-15 tells us to stay away (flee) from idolatry, and be wise in our judgments (decisions). How are we to be encouraged to walk with Jesus Christ in our daily lives? Paul here reminds us of Jesus' instituting his memorial meal during his last Passover celebration with his apostles. He was, with this meal, signifying that his forthcoming sacrificial death would begin God's New Covenant with mankind. The New Covenant was created by the sacrifice of God's personification (God's becoming human, II Cor. 5:19) for the forgiveness of the sins of all who will confess and trust him as Savior and Lord. The Lord's Supper is to be practiced by all believers to keep continually reminded of God's love for his creation. "For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son," Lk 22:7-20; John 3:16a. [I believe that this reminder was a part of the worship service from time to time as the early believers assembled for worship, and is why God's Word tells us "not to forsake the assembling of ourselves together," Heb. 10:14-25.] Paul in vss. 14-15 tells the Corinthians that participation in the Lord's Supper at worship services symbolizes the believers' fellowship with the person of our Lord Jesus. Such participation shows the oneness of, not only the local believers with one another, but also the oneness of the local group to the Lord himself. Carrying forward the relationship of believers with the people of Israel, Paul states that as the Israelites all partook of the altar sacrifices as one, so do all believers partake of the Lord's Supper as one body. But we believers should not confuse eating meat offered to idols with either the Jews' eating God ordained sacrifices at the altar of God or the believers' remembering our Lord during their participation in the Lord's Supper. When buying meat at the market, a believer should not even inquire whether the meat was prepared for idol worship, but when there is a question, do not confuse liberty with license. Every believer should consider the license of (especially immature believers) others and not just his or her own liberty. Agape love is to control ones actions with Christlike grace.

Aug. 4, 2002 "Believers' Dress And The Lord's Supper" Couples Class

I Cor. 11

Wendell Alford,
Teacher

I. We should remind ourselves that Paul in this section of the First Corinthian Letter is answering specific questions which had been directed to his attention by the congregation members themselves. In Chaps. 11-14 the general problems being addressed were appropriate conduct in the worship services. Keeping this theme firmly in ones mind is imperative if we are to understand what Paul (God) wants us believers to know and practice. Not remembering that Paul develops the church's conduct in the entire Chaps. 11-14 passage can lead us to misunderstand God's truth there. Further, the contemporary customs and cultural norms should be taken into account throughout the context of Chaps. 11-14. To do otherwise, as many have done, such passages as, "Let your women keep silence in the congregations: for it is not permitted unto them to speak;" (I Cor. 14:34), can be readily misunderstood and abused. We noted, for instance, in Chap. 7:2-4 that Paul makes believing spouses equal in their relations with each other, a truth which was utterly unacceptable by that culture at that place at that time. This concept that faith in the Lord Jesus made women free (See also Gal. 3:28.) was so unheard of that many of the new female believers were having difficulties adjusting to their new freedom. (Recall that Peter himself had trouble accepting Gentile customs which, according to Paul, had nothing to do with disputing the basic truths of the Christian faith, Gal. 2:11-21.) In other words, not only were the women believers having adjustment problems, but so were the men believers.

II. With the above in mind, we now examine the text of Chap. 11. Paul begins the two principle concepts in the chapter, proper believer's attire and partaking appropriately of the Lord's Supper by inviting the Corinthian believers to emulate his own attitudes and actions by keeping the customs (ordinances) he had practiced while among them, Acts 18:18. Evidently, a custom of the Corinthians related to some degree to the present-day practice of many Mideastern women, i.e., to keep their head covered in public places. In vss. 3-10 Paul gives the evidence of the Old Covenant (the Pentateuch especially) indicating why head covering was symbolic of the relationship of human male-female differences. The first human male, Adam, was God's first priority in his (God's) creation of humankind. The woman was subsequently created to fill the male's need for companionship, Gen. 2:18. In Paul's day head covering was the symbolic evidence of the authority of the male over the female, vs. 7. For example, temple prostitutes regularly went about in public without head covering indicating that they were not under the authority of any man but felt free to engage any male. In fact, a sure way of recognizing who the whores were was the lack of a head covering. (Today they not only leave their heads bare but also just as much of the rest of their bodies as the law permits, and beyond.) One can readily understand why believers were so sensitive about the dress habits of both men and women believers, for both were implicated, vss. 6-7. What one wore on his or her head symbolized authority. I recall during WWII that the custom (order) was that

military personnel were never to go hatless while bearing personal armor (firearms). Carrying a pistol represented, in effect, the nation's constitutional authority. Its use represented national, corporate authority. Paul's conclusion concerning wearing headdress is given in vss. 11-16. In vss. 11-12 he states clearly that following the creation of Eve no man can claim independence apart from women. No man after Adam, came into being (including our Lord Jesus himself) apart from the involvement of a woman. The race's continuation makes males and females interdependent. So, in vs. 13 Paul leaves the matter of headdress to personal judgment for each believer [as led by God's Holy Spirit]. By nature men's hair grows shorter than women's normally. In vss. 14-15 Paul notes this natural difference. The authority which was associated with head coverings from Adam and Eve to God's sending Jesus to institute a New Covenant with mankind has been altered. We can note this change (that Jesus "leveled the playing field") in Paul's summary conclusion at vs. 16: where there is a contention about authority as indicated by wearing or not wearing head covering, "we have no such custom neither the churches of God." Leaving the concept of authority, we should not forget God's insistence that men and women never neglect to show their sexual differences, including the outward appearances involved in clothing, Deut. 22:5. There, not keeping men and women distinctive in dress is declared detestable to the Lord. This distinction of sexuality has a special spiritual importance as regards sexual activities, Gen. 19:4-13; Lev. 20:13; Rom. 1:26-28; Jude 7.

III. The second question asked Paul and answered in Chap. 11 is the manner in which the Lord's Supper should be conducted. This ordinance (custom) was initiated by our Lord himself at his last observance of the Jewish Passover, Matt. 26:26-29; Mk 14:22-25; Lk 22:19-20, just before he was sacrificed for believers' sins. Obviously some of the Corinthians were abusing this important custom which Jesus said should be practiced by his followers (believers) as a commemoration of what Jesus had done for all mankind, "especially of those who believe," I Tim. 4:10. How were the Corinthians abusing the Lord's Supper? Paul's revelation in vss. 17-22 indicates that the remembrance meal was an occasion for doing more than just remembering the Lord's sacrifice. First, the observance gave evidence that the believers were divided. Some were bringing their own full meals and making the time primarily one of receiving physical nutrition rather than commemorating the Lord's death. Some were even surfeiting without sharing and drinking until drunk, vs. 21. Note in vs. 23 that Paul received his instructions regarding the Supper directly from the Lord Jesus. In vss. 24-25 the apostle quotes Jesus himself regarding the Passover observance on the night he was betrayed. Taking the bread first, he indicated that the bread [symbolized] his body which was broken for believers. Then he took the cup and remarked "this do, as oft as you drink it, in remembrance of me." Jesus said that the drink represented "the new covenant [sealed by] my blood." Paul states, "- - as often as you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death 'till he come." Eating a regular meal together in fellowship with the family of faith can be a joyous experience, but such socializing does not commemorate the Lord's sacrifice for our sins appropriately. As we participate in observing the Lord's Supper, we are to examine our attitudes and actions in light of God's will for us as we live our faith in Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord.

Aug. 11, 2002

"Jesus Is Lord"
I Cor. 12

Couples Class
Wendell Alford,
Teacher

I. We began last Sunday to consider the first of Chaps. 11-14 which have to do with proper conduct for believers especially during the formal worship experiences. In Chap. 12, the second chapter, Paul discloses how the Lord directs each believer on a one-to-one basis to do his will for them. A reminder is first given to these Corinthians who were, for the most part, Gentiles without the benefit of a knowledge of Jewish history and their customs. The apostle repeats a clause given several times in this letter: "I would not have you [to continue] ignorant." Gentiles historically worshiped (were carried away by) dumb (silent or lifeless) idols. After turning from their idols to a living, personal faith in Jesus Christ, they were to follow the Lord's will by listening to God's Holy Spirit, the Spirit that was in Christ. Why should a believer depend upon the Spirit's leadership? Because the Holy Spirit, without exception, properly, appropriately, and precisely relates a believer to Jesus as Lord of life, Ezek. 11:19-20; John 14:22-29. "I want you to understand that no person who is led by God's Spirit refers to Jesus as "anathema" [or denounce Jesus as other than God's only begotten Son and Messiah (Savior)."] Put another way, "no person can say that Jesus is the Lord, but by the Holy Spirit," vs. 3; John 6:41-47; 16:7-15. Jesus, the Son, and God, the Father, (who are one) are one with the Holy Spirit, and it is through God's Spirit that individual believers are assigned and empowered by God to do his various assignments in the Kingdom of God. These assignments are varied, but they are all given by that one Spirit, vs. 4. These tasks involve many services, but there is only one Lord, vs. 5. Although individual believers are assigned many different activities, it is the same God who is performing his many works through every and all believers in the local congregations. Each task is added to the overall work of God, vs. 6. To illustrate the importance of each believer's contribution to the whole work of God in the earth, Paul states that the one Spirit gives to one believer the word of wisdom, to another the word of knowledge, to another faith, to another the ability to heal, to another the working of miracles, to another prophecy (witnessing, evangelizing, preaching), to another the ability to distinguish various spirits (I John 4:1-6), to another speaking in languages other than his or her own, and to another the ability to interpret those other languages, vs. 8-10. The Holy Spirit makes these and various other assignments of responsibilities to different believers as the Spirit sees fit, vs. 11.

II. Apparently some of the Corinthian believers were of the opinion that the Spirit's distribution of tasks was making a distinction by importance of assignment. In other words certain believers considered those with certain tasks to be more important than others. To offset this lack of understanding, Paul proceeds to liken the congregation members' assignments to the many parts of a human body. The ekklesia makes up the extension of Christ's body with the Lord Jesus Christ being the Head of that body. We as believers are initially drawn to accept Jesus as God's Messiah (Savior) through the agency and power of God's Holy Spirit. As we yield to the Spirit's

leadership, we are immersed (with physical immersion symbolizing that confession that Jesus is now our Lord of life) into that spiritual body of which Jesus is Head and of which all his believers (the ekklesia) are the body, vss. 12-13. When we become believers, we are new creatures (as parts of Christ's body) regardless of our mortal statuses, i.e., Jews, Gentiles (all nonJews), slaves, or free, [men or women, Gal. 3:28]. Just as the mortal body is made up of many parts even so is Jesus' body, the ekklesia. Therefore, one member of the ekklesia is as important to the total welfare of the entire spiritual body of Christ as any part of the human mortal body is to any human being. It is irrational to assume that because the feet are all that are necessary for bodily locomotion, the body has no need for hands. Contrariwise, the hands are no less important to the body's overall functioning than are the feet. [With only feet one could get to the pea patch but could not pick the peas without the hands.] Saying that one body part is so important does not exclude the need for any other part. Paul then notes even those body parts which many would consider most important, the eyes and the ears would, by themselves, make a useless nonfunctional body. Even today mankind has not developed prostheses for all parts of the human body nor the ability to transplant all necessary organs to sustain physical life, the brain for instance. We sympathize with quadriplegics (person without the use of both arms and both legs), and Paul (God's Word) is saying that an ekklesia can be so handicapped if all members do not perform the assignments which the Holy Spirit has given them. Likewise, if every member performed the same type function, how imbalanced the congregation would be! If on a given occasion, everyone uses his or her tongue to speak and no one uses his or her ears, the ekklesia is accomplishing nothing for the good of each other or God. We should not lose sight of the importance of all the necessary functions of the ekklesia, nor should we assume that those parts which could be considered less important (feeble) to be unnecessary, vs. 22. In fact, in vs. 23, Paul states that because some parts of the congregation (individuals) appear to be so insignificant that no one wants them, they are even more important. [It is like someone saying in today's world, "She does not work, she's only a housewife, homemaker, mother, etc." What a pitiful shame! - WA] For the most obviously important parts of Christ's body, the ekklesia, there is no need for special emphasis, but for those of seemingly less prestige, more encouragement is needed. Paul says that one's satisfaction should come from, not just that he or she is performing his or her assignment well, but the satisfactory results for the entire congregation, vs. 24. The ultimate result should be that there be no divisions (schisms) in the group. All members should care and respect every other member of the congregation, vs. 25. When one member suffers, all members should suffer out of Godly sympathy, and when one member is honored, all the members should rejoice in the honor, vs. 26. We believers are individuals but still make up the one body of our Lord, vs. 27. Now, vss. 28-30 are extremely important in Paul's (God's) thesis, I believe. While there are apostles, prophets, teachers, miracle workers, healers, helpers, coordinators of business affairs, those who speak foreign languages they have not learned formally, and those who interpret those foreign languages, no one person is to do all. The understood answer to Paul's rhetorical questions about this is, "No." In vs. 31 Paul introduces the answer to all misunderstandings about congregational differences, Chap. 13.

Aug, 18, 2002

"A More Excellent Way"
I Cor. 13

Couples Class
Wendell Alford,
Teacher

I. Last week we noted in Chap. 12 the various gifts of God's Holy Spirit which various believers of the Corinthian congregation were assigned for nurturing the body of our Lord Jesus Christ. It is true that individual believers grow in God's grace through exercising the Lord's assigned tasks in his kingdom, but Paul's (God's) emphasis in practicing God's desires for them was that the entire fellowship be enhanced in the process. In vs. 31 of the preceding Chap. 12, Paul admonishes the Corinthian believers to "desire earnestly the best gifts," meaning that a given believer should choose and give him or herself to the task God's Spirit is leading. The best gift for one believer can be all wrong for another believer. In other words, a believer should choose what is best for him or her. But can one be most satisfied that he or she is doing what pleases the heavenly Father? Paul realizes how frustrated a believer can become in trying to please the one, true, holy Creator of the universe. Paul states in 12:31 " - - and now I will show you the best way to apply yourself to the tasks of God for you." He, with this introduction, leads us to the famous "Love Chapter" of the New Covenant.

II. The reason for love, agape, being the supreme motivation for a believer's attitudes and actions, is because it is a sure sign that one is being Godlike. At Matt. 5:43-48 Jesus in his lengthy Sermon on the Mountain speaks of his disciples' choosing not only to love their neighbors but also their enemies. The Lord's climax of this discussion concerning believer's loving everyone is, "Be ye therefore perfect (complete or whole), even as your Father in heaven is perfect." Further, John 3:16 tells us why God brought his second and final Covenant with humanity into existence. He loved all people, and now, through faith in his only begotten (through his Holy Spirit) Son, anyone, even enemies of God, can appropriate God's love by believing and accepting this Good News. In summary, if a believer is to be Godlike, he or she must love as God loves, agape, without expectation of something in return. Now we can better understand how we can, when led by God's Spirit, associate amicably with our enemies and even our fellow believers! Truly, God's way is "a more excellent way!" (I Cor. 12:31)

III. Please note that vs. 1 contrasts those who speak in tongues of any other language than their own or even of angels (heavenly) and do not agape everyone, he or she is like beating noisy cymbals or the high and piercing sounding brass musical instruments. Speaking, however loudly, does not necessarily communicate that which is expressing genuine love and concern for the best welfare of God's ekklesia. [I believe, because of what follows in Chap. 14, Paul is emphasizing that the gift of speaking in tongues unknown to the one uttering that language, is not exercising a spiritual gift which makes that speaker "spiritually superior," Chap. 12. Exercising this gift was, in fact, being abused by certain believers in the Corinthian congregation. Specifically, who the abusers of this gift were, Paul deals with in Chap. 14.] Likewise, understanding and exercising the gift of prophecy (witnessing of God's love

through Jesus Christ) including the deep mysteries of God's working with his creation without that agape which moved God to love us who are unholy (sinners), we are reduced to nothing. We are also nothing (unworthy) if we have an inexhaustible faith as described by Jesus in Matt. 17:20 but which is not motivated by agape. Paul in vs. 3 relates agape to the beneficent giving of everything one has to feed and care for those less fortunate, the poor. There is no spiritual profit or advantage when one subjects his or her very body to be physically abused (even burned), without regard to agape for God and ones fellow human beings. Many men were crucified during the period when our Lord suffered his sacrificial death on the cross, but they were not put to death to express God's love for all people to have life eternal with God. God's agape made the difference! We should keep in our minds (emphasized week before last, 8-4-02,) that Paul is addressing specific problems in the Corinthian congregation, abuse of certain spiritual gifts (especially the gift of tongues), envy of others gifts, selfishness as expressed by prolific use of lawsuits, impatience with others (especially in public meetings and worship services), and divisions in the membership (cliques). In the first verses of this chapter Paul lists five of the spiritual gifts: tongues, prophecy, knowledge, faith, and sacrificial giving of material possessions. Even doing good things equals nothing in God's sight without agape!

IV. Why is agape so important as an adhesive to worthiness in practicing God's spiritual assignments, gifts? The answer is given in the rest of the chapter, vss. 4-13. Before we examine this cohesion (the necessary combination of a believer's service with agape), we should remember God's communication to us at I John 4:7-21. Agape is extremely patient and considers others as equals (at-one-ment); agape is not egotistical nor boastful, nor arrogant. Agape is not rude nor a promoter of oneself at the expense of others. Agape does not incite others to anger nor hold a grudge against others (keeps no account of evil against others). Agape is not delighted when another person stumbles spiritually and sins, but rather, is happy when another person is growing in God's grace to become more like our Lord Jesus Christ in attitudes and actions. Agape sustains ones loyalty to others without regard to cost to self, stands by them against opposition, expects them to do well, and believes in their integrity and worth. Eventually, believers will have agape alone as the only needed gift, because agape lasts always and never fails. On the other hand, spreading God's message of spiritual salvation will no longer be necessary, the speaking of (tongues) the language of others will no longer be needed, and knowledge will be universal. At this time our knowledge is partial, and our understanding is limited with flesh-and-blood (mortal) limitations. Perfect, complete understanding has been promised by the Lord, and when that promise is granted by God, we believers will have all ignorance taken away. We are childlike (exercising hope through faith, Matt. 18:1-4) in this life, but eventually we will be like Jesus Christ, Rom. 8:29; I John 3:1-3. At best, we believers now see the future hazily, but in God's own good time we will see Jesus face to face. Paul finally compares faith, hope, and agape and concludes that the greatest (of absolute necessity) of the three

Aug. 25, 2002

"Prophecy, Tongues, And Worship"
I Cor. 14

Couples Class
Wendell Alford,
Teacher

I. Just as Paul began Chap. 13 referring to speaking in a foreign language, he likewise begins Chap. 14 (vs. 2) making reference to the same activity. In other words, this problem keeps recurring in the letter in this section, Chaps. 11-14. Now as we come to Chap. 14, the apostle confronts the problem which was occurring in the Corinthian congregation head-on. In vs. 1 the theme of Chap. 13 is repeated, "Be guided by agape and desire to follow spiritual concerns [as contrasted with carnal concerns noted in the beginning chapters of this letter: division, legal actions against other believers, incest, etc.], and, rather than dote on proving yourself to be spiritually superior to others, seek (desire) to witness of the Gospel to the lost, pure and simply," vs. 1. Because speaking languages other than your own is a proof of God's special revelation (Mk 16:17; Acts 2:3-4,11; 10:46; 19:6), and is not usually appropriate in a monolithic situation such as existed in the congregation there at Corinth, except when foreigners attended the services. If you witness to the French in Russian about the Gospel, to the French what you are saying is not communicating useful information, and the Gospel still remains a mystery to the French. Please note that the word "unknown" in vs. 2 should be italicized, because it does not appear in the original Greek text. Further, "unknown" does not modify tongue(s) elsewhere in the New Covenant in this regard. "Tongue" in our today's communication should be "language" or "speech," and "unknown" should then be supplied as "a foreign." Our word "glossary" comes from the New Covenant Greek word which is translated "tongue," glotta or glossa. In the first six verses of this chapter Paul stresses the importance of communicating the essence of the Gospel to those who have not heard, rather than speak what amounted to gibberish or gobbledygook (a language without meaning to the hearer). If a member of the congregation speaks a language which makes him or her feel good or exalts him or herself, but does not further the cause of Jesus Christ (purify or build up his body, the ekklesia), then the Lord does not receive glory and credit for what is happening. Speaking foreign languages as a special assignment (gift) from God was most useful in spreading the Gospel, especially during its (the Gospel's) early years. The evidence is that many were used of God to speak of Jesus Christ to those whose native language which the ones witnessing did not know, but it is also evident that many of the Corinthian believers were abusing this gift of God for self-edifying (aggrandizement). Paul believed that the ability to speak a foreign language was desirable at times in the Corinthian location, but he saw a greater need for the members to witness to those who spoke their own tongue, vs. 5. In vs. 6 the apostle speaks directly to the fact that miraculously speaking in a foreign language was intended to reveal a special (unknown before) knowledge from God.

II. Beginning with vs. 7 Paul (God) explains the tongue gift in more detail than is found elsewhere in the New Covenant. The inherent evidence in these verses makes clear that "tongue speaking" had become something not originally intended by God for its use.

Believers were uttering sounds that communicated nothing to anyone. For sounds to communicate intended thoughts from person A to another person, B, there must be a commonality in both. For example, if someone is playing music on a flute, a hearer must have heard a flute to know what instrument is being played. The hearer would know that the sound heard is not coming from a harp. Likewise, a trumpeter could call a military unit to begin conflict with an enemy, but if the soldiers did not know the correct bugle call, they might retreat instead. So it is for those who seek to communicate God's love through his Son, Jesus Christ. They must speak words that are intelligible to the hearer if he or she is to give reasonable consideration to God's position regarding sin and salvation. When singing praise to God, more than words should be used. God's Spirit should be evident in the song sung by a believer. When the Spirit leads one to convey God's message to another, there should be evidence of both the mechanics of communication and also the urgency of God's Spirit in the spirit of the conveyer, vs. 15. Music that glorifies the Lord by a vocalist involves much more than timbre, tone, pitch, and timing. Such music must have the right words as well as the right spirit. In vs. 18 Paul admits that he spoke more foreign languages than all the Corinthians put together. In his missionary endeavors God enabled the apostle to be a communicator in languages which he had not learned through formal training. But, even so, in a group who all spoke the same language, he would rather speak five words of their native language than ten thousand words of a language foreign to them. Understanding what is spoken is the prime reason for speaking in the first place, vs. 21. In this verse he quotes Isa. 28:11-12 wherein the Jews, even when hearing God's message, refused to interpret properly and heed the message. In vs. 22 Paul states plainly what he stated above in vs. 6, tongues were used by God for special revelations of God's relating to mankind, Mk 16:17; Acts 2:3-4,8,11; 10:46; 19:1-7. Now note especially vs. 23 in which Paul states that it is possible for the gift of speaking in another language to create activities in the congregational meeting where outsiders (unbelievers) can justly consider the participants to be insane (mad), i.e., without reasonable communication experienced. For conversions to take place and praise of God to be shown, proper worship of God should be understood by all those present.

III. In vss. 26-40 Paul gets very specific about the problem of the confusion (vss. 33,40) of the misuse and abuse of what had been a legitimate use of the miraculous speaking of foreign languages to establish and communicate special changes in his relating to the ekklesia. This misuse and abuse was especially prevalent during worship services. Remember that back in 1:11 we learned that it was from Chloe's (a woman) family that Paul had learned how the congregation was doing, including its problems. No doubt, Chloe mentioned the confusion which the gift of tongues was causing. Apparently, the chief participants who were causing the public interruptions were the women, vs. 34. That the women were especially involved in the confusion can better be understood by noting that at I Cor. 11:5 we learned that the women participated in both public prayer and prophecy. Perhaps in their new freedom in Christ Jesus, they were in the process of learning their new responsibilities.

Sep. 1, 2002

"You Shall Never Die Spiritually"
I Cor. 1 5

Couples Class
Wendell Alford,
Teacher

I. The portion of Scripture which we are considering today is one of the highlights of God's communication with humankind. It contains a factual, eyewitness account of the grace God has shown for the restoration of any human spirit who will accept God's plan in vss. 1-11. This chapter stresses the importance of the part Jesus' bodily resurrection from mortal death (separation) plays in God's plan, especially in vss. 12-28. A person's expected response to this Good-News-plan of God for individuals is outlined in vss. 29-34, 58. The glorious details of the coming resurrection of those who accept God's plan of salvation is detailed in vss. 35-58. We believers would be without some of the most inspiring details of God's promise to us who are trusting his gift of spiritual salvation from Jesus Christ, his only begotten Son, if we did not have information contained in this chapter. Jesus promised in John 11:25-26 that, "I am the resurrection and the life: he that believeth in me, though he may die (physically), yet shall he live (spiritually). And whosoever liveth and believeth in me shall never die." Jesus taught openly and without any doubt that there is to be a resurrection in Matt. 22:23-33. In that passage Jesus quoted Exod. 3:6, 15 which he interpreted saying, "I am the God of Abraham, - Isaac, - Jacob. God is not the God of the dead [those separated from God spiritually], but of the living [those at one spiritually with him, immersed in God's atonement, reborn from above, John 3:3-7; Rom. 5:9-11]."

II. Paul could never have divulged Chap. 15, I believe, if he had not received it directly from Jesus personally, Gal. 1:12, 15-20. The apostle states as much in vs. 3 in which he says forthrightly, "I delivered unto you first of all that which I also received, how that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures; and that he was buried, and that he rose again the third day according to the Scriptures," Psa. 16; 22; Isa. 25; 53. [Paul's Scriptures were, of course, the Old Covenant.] In vs. 1 Paul confirms that the Corinthians had received by faith this Good News which he (Paul) had delivered (witnessed) to them. Their very faith was built on this sure foundation, "- - that Christ died for our sins, was buried, and rose again the third day according to the Scriptures," vss. 3-4. After his resurrection, Jesus was seen by Peter, the twelve, over 500 at once, by James, all the apostles, and finally, and lastly by Paul, "as one born out of due time," vss. 5-8.

III. Evidently, some had falsely believed and were informing the Corinthians that there is to be no resurrection of believers who had died. Paul in vs. 13 directly and firmly bases believer's eventual resurrection upon the fact that God raised Jesus from physical death back to life. The Gospel would not be the Gospel (Good News) if Christ had not arisen from among the dead, Psa. 16:10; Acts 2:29-36. The resurrection is a necessary, essential element in the Gospel. When Paul was approached by Christ at his Damascus Road conversion experience, Paul's first response to Jesus was, "Who art thou, Lord?" He recognized the lordship of the one who had

spoken to him, but he "knew" Jesus was dead. When Jesus identified himself as one very alive, Paul immediately knew that Jesus had been, in fact, resurrected from among the dead. Now in Chap. 15 Paul relates Jesus' resurrection to Jewish history. He says that Jesus' resurrection was "the firstfruits" of God's new order of resurrections of the just (trusters in Jesus Christ). If Christ did not die physically as all people die physically and was then resurrected to life, then there is no basis or foundation for a believer's faith, I John 4:2-3. It is upon this faith that God is building his ekklesia, Isa. 28:14-16; Matt. 16:16-18; 21:42-46; I Pet. 2:1-10. Christ's miraculous birth, perfect life, and sacrificial death were given approval by God in his having resurrected his precious Son from among the dead (hades). If Christ was not raised by God, then believers have no hope and Paul's testimony (God's Word) is untrue which leads Paul to say, "If in this life (mortal) only we have hope in Christ, we are of all men most pitiable (miserable)," vs. 19, and those who die trusting Christ are perished (annihilated or cease to exist), vs. 18.

IV. In vs. 20 Paul states plainly that Jesus has, in absolute fact, risen from death and, in so doing, has become the firstfruits of them who have believed and have died physically. The "lastfruits," all believers, will be made alive distinctively (resurrected) when Christ returns to earth to claim his entire body, ekklesia, of believers. Mortal death is the direct result of sin and all have sinned since and including Adam and Eve. But in and through Jesus Christ, all who trust him will be made alive, and every believer in his or her own order, vs. 23, i.e., Christ will bring those who have died before his second coming (firstfruits) and afterwards make spiritually alive those believers who are physically alive at his second appearance on earth. When Christ returns, he will set up the Kingdom of God on earth, "for he must reign, till he hath put all enemies under his feet," vs. 25. The last enemy (Satan) who has promoted sin which separates people from their Creator God, will be subdued by Christ who will be subject to God, the Father, vss. 24-28. At vs. 29 Paul (God's Word) deals with those who have been immersed into God's favor (will) through faith by becoming one with God through Christ. Look carefully, with vs. 29 in mind, at Rom. 6:3-14. Vs. 29 is saying, I believe, that if Christ is not resurrected from the dead, why should we be immersed (covered by or allied with) his life and sacrificial death since there is to be no resurrection (afterlife) at all. [Present-day Christianity has, in large part, made immersion to be a rite, baptism, and to have a mechanical connotation rather than what it was originally, a physical symbol of a spiritual reality which unites a truster of Jesus Christ with God the Father who is Spirit. The theological term is "atonement" which means reconciliation, at-one-ment.] Vs. 29 says that if Christ was not raised from death, then he is still dead. If he is dead, why be an ally (through immersion) with him, because there is no spiritual advantage in doing so. Believers are still in their sin, physically alive, or dead, vss. 16-18. If Christ were still dead, then those believers who have died physically are lost forever, and we who are still alive physically are in constant jeopardy, vs. 30. If there is no afterlife, we

should just as well eat, drink and make merry for we will all die physically eventually. But no, we should not be so deceived, because every person is to give an account, believers for rewards for their services rendered to our Lord-of-life while in the flesh (Matt. 5:12; Rom. 14:12; I Cor. 5:5; I Pet. 4:5; Rev. 20:2-8), and unbelievers to eternal separation from God (Rev. 20:11-15). Therefore, "awake to righteousness and sin not; for some of you are not conducting your lives according to the knowledge you should have as believers. I speak this to your shame," vs. 34, and see also II Pet. 3:11-15.

V. As mentioned above, beginning with vs. 35 and through the remainder of the chapter, Paul reveals God's plan, with considerable detail, for those who have made, through faith, Jesus Christ Savior and Lord of their lives. How can a person believe that those who die physically can logically be made alive again? Their bodies will deteriorate, and how could they ever be put back together again? Paul says that, remembering the Creator God's omnipotence such questioning makes one foolish in their thinking, Matt. 22:29 and vs. 36. When one sows any seed such as grain, the seed deteriorates, but the result produces the same type of seed. The planted seed does not remain, but another seed is produced. This reproduction can only take place through the creative power of God, vss. 36-38. Not only is this true regarding plants, but animals have different types of flesh according to God's creative ability. God has created bodies (beings) which are either earthly or heavenly bodies. There are different types of heavenly bodies, for example, the sun and the moon. One type of celestial body has a different glory (priority) than another type, as pleases God, vss. 38,40-41. In vs. 42 Paul then likens God's creativeness as noted above to the resurrection of believing people after they have died physically. A believer's body is subject to material destruction when it no longer has a spirit within, i.e., is physically separated [dead] from its spirit [life]. The body is buried as a corrupted being, a body of weak limitations. Before physical death the human body is patterned after other things of an earthly nature, but there is a body which God will create for those salvaged spirits who are trusting him through Jesus Christ. In vss. 45-50 Paul reveals that there was an Adam without an eternally living spirit first, and then God breathed into him an eternal spirit with his (God's) own likeness (eternal life). The first Adam was made of dust (like the other animals) with the potential of becoming spiritually eternal in God's likeness. That likeness will only reach its ultimate maturity for believers after we die physically, and Jesus comes again to claim us as his own. When he comes, there will be some believers physically alive on earth. As Jesus nears the earth with all firstfruits believers who have died physically before his return, (I Thes. 4:13-18), along with all believers then physically alive, will instantaneously be changed into incorruptible bodies (beings), vs. 50, i.e., bodies not susceptible to physical limitations such as mortal death (separation), I Thes. 4:17b-18. In this process, finally, for believers, the saying, "Death is swallowed up in victory," will come to pass. Death was encountered by all humanity because of their sins (disobedience to God's will) before and after

God revealed his Law to mankind. After the Law came, the effects of sin was compounded, because mankind knew directly what God wanted him to do. Nevertheless, the situation was hopeless for everyone until God the Father sent his only Son, Christ Jesus. Faith in God's righteousness through Christ Jesus brings complete victory over the grave and the sin which puts one there. Being assured of ultimate victory through Christ, we should serve the Lord diligently and continually, "forasmuch as we know that our labor for the Lord is not futile," vs. 58. The sting of death is neutralized through the miraculous birth, faultless life (sinless), sacrificial death, burial and resurrection of the person (body) of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.

"Low in the grave he lay - Jesus my Savior. Waiting the coming day - Jesus, my Lord!
Vainly they watch his bed - Jesus my Savior. Vainly they seal the dead - Jesus, my Lord!
Death cannot keep his prey - Jesus my Savior. He tore the bars away - Jesus my Lord!

Up from the grave he arose, with a mighty triumph o'er his foes. He arose a victor from the dark domain, and he lives forever with his saints to reign. He arose! He arose! Hallelujah! Christ arose!"

"Work, for the night is coming, work thro' the morning hours;
Work while the dew is sparkling. Work 'mid springing flowers.
Work when the day grows brighter. Work in the glowing sun.
Work, for the night is coming, when man's work is done.
Work, for the night is coming under the sunset skies;
While their bright tints are glowing. Work for daylight flies.
Work till the last beam fadeth, fadeth to shine no more.
Work while the night is darkening when man's work is o'er."

Sep. 8, 2002

"Inspired Sharing"
I Cor. 16

Couples Class
Wendell Alford,
Teacher

I. Paul continued his doctrinal teaching through the first fifteen chapters of this first letter to the believers at Corinth, and now turns to the very practical matter of their sharing with the destitute believers in Judea. This letter to Corinth was written about AD 57 from Ephesus. Paul knew that those who had been faithful to Christ Jesus back in Jerusalem and its environs (Judea) were undergoing trials and deprivation of food and other necessities of life. Mentioning taking a collection for the believers there presents a vivid contrast with the previous chapter where heavenly, spiritual details have been explained. One of the emphases of this first Corinthian letter was that God's people were to respect and love one another wherever God's ekklesia was being gathered. Paul also was very interested in demonstrating that there is no difference in God's sight between believers who are either man, woman, Jew, Greek (Gentile), bond (slave), or free (nonslave). What could demonstrate such love for fellow believers more than the sharing of their possessions with foreign Jews by Corinthian Gentiles? In vs. 1 the apostle made clear to the Corinthians that, not only were they being given the opportunity to share, but other believers (Galatians) were being asked to do likewise. The universal nature of God's grace through Christ Jesus was through the believers' individual faith in God's Messiah. The spiritual bond of faith truly made all trusters in Jesus the one body of which Christ is the head. It is very noteworthy, I believe, that Paul, in giving instruction for the method of collecting the money for the Judean saints, did not appeal to the Old Covenant pattern of tithing, nor did he advocate a general, special offering upon his visit. He did ask that the fund be a regular offering when they met to worship which was on the Lord's Day, the first day of the Jewish week, not the Jewish Sabbath. They evidently met for corporate worship on the day of the week which honored the Jewish day of the week on which our Lord was resurrected. Since giving to the mission fund (to be used for what we would call social welfare) was during the worship service, this act of sharing was considered a part of the worship experience. This regular offering was to be proportionate to their earnings of the previous week, "as God hath prospered him." Paul admonished the believers as individuals, not as a corporate body, "- - let every one of you lay by him in store (to become a part of the group treasury) as God hath prospered him - -." This arrangement would allow flexibility within the group. Undoubtedly, some individuals could share more than others. In my opinion, proportionate giving is not a flat amount such as a tithe, but relates to what one has as a remainder after sharing, rather than the amount given. Grace giving is always fairer than law giving, and it can amount to more or less than a tithe. I believe that such a statement must be justified by Scripture to be valid: Jesus did not commend the widow because she gave a tithe, nor did he commend the Pharisees and Scribes for their meticulous attention to tithing, Matt. 23:23-24; Lk 18:9-14; 21:1-4; [Heb. 7:5]. What one gives in the name of Christ is a reflection of the giver's spirit, not to supply a need which God has. The only thing which God does not already own is an unbe-

liever's spirit. Paul's business method for handling money which is sanctified for the Lord's use should be noted. The Corinthians were to put in writing from whom and to whom the money, "your liberality," was to be sent. Further, Paul agreed to accompany the offering if that arrangement seemed appropriate to the group. Note in vs. 3, "them" will be sent to Jerusalem with the money. The "them" probably meant a committee, or, at least several. Church offerings should always be entrusted to more than one person, to avoid unnecessary temptations. At Acts 19:21 and Rom. 15:25-28 (on Paul's third extended mission out of Antioch) the apostle stated that one engaged in spiritual labor can justifiably live from the efforts of those served. This entire project of collecting help for the believers in Judea was in keeping with his promise at a Jerusalem conference, immediately following his and Barnabas' first missionary journey, that he would remember the poor [at Jerusalem?], Gal. 2:9-10.

II. Beginning with vs. 5 and through the remainder of the letter, Paul tells the Corinthians about his tentative plans and what he knows of certain of his associates and their plans. Note how tentative Paul's plans were, vs. 6, "it may be" and "ye may bring (send) me," vs. 7, "but I trust to tarry (stay) a while with you." It appears that the apostle was deliberately not attempting to force God's plans for him nor delay when those plans became assured for him. Also, Paul did not attempt to dictate his own will upon his associates who worked with him. For example, note that in vs. 12 he states that he had urged Apollos to visit the Corinthians on an occasion, but Apollos' decision against the request prevailed. Paul states that Apollos would visit at his own convenience. The reason for his not leaving Ephesus for Corinth at the time was that, "a great door (of opportunity) is opened to me, and there are many adversaries [here at Ephesus]." When he could come to Corinth, he hoped to "stay a while [rather than just hurry through], if the Lord permit," vs. 7. In the event that Timothy should visit Corinth, Paul vouched for his veracity in Gospel service. In fact, he declared Timothy's mission equal to his own and worthy of support and encouragement. In vs. 13 Paul again admonishes the believing Corinthians to be alert constantly, courageous in their faith in Christ Jesus. All actions should be carried out with love as the motive, vs. 14. Paul commends to them Stephanus who was the first convert in Achaia and whom Paul had personally immersed himself. Included with Stephanus were Fortunatus and Achaicus who had likewise supported Paul in his missionary work. Actually, Paul admits that these men had been more available to help the Corinthians than he had himself, vs. 17. Knowing that they had been of assistance to the Corinthians refreshed the apostle's spirit. Aquila and Priscilla sent their greetings along with the other believers who met for worship in their home. Paul then signed the letter in his own handwriting, stating therein that, "if any man [person] love not the Lord Jesus Christ, let him be Anathema [Aramaic for "accursed" or "damned"] Maranatha [Greek for "our Lord comes"]. These two words can be justifiably translated, I believe, "Let those who do not love our Lord be cursed, for our Lord is definitely coming for those who love him and love his appearing," II Tim. 4:8.

Sept. 22, 2002

"God Is Faithful"
II Cor. 1

Couples Class
Wendell Alford,
Teacher

I. Within a year after Paul's first letter to the Corinthian believers, some in the group had been swayed by false teachers who stirred the members against the apostle. These "teachers" claimed that he was deceitful, proud, egotistical, unimpressive in appearance and oratory, dishonest (especially concerning money), and unqualified as an apostle of the Lord Jesus Christ. Paul sent Titus to Corinth to encourage the Corinthian believers to stand fast in the Good News as he (Paul) had delivered it to them. When Titus returned to Paul at Ephesus, the latter rejoiced when he learned that the Corinthians had, in fact, had a change of heart regarding Paul and the Gospel he had shared with them. Apparently a majority of the membership agreed to remain loyal to the apostle and his message. Much of this second letter expresses Paul's thanksgiving for their decision, and he further outlines his qualifications to confirm their decision. Without the context of this letter combined with the first, one could conclude that Paul was simply boasting about himself in Letter Two. He had ample reason to corroborate their right decision to choose him and his Gospel message. Very probably those "teachers" were either Judaizers, or ones who had been influenced by such. Also, his insistence that believers should conduct their lives according to the Lord's teachings could have been a burden for some believers who were being influenced by the debauchery and immorality so prevalent in wicked Corinth. Such reluctance was evident, for remember, Paul cited one of the believers was living (cohabiting) with his father's wife, I Cor. 5:1-3. Further, his admonition to the congregation concerning such behavior was explicit. That one should be excluded from the fellowship, because of the adverse, unGodly testimony which he was living, I Cor. 5:4-7. Note especially vs. 5 of this passage which states, " - - deliver such an one unto Satan for the destruction of the flesh, that the spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus." When we examine (next week) Chapter Two of this letter (II Cor.), we will learn the outcome of the wayward man who was cohabiting with his father's wife, and, at the same time, professing to be a believer of Jesus Christ.

II. Paul begins this second letter to the Corinthians by confirming his apostleship for Jesus Christ as having been established by the will of God, the heavenly Father. He notes that Timothy was with him there in Ephesus and shared with the apostle the communication of this second letter to the Corinthian believers. His introduction makes clear that the letter was appropriate for all believers in the province of Achaia which was the entire peninsula where Athens was also located, vs. 1. His greeting asked that the people of Achaia be accorded the grace and peace "from God our Father, and from the Lord Jesus Christ." He then characterized God as the Father of mercies, comfort and of our Lord Jesus Christ. God comforts believers, his spiritual children, in their times of trials and troubles so that those same children can comfort one another. We believers are associated with the Savior and therefore appreciate the troubles inherit in a world where sin causes so much pain, vss, 3-5. Just as we are comforted by Christ's love for us, even though

he suffered greatly while in the mortal flesh (Isa. 53:3-5), we are to comfort one another as believers in that same Suffering Servant. Our eternal hope lies not in the present world order, but in the promise of God through faith in his only Son, Jesus the Messiah (Savior). In vs. 8-11 Paul testifies to his own trials as he has served the Lord in Asia, our current Asia Minor and where all the churches addressed by John in Rev. Chaps. 1-3 were located, Rev. 1:11. Asia in the early New Covenant period consisted of roughly the western third of the Asia Minor peninsula. This Roman province was as rich as any portion of the Roman Empire. It had been a possession of Rome since BC 133. The trade and cross travels through this area was, no doubt, Paul's reason for spending so much time, during these early years of spreading the Gospel, in Ephesus. Remember that he gave as his reason for not visiting Corinth during a rather long period was that, "I will tarry at Ephesus until Pentecost for a great and effectual door is opened to me, and there are many adversaries," I Cor. 16:8-9. In vs. 8-11 of our current consideration Paul is referring to the Asian service and the problem he had experienced there. Through the remainder of Chapter One he again asks the Corinthians to understand the priority he has given to the Asian work.

III. In vs. 12 Paul states his position regarding how they relate to his priority of service. He hopes that they can understand his position. His reason for choosing his places and length of services in the various areas is, because he has been under the direct leadership of God's grace. He admits that his earlier plans were to come to Corinth, but even his promises as a human must take second place under God's direct leadership. In other words, any plans which Paul made were subject to correction and change by the Lord God. Only God is faithful to his own overall plan for his servants, and only God has the final and unchangeable "yes" or "no." Any appearance to mankind that God has changed is caused by the fallibility of people to carry out God's perfect will for them. God, of course, knew mankind's fallibility from the creation of the world. The relationship of mankind's imperfection and God's perfect holiness is perhaps best understood by noting God's Word at Heb. 8:7,10 in which God promised (Jer. 31:29-34) that a New Covenant would be made with mankind in which God would communicate directly with each believing person. This promise was later implemented through the Person of God's Holy Spirit and the merit of a sacrificed only begotten Son, Jesus Christ. A perfect, holy God could relate to any imperfect (sinful) person only by means of a perfect sacrifice, Heb. 9:12-15,24-28. Paul reminded the Corinthians that their hope and joy depended not upon his visiting or being with them, but upon God's faithfulness which was absolute and sealed by his very Holy Spirit. God's promises are not "yes" or "no," but are established by a resounding "yes." To that we are eligible only to say "AMEN." We are sealed with a steadfast down payment, the Holy Spirit of God, and God cannot lie, Heb. 6:18-20. God's messenger does not have control over a believer's spirit, but a believer's joy and hope is fixed by his or her faith in God's faithfulness to keep his promise through Jesus Christ, vs. 21-24. God is so merciful and loving!

Sept. 29, 2002

"Forgiveness, Comfort, And Love"
II Cor. 2

Couples Class
Wendell Alford,
Teacher

I. Paul's sentiments which begin Chap. 2 are a continuation of the end of the previous chapter. His delay in returning to Corinth was to give time for those erring believers to admit their misbehaving according to God's will for them as believers, his children. For Paul to be with them knowing their fracture of God's will would have so saddened him that the sadness would have been infectious for the members. Vs. 1 indicates that the apostle had visited the group before under unpleasant circumstances. He determined not to repeat the occasion, for he feels that his encouragement can soothe their own spirits (especially of those not involved directly in the sinful activities). But who then would give Paul encouragement and a feeling of joy, vs. 2. Their feelings of satisfaction could not be thorough and complete without the whole group's knowing that they, as a spiritual family, were serving the Lord appropriately and without some members obviously serving Satan while claiming to be in good standing with God's people. Paul confesses that he had communicated with them (the first letter) with "much affliction and anguish," but, even so, his sorrow did not quench his undying love for them. Further, he wanted the Corinthians to know that he still loved them, vs. 4.

II. Beginning with vs. 5 the apostle addresses specifically the problem of immorality which he had noted in I Cor. 5. We should review the situation, at least briefly. One of the male members of the congregation was living as man and wife with his own father's wife. There are some questions which we can pose and which the Bible does not answer. In any case, the immoral situation was well known in Corinth, and Paul condemned the man's actions (not the man's spirit). The context of I Cor. 5 makes fairly obvious that those who were not believers did not practice such sexual immorality, incest, I Cor. 5:1. Paul's admonition to the congregation was that they withdraw fellowship from him. If believers are to demonstrate a genuine relationship with a holy God, through faith in Jesus Christ, their lifestyles should reflect God's will according to Jesus' teachings. Jesus said at John 14:22-29, "- - If a person love me, he (or she) will keep my words: and my Father will love him, and we will come unto him, and make our home with him. - -" In this same passage Jesus says that after he (Jesus) is gone, God will send a Comforter, Helper (Gk, paraclete) to teach believers the words (will) of Jesus. Further, we learn from God's Word at Eph. 4:30 that we, as believers, can indeed grieve (sadden) God's Spirit by not performing according to the Holy Spirit's leading. Remember last week we noted at II Cor. 1:21-22 the same idea.

III. Now in Chap. 2:5+ Paul lets us know that those who grieve God's Holy Spirit should also grieve a congregation of believers as well. The apostle says that his sadness was not without reservation, "but in part," vs. 5. Nor did Paul want the congregation to feel defeated, "be too severe." Now that the man had repented and changed his immoral practice (of living illicitly with his father's wife), his punishment was sufficient when the

congregation had expressed corporately their disapproval of his sinful action, vs. 6. The group should, following his confession and change of life, forgive him, comfort him, and, finally, reaffirm their love toward him, vss. 7-8. Why should the congregation accept him and return him to full fellowship status? Because he could otherwise be "swallowed up with overmuch sorrow," vs. 7. Paul revealed in vs. 9 why he had been so direct and abrupt in the former letter. He wanted to know whether the Corinthian congregation of believers would follow the leadership of God's Holy Spirit.

IV. Vs. 10 introduces a very important principle concerning forgiveness of those who have, as God's children, sinned against God's Spirit. Paul says, in effect, that the local congregation is the entity which properly exercises discipline to those who contradict God's will in their moral choices. The apostle had given them his own opinion in Chap. 5 of I Cor., but he was not really sure how the group would react to his position. He knew that God's Spirit had led him to his view. However, he had no way to know whether the group would also be in accord with the Lord's leadership through his Spirit. If you forgive this repentant member, I will, of course, accept your position, not on my own authority to forgive. Vs. 10b states that Paul accepted the forgiveness, because he knew from the congregation's observation the sinning believer had met the condition to have been forgiven by "the person of Christ." The "bottom line" was not whether Paul or the congregation had forgiven him, as important as that forgiveness was, the most vital fact was that Paul knew that Christ had, in fact, forgiven the wayward one. And how could Paul be so sure? God's Word is consistent on this matter. Examine I John 1:8-2:5,12, "If we say that we have no sin (proneness to sin), we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If, however, we confess our sin [to God], he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness." That we sin as believers is made crystal clear in God's Word which states, (I John 2:1) "My little children [of God], these things write I unto you, that you sin not. And if you [any believing person] sin, we [believers] have an advocate (intercessor) with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous. And he is the propitiation (one who appeases and makes favorable or atones) for our sins." And at I John 2:12, "I write unto you, God's children, because your sins are forgiven you for his (Jesus') name's sake." Paul was very aware of God the Father's forgiving nature through his Son, Jesus the Savior, and could, therefore, notify and assure the Corinthian believers that the man who had been living sinfully could be sure that the Lord had heard his confession to God and mended his lifestyle was now back in fellowship with both God and God's people, the ekklesia. We should be aware that there is a large segment of those who profess to be Christians in the world today who have been taught and believe that forgiveness comes from and through the corporate church. This arrangement gives that corporate body the control of forgiveness over its members which is, I believe, contrary to God's Word. It is true that at John 20:23 Jesus did tell the original apostles that they would know whose sins would be forgiven, but note that in the preceding vs. 22 such knowledge is related to their receiving the Holy Spirit. We are triumphant only in Christ, for we do not "peddle by trickery" the Word of God, but give [truth] directly from God, II Cor. 2:14,17.

Oct. 6, 2002

"The Spirit Giveth Life"
II Cor. 3

Couples Class
Wendell Alford,
Teacher

I. At the end of Chap. 2 Paul gives all credit for a believer's triumph to faith in the power of Jesus Christ. At the beginning of Chap. 3 he gives attention to the part a witness plays in the salvation process. The apostle asks a couple of rhetorical questions in vs. 1. Does a witness to God's truth, in this case Paul himself as one especially chosen by God to communicate God's Word, need a letter of reference from someone other than God to vouch for his fidelity to the truth? Do I, Paul, need to lay again the foundation for spiritual salvation since I have already relayed the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth to you, Gal. 1:6-12. He said, "- - Need I, as some others do, need letters of commendation?" In vs. 2 he refers to having ones heart written upon, and states that their faith and manner of life shouts out that the message (Paul's) which changed their wills was positive evidence of the truth of Paul's witness. They had received God's Spirit who had himself written God's truth on their hearts (wills), Rom. 8:12-17. Believers, then, who follow Paul's letters (God's Word) written in their hearts (minds, wills) are following God's will, not because the communication is ink on paper. God's will (Spirit) is so much a part of the believers' personalities that they are new spiritual beings, II Cor. 5:17. Our new beings were created from above, and we now trust Christ and his relation to God the Father, John 10:22-30; II Cor. 3:4-5.

II. Beginning with vs. 6 Paul introduces and expands upon the contrast between God's Old Covenant and his New Covenant with mankind. Our message as believers in Jesus as Messiah (Savior) has to do with the difference between the first Covenant which was a set of rules set down in stone, and the second and last Covenant "of the Spirit [who] giveth life." To realize the profound difference one should keep in mind that "life" in this better Covenant is defined as "together with ones Creator" through faith in his only begotten Son, Christ Jesus, vs. 6. The Law was given to mankind through God's servant, Moses. But that Law ministered (dispensed) death to the hearers who attempted to please God by abiding by that Law. The concepts of the Law as codified, killed (spiritually) people even though that Law was glorious, because it expressed God's will for people. There is no doubt concerning the glory related to the Law, for Moses glowed with God's glory immediately after receiving it, Exod. 34:29-35. In the context of Scripture in which Moses received what Paul is referring to here, the Ten Commandments are intended. There is no fault with that Law even though it condemns mankind. The problem, then, is not with God who gave the Law, the Law, or with Moses through whom God channeled the Law, but with people's lack of will and therefore their inability to keep it. So what good was the Law to a people who could not live according to its demands? A sacrifice system was established to bridge the gap between God and mankind, but even that did not suffice. And what about today after Jesus has come and become God's agent for believers' spiritual rebirth? God's will for mankind as expressed in God's Law still shows individuals that they are sinners separated

from their loving heavenly Father, Psa. 19:7; Gal. 3:24-26. Vs. 7b states that the Old Covenant was known by God from the beginning to be an arrangement which would fade away, Heb. 8:7. What is the chief difference between the Old and New Covenants? Now if God's ministry of the Law was so glorious, how much more glorious is the Covenant during which God will live in his ekklesia, his people called out of all the earth to serve him in his Kingdom of God. God's Holy Spirit himself will dwell within each believer, a new phenomenon in God's relating with those who will believe his New Covenant in and through Jesus Christ, Joel 2:28-29; Acts 2:14-16. The ministry of the New Covenant will testify to a perfect (complete) righteousness, for God has now provided the perfect Lamb for the needed sacrifice. Those who have faith in that Lamb, Jesus the Messiah, are covered by God's very own righteousness, Rom. 9:30-33. Throughout all time the factor that has pleased God has been faith in God's promise, not in ones own self-righteousness, Matt. 23:12; Rom. 10:3. The most succinct Bible contrast of the two Covenants is at Heb. 8:13, "In that he saith, A New Covenant, he hath made the first old. Now that which is becoming obsolete and has become outdated is ready to vanish away."

III. In vs. 10 Paul, in comparing the two Covenants, states that when God replaced the first glorious Covenant with the ultimate in glory, he established faith not in the good Law but in his only Son. Our hope now is in the righteousness of that only Son, Jesus Christ, and we can be bold. Our boldness is not dependent upon our ability to keep the Law but upon our faith in God's own righteousness, in God's Lamb whom he furnished for the sins of all people who will trust him, Gen. 22:1-8, 11-13; John 1:29, 36; Heb. 9:12, 14-15, 22-28. Recall that Paul was a Hebrew by birth and a strict Pharisee. He had personally experienced what Moses underwent when God's glory gradually faded from his face after leaving God's presence on Mt. Sinai. In Paul's case, however, this glow of trusting the Law failed quickly on his journey to Damascus to imprison believers who trusted not the Law, but God's sacrificial Lamb, Christ Jesus. Paul is now testifying to the Corinthian believers in AD 58 that the veil which covered Moses' face has been done away with entirely, Matt. 27:50-51, in Christ, vs. 16. The Law was read regularly by the Israelites, but their wills were made dull in Paul's day (and still are). The Jews have still not accepted God the Father's righteousness through Jesus, God's Messiah. The Law is a veil over their hearts, vss. 14-15. Their refusal to trust Jesus is the reason they have not received the Holy Spirit of God. God's Holy Spirit will come and live with (personally direct a believer's life) an individual only if he or she yields to God's plan of spiritual salvation for eternal life in and through Christ Jesus. Just as the heavenly Father and Jesus are one and the same (Jesus is God who came in human flesh), so is the Lord Jesus one with the Holy Spirit, John 10:30; 14:36; II Cor. 3:17. "- - Where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty," John 8:36; vs. 17. We believers can boldly approach God and can, with unveiled faces as reflections of the Lord Jesus Christ whom we trust for eternal life, rejoice. We have been transformed from fear of the Law (intended to reflect God's glory, righteousness) to the ultimate glory of God's righteousness, faith in Christ Jesus who is our righteousness. Faith in Jesus alone can give eternal, spiritual life!

Oct. 13, 2002

"Temporal Versus Eternal"
II Cor. 4

Couples Class
Wendell Alford,
Teacher

I. Chap. 4 continues (begins with "Therefore") Paul's testimony of those who bear witness to God's grace whereby he "spared not his own Son, but delivered him up for us all, how shall he (God) not with him also freely give us all things?" (Rom. 8:32) Our testimony, even as Paul's, gives us such motivation because of God's mercy, we do not lose heart or faint, vs. 1,16, and see also Job 13:15-16, "Though he slay me, yet will I trust him (God). - - He also shall be my salvation: for an hypocrite shall not come before him." The apostle in vs. 2 states that his testimony (God's Word) renounces crafty (hidden, shameful, ulterior, or adulterous) elements which do not reveal God's genuine position regarding his relating to his creation, mankind. The implication in vs. 2 is that some who claim to proclaim God's Word to be one thing really are combining its truth with error. The resulting amalgamation is not the Good News but is dishonest and is "handling the Word of God deceitfully." Such propagation of an improper, false "gospel" was in order to "commend themselves" rather than as Paul was doing, "renouncing such dishonesty." The true Gospel of God through his Son, Christ Jesus, is the ultimate expression of God's grace, and is so simple that a child can understand, Matt. 18:1-5. In fact, if it is hid, it is hid (veiled) from those who simply refuse to accept God's gracious, free offer of eternal life through his own righteousness in and through his only begotten Son Jesus Christ (are perishing), vs. 3. All of the propagators of this dishonest and false "gospel" are led by "the god of this world," (Matt. 12:31, "the prince (ruler) of this world"). These false teachers fulfill Isaiah's prophecy at Isa. 6:8-10; Matt. 13:14-15; John 3:36; Gal. 2:21; Jude 4. The substance of the argument against false teachers is that anything or any persons who put itself or themselves between an individual and Christ Jesus is blinded and cannot see the truth (God's Gospel), because Christ is the very image (true reflection) of God himself, vs. 4b. Nothing or no persons can rightfully claim to be God, for the only true way to see and know God the Father is through Jesus Christ himself, John 14:6-7.

II. A true witness to God's truth does not elevate himself or herself, but Christ Jesus as Lord, vs. 5. The true witness is, in fact, a servant of the Lord, not one who is served by others, Matt. 20:25-28. As Paul put it in vs. 5, "For we proclaim not ourselves, but Christ Jesus the Lord: and ourselves your servants for Jesus' sake." The plural pronouns used here, "we" and "ourselves," are not the royal plurals used by monarchs, but are plural because, at the beginning of this letter, Paul includes Timothy as a coauthor of the message being sent to the Corinthians. Now we know also that God's Holy Spirit was the actual Author since it is God's Word to us believers, but not to unbelievers, vs. 3. The same Creator God who "commanded light to shine out of darkness [made something out of nothing, Gen. 1:1-5], hath shined in our (believers') hearts (wills), to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face (person) of Jesus Christ." The apostle (God's Word) is saying that it requires the same creative

power to recreate a human spirit into his (God's) likeness as it did for God to create something (physical) from nothing, II Cor. 5:17. (See also John 6:35,39,41-47; Rom. 8:16-17.)

III. A big problem for us believers is that part of us which is temporary, the physical dwelling place (our bodies) of our spirits, spirits which have been remade (reborn from above) spiritually. We have eternal spirits in "earthly vessels," and we know from our experiences that "the excellency of the power (which recreated us) is of God, and not of us," vs. 7. In the flesh we are under pressure "on every side" but not destroyed (crushed) spiritually. We are at times perplexed (with the physical eventualities), but we do not permit life's uncertainties to create despair or hopelessness for us who have eternal life. Even when in this life we are persecuted and struck down, we know God's promise, to sustain us even through our separation from this world order (physical death) and beyond, is steadfast and sure, vss. 8-9. We know that our Lord Jesus Christ, in whom we trust, went through the severest of persecutions. God's promise is that if we trust and publicly display that trust before others, we will be protected from anything that would separate from God's love for us, Matt. 10:32-33; Rom. 8:35-39. As believers we are to subject our actions while in these temporary dwellings to the lordship of Jesus Christ so that our attitude and actions will be manifest (demonstrate) our trust in the Lord Jesus, vss. 10-11. Our lives are to be lived for others rather than selfishly, I Cor. 10:24; Phil. 2:3-8. Paul could have lived a selfish life but deliberately chose to spend his life dedicated to proclaiming God's Good News in Jesus Christ so that others could hear, believe, and thereby have life eternal. We, too, should live lives that testify to God's grace through his Son. Paul refers to such a life as one which has the "spirit of faith," vs. 13. In that verse he quotes Psa. 116:10, "I believed, and therefore have I spoken." We believers are likewise to speak (communicate) our belief to others. We understand that as God raised Jesus from physical death, "shall raise up us also by the same power," and we will, after that resurrection, be presented together with Paul and Timothy, vs. 14. In vs. 15 Paul states simply that sharing God's offer of his grace with all who will accept it, is worth all the sacrifice in personal time and effort, because all such activity will signify agreement with the praise and glory due God for his mercy through his Son, Christ Jesus.

IV. The chapter concludes with a repeat of vs. 1, that believers should not "become weary in well doing," Gal. 6:9-10; II Thes. 3:13. Paul's reasoning is that we are inevitably going to diminish physically and eventually die physically, I Cor. 15:22. This arrangement was brought about by mankind's choice of evil (Isa. 53:6), but God now has created a new covenant by sending his Son from heaven for all who will trust him for eternal life. Those who have that trust are renewed in their spirits every moment of their lives, "day by day", vs. 16. We believers should not be overly concerned about the problems and anxieties of this temporal period "while we look not at things which are seen. Our light affliction, which is but for a moment, worketh for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory." The things which are seen are temporary, but the things which are not seen (our faith in Jesus Christ) are eternal," vs. 18.

Oct. 27, 2002

"We Walk By Faith"
II Cor. 5

Couples Class
Wendell Alford,
Teacher

I. Chap. 5 of II Corinthians is probably the best known passage in this second letter by most believers, for it is there where Paul (God's Word) makes an explicit connection of ones faith in God's love (John 3:16) with the person of the Lord Jesus Christ. Vs. 1 states that, "For we know that if (when) this tabernacle (tent or temporary home) were (is) dissolved (destroyed), we have a building (permanent place where our spirits will continue to live) created by God (himself) not by hands (of earthly materials), John 2:13-21; Mark 14:58, "eternal in the heavens." While in the mortal flesh, we believers yearn and earnestly desire to swap our flesh-and-blood dwelling places for that eternal house waiting for us in heaven which God is preparing for us, John 14:1-3. Such was Paul's testimony at Phil. 1:21-24 and Peter's at II Pet. 1:13-14, but both noted that their service for the Lord was the restraining force which at that time caused them to want to remain in the flesh. Neither was suicidal even though both looked forward to being in Jesus' presence. Vss. 3 and 4 have raised questions in the minds of many Bible scholars as to whether "nakedness" as noted here has to do with the believer's state of being between mortal death and the resurrection when Jesus returns to earth in person. If this transitional period is what Paul is describing here, it is to my knowledge of Scripture, the only instance where the believer is said to be without living quarters (naked) between physical death and the resurrection, I Cor. 15:42,50-52; I Thes. 4:13-18. I believe that that is an improper interpretation of the passage and that upon leaving our tabernacles (mortal bodies) we believers go at once to be with our Lord in heaven, Luke 23:42-45. This chapter, I believe, simply confirms what Jesus proclaimed on the cross concerning the criminal who confessed Jesus to be Lord just before he (the criminal) died. Jesus said, "Truthfully I say to you, today shalt thou be with me in paradise." Now returning to II Cor. 5:3-8: it also concludes with the same fact that Jesus asserted on the cross. The "If" (conditional) proposition in vs. 3 raises the probable question which could occur to a believer regarding his state of being between mortal death and the resurrection. Vs. 4 further emphasizes the same concern (burden) of becoming "unclothed" rather than having their beings "swallowed up of life." But God himself has promised the continued well-being of his chosen ones, John 10:28-29; Rom. 8:38-39. He has done this by living in the person of his Holy Spirit within each believer's personality, vs. 5. The Holy Spirit's dwelling within is the guarantee (earnest, down payment, assurance) that God will do what is best for the trusters in his Son, Jesus Christ. "Therefore, we are always confident, knowing that, whilst we are at home in the [physical] body, we are absent from the Lord: [this is true even though] we walk [while in the flesh] by faith, not by sight," vss. 6-7. Our assurance is based, then, completely upon our faith in God's promise through Christ Jesus, Eph. 2:4-10. Now in vs. 8 Paul (God's Word) reiterates the reason for a believer to be confident, "[even while in the flesh a believer] can be cheerful and happy knowing that God's sure promise is that after leaving this earthly home, he or she will be taken

to be [present] with the Lord in heaven [paradise]." This undeniable assurance gives us reason (motivation) to be constantly pleasing to the Lord, vs. 9.

II. We are to appear before Christ's judgment seat (throne) to be assessed for rewards according to ones behavior while in the flesh, vs. 10. The Bible is not definitive in describing this "reward judgment," but here Paul includes himself among those to undergo such a judgment. It is obvious that the "we" includes us also as believers, for only believers can be rewarded for service in God's kingdom under the lordship of Christ. Unbelievers have chosen otherwise. We believers are not to be judged for our sins for which Jesus was crucified, nor are we to be judged for sins for which we confess to God and ask him for forgiveness, John 3:17-18; I John 1:9. For what then are we to be judged? For exercising options as believers that do not promote God's kingdom on earth, sins which destroy a believer's witness to the lordship of Christ. I base this belief upon I Cor. 5:5 and II Cor. 2:6-10, as well as Matt. 6:14-15; 18:21-22,34-35. What are to be our rewards for serving God while in the flesh? Apart from the satisfaction of realizing that one is pleasing (praising) the merciful heavenly Father who has awarded an undeserving person eternal life in his presence through simple faith in his only begotten Son, Christ Jesus, need there be more? Vs. 11 calls our attention to the fact that our holy God can not be manipulated or misled. All of our motives "are made manifest (known) unto God," and Paul states that (because we are led of God's Holy Spirit), our consciences should likewise keep us informed about whether our actions and attitudes are pleasing to God, Gal. 5:16-18; Eph. 4:30. This leadership precludes the notion that we can please God by pleasing others with outward appearances. Paul implies that some are acting in such a way "and not in heart" (in reality before God), vs. 12. Paul admits that his determination to spread the Gospel could be interpreted as though he were not quite sensible. That determination also applied to his efforts to encourage other believers to grow in God's grace and reach maturity, vs. 13. Christ died for all, and therefore all need the Gospel and to believe it. After they believe, they should also "not live unto themselves" but share the Good News with others and live lives exemplifying the will of the Lord they confess. Before Paul's conversion (seeing God's light), he saw Jesus as just another human being, but as a believer he realized that he was wrong. When anyone accepts Jesus as the Christ (Savior), he or she becomes a new creation, and as a new creation in union with Christ, that believer has a completely new (another) orientation to what is worthwhile in life. This new being is the result of God's doing alone. He has made possible, through Christ, for anyone to be reconciled to himself. In fact, "God was in Christ to bring the world (eventually the whole world order will be transformed) back to himself, and through that new relationship (a believer through belief in Jesus Christ with God the Father) God will not impute (assign blame for) their trespasses (sins) against them," vs. 19. What a glorious thing our heavenly Father has done for us as trusters in Jesus Christ! We are therefore ambassadors (authorized messengers) for Christ, and as God's representatives, we are to tell the world that "God hath made him to be sin (that which separates people from God and makes them dead spiritually) for us, who (Jesus) knew no sin, that we might be made the righteousness of God in him," vs. 21.

I. First, we should make clear that "fellowship" is not the same as "associating with." When a believer fellowships with another believer, he or she is enjoying companionship with someone who has the same values, interests, and goals. That we believers should associate or mix socially with unbelievers is made clear, with emphasis, at John 17:11-20; I John 5:18-20. If we do not associate with unbelievers, how are we to be an influence for and witness to those for whom Christ died? With the above short introduction to the chief theme of this chapter of Paul's second Corinthian letter, we will now examine the first section of the chapter. In vs. 1 Paul states that servants of the Lord work together as pastors, evangelists, teachers [and, at the outset, apostles], and, I believe, included today would be all believers who profess Jesus as Savior and Lord of life. Particular attention should be given to the prepositional phrase "with him" which could be interpreted to mean that we believing witnesses are working with God in the process of building the ekklesia. Actually, that phrase is not in the original Greek text and was supplied by the translators as is indicated by italics in the King James version. Paul stated in the preceding 5:20 that we believers are ambassadors (representatives) for Christ in the world. The last part of 6:1 repeats the apostle's solicitation of the Corinthian believers to be mindful of God's rich and free grace which they have received and now enjoy. He begs them not to waiste their glorious positions as recipients of God's favor, "in vain." In vs. 2 he quotes God's Word in the first Covenant at Isa. 49:8 where God promised his people, the Jews, that there would be a time when God would, through them, bless all people of the earth through a new Covenant. Paul could have also quoted Isa. 42:6-10. The apostle is telling the believers at Corinth in 57-58 AD (and us in Tallahassee in our day) that we are living during God's "window of opportunity." The time is now when anyone can become a child of God (spiritually alive eternally) through accepting his only begotten Son, Jesus Christ, as Messiah, Savior. Now is the time acceptable to God, God's day of spiritual salvation. (See also John 9:4.) It is also in this period (age) that believers are not to be offensive (arrogant or belligerent) in their faith but humble, because our Lord, whose ambassadors we are, has set the example of humility, Phili. 2:8. We should live our lives so that our consciences are clear as we serve our Lord, "approving (commending) ourselves," vs. 4. We are to endure during times of afflictions while distressed, and even if we do not have basic necessities. If placed in prison, tortured, overworked, not getting enough sleep, or going without food, we, as believers and therefore servants of the Lord, are to live exemplary lives, be knowledgeable (keep a proper perspective of this temporary period in the flesh), be infinitely patient, be kind (We are still vulnerable humans.), be truly loving (not hypocritically), be guided by God's Word, God's power, and his Holy Spirit. Our armor is to be a dedication to do God's will in everything that we do, "on the right hand and on the left." As we do God's will, unbelievers will translate what is honorable in God's sight as dishonorable, goodness as evil, truth

as deception, spiritual mysteries as gobbledygook (Acts 2:12-14), one as dead even though spiritually alive forever, as punished by God but only suffering for his sake, as without joy but gloriously happy, as poor (according to worldly values) yet with the riches of heaven, as destitute yet lacking nothing of eternal value. Paul confesses to the Corinthian believers that he is relating his own position and experiences, and, in so doing, he is opening his very soul to their view, "our (believing servants of the Lord) mouth is open (I am telling it like it is.) unto you, our heart is enlarged (My most introspective thoughts are wide open for your inspection.). You are not without my most innermost sentiments so I hope that you will be likewise with me," vss. 11-13.

II. Paul bared his soul to the Corinthians as believers. He would not have been so frank with unbelievers, I believe. At vs. 14 and through the end of the chapter, the apostle emphasizes the importance of maintaining faithful lives in the midst of the large city, sinful Corinth. We have noted the immoral problems among those evil people and the influence those people were having on the believers in God's ekklesia. In I Cor. we learned that members were living in sexual immorality, suing one another in the pagan courts, socializing with unbelievers while they ate food dedicated to idols and thereby allied with idol worship, and some even believed that married living could, in and of itself, constitute immorality before God. For God's Word's contradiction of this position, see I Cor. 7:1-2. Paul, then, at the end of this chapter sought to increase the members of the local Corinthian congregation's loyalty to Jesus Christ and his teachings by emphasizing the need to fellowship together rather than with outsiders, unbelievers. Again, let's stress that Paul is not suggesting disassociating with those Corinthians who were not members of the group, but they were not to fellowship with them. Understanding the difference between associating with and fellowshipping with is crucial in knowing what God's Word is encouraging us believers to do in pleasing our Lord. A fellow is one who is allied with another in directions, purposes, and life's goals. The word "community" is akin to "fellowship," and so is "family." The idea is that a group of individuals hold (share) a core of common beliefs and live lifestyles according to those mutually accepted beliefs. We say that we are "in the world" but not "of the world" which expresses the proper idea of believers' separateness. We believers are God's dwelling, and we must take care not to invite into our beings contrary strangers who fight and oppose God's Holy Spirit's leading. Vs. 14 about being "unequally yoked" applies to practicing fellowship with unbelievers by believers. Some have applied this concept to married partners only, and while that application is a valid one, Paul (God's Word) is speaking, I believe, of all believers with all unbelievers for fellowship. In the experience of believers denominated Baptists in this country where all people are free to believe and publicly express and practice their beliefs without governmental interference, the Baptists of New Hampshire, in about the middle of the nineteenth century, compiled a local Church Covenant which many local Southern Baptist congregations use as a general guide for fellowship practice. I confess to having been influenced by this agreement as a youth. It is not a creed but is based upon Scripture and is spiritually motivated. It follows on the next page.



+ Church Covenant +

Having been led, as we believe by the Spirit of God, to receive the Lord Jesus Christ as our Saviour and, on the profession of our faith, having been baptized in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, we do now, in the presence of God, and this assembly, most solemnly and joyfully enter into covenant with one another as one body in Christ.

We engage, therefore, by the aid of the Holy Spirit to walk together in Christian love; to strive for the advancement of this church, in knowledge, holiness, and comfort; to promote its prosperity and spirituality; to sustain its worship, ordinances, discipline, and doctrines; to contribute cheerfully and regularly to the support of the ministry, the expenses of the church, the relief of the poor, and the spread of the gospel through all nations.

We also engage to maintain family and secret devotions; to religiously educate our children; to seek the salvation of our kindred and acquaintances; to walk circumspectly in the world; to be just in our dealings, faithful in our engagements, and exemplary in our deportment; to avoid all tattling, backbiting, and excessive anger; to abstain from the sale of, and use of, intoxicating drinks as a beverage; to be zealous in our efforts to advance the kingdom of our Saviour.

We further engage to watch over one another in brotherly love; to remember one another in prayer; to aid one another in sickness and distress; to cultivate Christian sympathy in feeling and Christian courtesy in speech; to be slow to take offense, but always ready for reconciliation and mindful of the rules of our Saviour to secure it without delay.

We moreover engage that when we remove from this place we will, as soon as possible, unite with some other church where we can carry out the spirit of this covenant and the principles of God's Word.

Nov. 10, 2002

"Confidence Restored"
II Cor. 7

Couples Class
Wendell Alford,
Teacher

I. Please remember that in Chap. 5 of I Cor. Paul asked the Corinthian congregation to withdraw fellowship from a member who was cohabiting with his father's wife (his stepmother). This constituted an incestuous and adulterous relationship which gave the congregation a glaringly immoral reputation even among Corinthian unbelievers. According to II Cor. 2, at the request of the group, he stopped his immoral activity. Paul then told the congregation that they ought to forgive, comfort and extend their love again to the repentant believer, I Cor. 2:7-8. The wayward believer's and the congregation's confidence in God's will for them was restored. This action of the group was a big factor in Paul's second letter, Chaps. 2:7-8 and 7:9-11. At the end of Chap. 6 Paul had quoted a passage from Isaiah asking for God's people not to fellowship (association was accepted) with unbelievers (heathen), because they (Jews) are to be the Creator God's children, sons and daughters of the Lord Almighty, 6:17-18. At the beginning of Chap. 7 Paul states, "Having therefore these promises, dearly beloved, let us cleanse ourselves from all filthiness of the flesh and spirit completing our holiness (separateness) as we live in awe (reverence) of God." Without doubt, God wants us believers to live Godly lives.

II. Because of the outcome of Paul's suggestions regarding the ungodly conduct of some believers in their congregation and their repenting of those sins, Paul can say that the favorable results indicate that he has "wronged no man, we have corrupted no man, we have defrauded no man," vs. 2. Neither has he personally taken advantage of the Corinthian congregation, because his heart lives or dies with their welfare, vs. 3. They were constantly in his thinking. Paul was so grateful for the congregation's repenting of their misdeeds and "cleaning up their act" that he was "filled with comfort" even though he was having a time of tribulation during the period before he could learn of their corrections. Beginning with vs. 5 the apostle relates how the news came to him. His first letter contained rather caustic accusations against their sinful activities. He had called them divided between different witnesses, Paul, Apollos, Cephas and Christ (I Cor. 1:10-17), "carnal, babes in Christ," I Cor. 3:1. His attention had been required up in Macedonia, and he had delayed writing this second letter until he had heard from Titus what the effects of the first letter would be. Titus reached Paul at Philippi and brought the good news that the Corinthian congregation had followed Paul's suggestion, and the guilty incestuous man had repented and had been received back into fellowship of the group. Titus had been longer in getting this good news to Paul, because the latter had left Ephesus and gone to Troas. While Titus was so long in coming, Paul debated whether he should have written the first letter at all. "For though I made you sorry with the letter, I do not repent (feel sorry), though I did repent, for I [had] perceived that the letter had made you sorry, though [as it turned out] it was but for a while." What Paul is saying, in effect, "Perhaps I should not have written such an abrupt letter after all, or maybe I really should have told them

in person." Paul loved them dearly, but above all he wanted them to please God. How happy he was when he learned that God had been in the entire episode and worked everything for his own glory. In retrospect Paul could say, "Now I rejoice," vs. 9. The remainder of the chapter is reiterating the apostle's great satisfaction in his having sent his admonitions, the Corinthian congregation's reaction to those admonitions, and how, with Titus' full explanation, he rejoiced in the outcome of it all. "I rejoice therefore that I have confidence in you in all things," vs. 16. He now knew that the Corinthian congregation was indeed following the leadership of God's Holy Spirit even as Paul was!

III. I want to use the remainder of today's lesson to take this incident (forgiving a repentant and changed believer) and build upon it the question having to do with the relationship of spiritual salvation (becoming a child of God through faith in his Son Jesus Christ) with works (doing good things which please God). Specifically, we examine God's Word at James 2:14, "What doth it profit, my brethern, though a man say (lip service) he hath faith, and have not works? Can faith save him?" James at 2:21,23-26 names two Old Covenant people (Abram, Rahab) who, according to James, were justified by works and not by faith only. Note in James 1:1 that James sent this letter to believing Jews, and his emphasis is in their tradition. Peter was likewise a messenger to the believing Jews primarily and was careful not to appear to intimidate his fellow Jews. Note Paul's reaction to Peter's emphasis on works (keeping the Law) in the following texts: Acts 15:1-11,13-20; Gal. 1:6-24; 2:1-21. Further, Peter alludes to Paul's different emphasis at II Pet. 3:15-16. The difference in emphases is noted rather directly when one compares James' personages, Abraham and Rahab, at James 2:21,25 with Paul's (I believe Paul wrote Hebrews.) emphasis of the same two people, Abraham and Rahab, at Heb. 11:8-9,17-19,31. At I Thes. 1:3 Paul uses an expression "work of faith and labor of love" emphasizes his dependency upon faith as the threshold of becoming a believer, and then hinging the believer's good works on his or her love for Christ. I believe the best way to reconcile what appears to be a conflict, rather than simply a difference in emphases, is to refer back to Jesus' statement at John 15:1-17. Here Jesus says that he is the vine and believers are the branches. The object of his statement is that branches cannot bear fruit (serve him) unless they are living on (in) the vine (Jesus Christ) which (who) furnishes the nourishment and also determines the type of fruit produced. If you think this analogy through, you cannot be nor produce the right kind of fruit (a true, reborn from above, child of God) unless you are on (in, have faith in) the right vine (Jesus Christ). Paul would say that (to emphasize faith) there would be no true fruit without the trunk, but James would say that (to emphasize good works) if the branches do not produce the right fruit, it is therefore evident that those branches are not growing on the right trunk. In this valid illustration both emphases are fitting and true. Living faith (that which saved) is spiritually alive and productive in doing God's will. Paul and James are both revealing God's Word, of course, to us believers. Fret not, God knows the difference between lip service and truth, the tares and the wheat, Matt. 13:24-30; Matt.5:12; 16:27; I Cor. 3:8,11-16.

Nov. 17, 2002

"Legal Stewardship"
Intro. II Cor. 8-9

Couples Class
Wendell Alford,
Teacher

I. From the very beginning of the establishing of his ekklesia by the Lord Jesus Christ, God's Holy Spirit has encouraged individual believers to express their love for what God has done for them by sharing their financial resources with others of the faith and with those who give full time to spreading the Good News message to those who have not heard. In fact, this and the next chapter are considered to be Paul's most explicit message on believer's stewardship. We discussed fellowship two weeks ago, and today and next Lord's Day we think about stewardship. Both words have the same suffix, "-ship," which is from the same word as "shape" and which means "things alike" or "in the same shape." One thinks of a group of people in a craft (a ship) on the ocean with each one at a given time dependent upon the craft for safety and for each to reach the same goal. We have an expression, "We are all in the same boat (ship)." Fellowship is akin to such a situation, and likewise, so are those engaged in stewardship together. The Bible tells us believers that we are all stewards (managers) of God's possessions (everything) which he entrusts to us. I have decided to approach the obligation and privilege of being, not only God's spiritual children through faith in Jesus Christ, but also managers of material possessions which he shares with us, by looking at such stewardship this week in the O.T and next week in the N.T.

II. Giving or dedicating gifts to God Almighty is first mentioned in Scripture when Abel and Cain both offered sacrifices to Jehovah God, Gen. 4:1-7. Cain as the older would have directed Abel's life had he done well (pleased God), but his offering was inferior to Abel's. Evidently Abel's offering was given in faith and Cain's was not, Heb. 11:4. The information would be nice, but we are not told explicitly about the differences in the gifts except that Abel's involved shedding blood (of animals), Cain's involved plant life, and that Abel's was given with faith in God. As mankind multiplied on the earth, giving to God out of gratitude for the Creator's protection and ample supply of material needs continued. Abraham conceived of an orderly method of returning for God's use a portion of God's blessings. In the Genesis account of Abraham's having overcome several kings (tribal chieftains) and then rescuing his nephew, Lot, from an enemy in the Sodom area, he (Abraham) gave the king of Salem (later Jerusalem) one-tenth (a tithe) of all the spoils taken from the kings defeated in battle. The king of Salem was Melchizedec, and the Bible states that he was "the priest of the most high God," and that he served Abram bread and wine, I Cor. 11:23-26. This mysterious Melchizedec is discussed in Heb. 5-10 as a priest of the Old Covenant whereas God the Father ordained his only begotten Son to be the sole priest of a New Covenant. That Son, Jesus Christ, is to be God's only priest forever, Heb. 10:1-25. On this point we shall embark next week, Lord willing.

III. Paul in his letter (God's Word) to the Galatian believers at 3:16-18 stated that the Covenant made with Abraham was based on Abraham's faith, not on the Law. This conclusion is obvious,

because Abraham believed God (had faith) and left Ur for the promised land 430 years before the Law was given to the Hebrews through Moses, Gal. 3:17. The patriarch's relationship with Jehovah God was established before he gave Melchizedec a tithe of his spoils of war. The tithe, then, as a formula for giving for God's purposes was established, by faith, long before the Law was given. However, the Law incorporated tithing as a proper portion of ones possessions to be given for God's purposes. The tithe was given in the Law for two purposes: one, for the physical support of the Levitical priests and God's feasts, etc., and, two, for caring for those with special needs, e.g., strangers (visitors), fatherless (orphans), and widows, Deut. 26:1-15. The Law states very clearly that tithing was to be done because of what God had done and was doing for the Hebrews, Deut. 26:16-19. Tithing had become an intricate part of God's Law which made God's people peculiar (special) in the earth. Not to keep the Law brought curses upon the individuals who spurned God's Law. The Levitical priests knew and admonished the other eleven tribes of the curses that would befall those who: made graven or molten images; treated ones parents with contempt; refused to honor anothers property rights; mistreated the physically handicapped; did not treat strangers, fatherless, or widows justly; did not honor his mother as his father's wife alone; related to beasts as sexual partners; had sexual relations with ones siblings or mother in law (or father in law); attacked his neighbor, even secretly; killed an innocent one for a bribe; and anyone who generally held the Law in contempt. The same priests then pronounced blessings upon all who would subscribe to and keep "the voice of the Lord thy God." The blessings included: prosperity for farmers and merchants; increase in children, crops, stock (cattle and sheep); safety in travel; power over their enemy neighbors (those who would do them harm from without); proficiency in their management abilities of all their affairs; a model position for all other peoples and nations; prosperity so abundant that other peoples will fear not to fashion their affairs after the same Laws of the Hebrews; and Israel will have so much wealth that borrowing will be unnecessary. All of these curses and blessings God promised the Israelites if they would abide by his Law, Deut. 27-28. Including in this Law was what we refer to as the Ten Commandments, Deut. 5:6-21.

IV. The above laws are only a portion of all the details of God's commandments in the Books of the Law, the Pentateuch. I have tried to indicate that God's desire for his people not only included tithing but also a host of choices which his people were to make to insure their being separate (holy) and acceptable to their Creator. The Law not only required a portion (a tithe) of ones possessions to be set aside for God's particular use in worshipping and praising him, but included laws also relating to food consumption, feasts, specific places which were to be considered holy unto God, treatment of slaves (Deut. 15:12-18), treatment of head of state (Deut. 17:14-20), provisions for the priestly group (Deut. 18:1-22), engaging in war (Deut. 20), individual property rights (Deut. 22:1-4), clothing (Deut. 22:5-12), marriage (Deut. 22:13-30), and many, many other admonitions. Note Jesus' words at Lk 11:42; John 7:19; 10:34; NEXT: "Volitional Stewardship," same II Cor. 8-9.

Nov. 24 2002

"Volitional Stewardship"
II Cor. 8-9

Couples Class
Wendell Alford,
Teacher

I. Last week we discussed the original flat tax in the history of mankind, the tithe, which was originated in and through our father of faith, Abraham, Rom. 4:1-2,9,16-25; Gal. 3:16-26,29. Note especially in these passages that plainly in Gal. 3:16 God's promise was made to Abraham through his seed, Jesus Christ, Heb. 11:39-40. Basic, then, to understanding pleasing God our spiritual Father in matters of the stewardship of possessions we should begin and rest finally upon Jesus' teachings on the subject. At Matt. 23:23 Jesus speaks of tithing by the Jewish religious leaders as a curse upon them, because they were meticulous in paying tithes even of small herbs used for food. In this statement about tithing he says, "Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for ye pay tithes of mint, anise and cummin, and have omitted (neglected) the weightier aspects of the law, judgment (justice), mercy, and faith: these (more important provisions of the Law) ye ought to have done, and not to leave the other undone." As we would say, "You are being hypocritical, because the tithing you do and emphasize in your teachings and acts as are required under the Law, are not to excuse you from meeting all of the Law's requirements," Jam. 2:10. Further, regarding stewardship of possessions, when Jesus was commending a certain widow at Mk 12:41-44, he did not mention tithing or other reference to the Law. Rather, he boasted of her sincerity and willingness to share, for God's purposes, her entire assets out of a spirit of volitional compassion. This point Paul makes precisely at II Cor. 8:8. In summary of Jesus' position on individual giving, I do not believe that he appealed to or based a proper system of giving by believers upon the legal prescription of tithing. His own specific reference to tithing by the scribes and Pharisees was given in a negative context, i.e., Jewish religious leaders were claiming to show their love of God by keeping the tithing portion of the Law when, in fact, Jesus called them hypocrites instead. Recall also that God's Word at John 1:17-18 states, "For the law was given by Moses, but grace and truth came by Jesus Christ. No man hath seen God at any time; the only begotten Son, which is in the bosom of the Father, he hath declared him." This deviation by Jesus from tithing as a basis of believers' stewardship is also emphasized at Lk 18:18-27. The one whom we have come to refer to as the "rich young ruler" could have been told by Jesus that to please God he should have been tithing, or, then and there given a tithe of his goods to the poor or the synagogue, and that this act would have made him qualified to enter the kingdom of God. He had, in his opinion, kept the commandments all his life. Jesus did not disagree with the young man, but did fault his stewardship and ask him to sell all that he had and become a follower (have faith in) the Lord. The young man refused (became very sorrowful), and Jesus expressed the control that material possessions can hold over even a very religious person. Speaking of this same human weakness Jesus said, "No man can serve two masters, for either he will hate the one, and love the other; or else he will hold (be loyal) to the one, and despise the other. Ye cannot serve God and mammon (riches)," Matt. 6:24. Obviously, Jesus is talking about

worshiping material possessions instead of God.

II. Now we come to Paul's "Sermon of Stewardship" in II Cor. 8-9. First, we must recognize that the specific collection which Paul was requesting from the Corinthian believers was for the poor believers in Jerusalem, Acts 15:25; Rom. 15:25-28; I Cor. 16:1-4. I believe it to be very interesting that not once in these discussions concerning raising and collecting offerings for God's work is the practice of tithing mentioned. The only mention of proportionate giving is in I Cor. 16:2, "Upon the first day of the week (the Lord's Day, Sunday) let every one of you lay (something aside) by him in store (in a safe place), as God hath prospered him, that there be no gatherings (collections) when I come." Since the collections were to go to aid the poor believers in Jerusalem, we would characterize such offerings as beneficent help for financially stressed (poor) fellow believers. I believe that this collection was an expression of love by primarily Gentile believers for Jewish believers over a long distance. Paul was, under God's direction, establishing a very vital position during the early ekklesia period: All of God's spiritual children through faith in God's Messiah (Saviour), Jesus, are in one spiritual family, whether Jews, Gentiles, men, women, Asians, Europeans, etc., Gal. 3:28-29. Stewardship in God's family during the entire period when God is calling out his ekklesia means much more than building houses for worship, supporting staffs to serve local congregations, maintaining headquarters facilities for denominational leaders along with staffs there, etc. If all this fellowship stewardship does not express love for Jesus Christ and his spiritual family, the results are only monuments to human vanity. Stewardship in God's activities is a very serious challenge for believers. One of the most spectacular passages in the Bible, for me, is the Holy Spirit's leadership regarding believers' stewardship at Acts 5:1-11. A couple, Ananias and Sapphira his wife, were inspired by an act of stewardship by Barnabas in donating a sum to the Jerusalem congregation. He (Barnabas) sold his property (land) and gave it all for the support of the local group. Ananias and Sapphira likewise sold a piece of land and gave only a portion of the money to the congregational leaders. However, they lied by saying that they had donated the entire purchase price. The results of their lying were that Ananias lied to congregational leaders first and fell down dead. He was buried immediately. Three hours later Sapphira, not knowing what had happened to her husband, was asked by Peter whether they had been truthful about giving the total purchase price of the property. She said that they had told the truth. She fell down dead also, and the men took her body and buried her in the plot by her husband. "And great fear came upon as many as heard these things," Acts 5:11. Their deaths were the result of having lied to the Holy Spirit about their stewardship. A believer's stewardship is a serious concern of God. According to Jesus' words (I repeat) at Matt. 6:24, "Ye cannot serve God and riches." Having faith in the Lord assures a believer that his or her needs will be met, Matt. 6:33. When we manage (are stewards of) our material affairs properly, as the Holy Spirit leads, God is supporting both the substance and managerial ability. At II Cor. 8:8 Paul said that he spoke "not by commandment" (tithing?), but as he had seen the Holy Spirit's leading in others (the Macedonians). Do not give sparingly but volitionally (not of necessity or grudgingly), because God loves a joyful giver, II Cor. 9:6-7. Following the Spirit's leadership must be constant and consistent.

Dec. 8, 2002

"Opposition To Simple Belief"
II Cor. 10

Couples Class
Wendell Alford,
Teacher

I. Beginning with Chap. 10 and on through the remainder of this second letter, Paul gives considerable attention to those who oppose his simple Gospel message. His opposition was exercised primarily on the basis of what is learned in the university course Philosophy 101 as ad hominem (to the man) argument. In practice the strength of such a position appeals to a person's feelings or prejudices rather than to his or her intellectual ability. In God's Word at Isa. 1:18 when Isaiah was being commissioned by God as a prophet, the Lord told Isaiah, "Come let us reason together, saith the Lord, 'though your sins be as scarlet, they shall [affirmation] be as white as snow; though they be red like crimson, they shall be as wool.'" In this, God's vision to Isaiah, the Lord appealed to mankind's intellect which God created with humanity and which God reserved for the pinnacle of his creation, humankind. Intellectual ability was a part of mankind's image and likeness of the Creator. This ad hominem argument was also used by the Jewish leaders in presenting our Lord to the Roman authorities for the death sentence, Acts 2:22-23,36; 3:13-17. Pilate at Mk 15:9-15 realized that the Jews were only seeking to get rid of Jesus rather than for any real criminal action (humanly speaking) which Jesus had done. "But Jesus answered nothing: so that Pilate marvelled," Mk 15:3-5, Isa. 53:7-10. Jesus was characterized by "meekness and gentleness" as Paul notes in vs. 1. This characterization is preceded by (II Cor. 9:14-15) the apostle's prayer for the Corinthian's having received the "exceeding grace of God" demonstrated by God's having spiritually saved them and guaranteed them, eternal life in God's presence. "Thanks be unto God for his indescribable gift."

II. Paul was very pleased to identify with his (and our) Lord Jesus Christ. His opponents were telling the Corinthians that this fellow Paul has you people fooled. He really is trying to gain materially from you. He is nothing special but walks "according to the flesh" like everybody else, vs. 2. In vss. 4-5 Paul states that he is not even fighting earthly battles, "of the flesh," but he is fighting God's spiritual battles with eternal consequences. He is fighting by and through God's strength spiritual "strong holds," casting down imagined arguments and every humanly important thing. His conclusion at the end of vs. 5 is that believers should "bring into captivity every thought to the obedience of Christ." Remember that Jesus said, "If a person love me, he will keep my words; and my Father will love him, and we will come unto him, and make our home with him [in the person of God's Holy Spirit]," John 14:23. Paul was said by his critics to be less than handsome and statuesque as one would be if favored by God. This view reminds one of Isa. 53:2 where the promised Messiah (Savior) would not appear according to the world's standards, i.e., pleasant in outward appearance. "For he shall grow up as a tender plant, and as a root out of a dry ground: he hath no stately form nor splendor; and when we shall see him, there is no beauty (appearance) that we should desire him." I do not believe that this means that Jesus was ugly physically, but that he was not what the Jews or the other people of the world

expect in a hero, a typical corrector of the world's ills. Jesus also said, "Come unto me, all ye that labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn of me; for I am meek and lowly (gentle and humble) in heart: and ye shall find rest unto your souls, for my yoke is easy, and my burden is light," Matt. 11:29-30. Further, Jesus told Peter just before Jesus was crucified to put his (Peter's) sword away, for that (force) was not the proper way for people to conduct their affairs, John 18:10-11. In other words, from the very beginning of mankind's creation God has not forced his will upon anyone. God wants to be accepted in the will (freely) of every person. In the last chapter of God's Word exercising of ones free will for God is paramount, "And let him that heareth say, Come - - - And whosoever will (desires), let him take the water of life freely," Rev. 22:17. Man's way is to buy a gun or enlist an armed force and force his own way upon others, but Jesus said, "Blessed (happy) are the meek: for they shall inherit the earth," Matt. 5:5. The kingdom of God is now being formed of those who have faith in Jesus Christ as God's Savior (the ekklesia), and the culmination of all of human history will see the establishment of God's kingdom over which all the earth will be under Jesus' kingship.

III. The apostle was convinced that God's way and will for mankind was not being practiced by the earth's population in general. Further, before the end, mankind's being fooled would be increased, II Thess. 2:2-12. In Gal. 1:4 Paul states that Jesus died to deliver us believers "from this present evil world (age) according to the will of God [who is] our Father." (See also Jam. 4:4 and I John 2:15-17.) The apostle was, in Chap. 10, defending his position on spiritual reality against those who would judge him on normal, worldly values, but see what Jesus said at Matt. 20:25-28 about forcing others to conform to their own position by worldly (Gentile) methods rather by example through serving others. The Corinthian believers were being told that Paul was being forceful in his letters (Remember that these letters were and are God's Word.), but appeared and sounded weak in person. Those who opposed Paul's simple presentation of God's Gospel made the Gospel sophisticated and complicated. Paul simply "glorified in the Lord," not in his own ability, vs. 17. Self-glory (self-righteousness) is not to be the goal of a believer, but "whom the Lord commendeth," vs. 18. Paul could have been more authoritative had he stressed God's justice, but he (Paul) made his appeal on the basis of God's compassion, Christ's gentleness. The apostle was right to present, of course, the Gospel with this emphasis, because God's justice had already been met by Christ's becoming sin for us. "For he [God] hath made him [Jesus Christ] to be sin for us, who knew no sin; that we might be made the righteousness of God in him," II Cor. 5:21. The simplicity of the Good News of God in Jesus Christ is that the most valuable possession any human can have is eternal life through faith in God's only Savior, his only begotten Son. No one can earn that condition (be spiritually salvaged), for it comes only through God's free grace, his unmerited favor, Rom. 6:23; Eph. 2:4-10. Paul could have made a poor appearance and given a poor presentation in the minds of some, but his message was and is pure gold, so pure that it can be used to pave the very streets of God's heaven, Rev. 21:21.

Dec. 15, 2002

"The Finality of the Gospel"
II Cor. 11

Couples Class
Wendell Alford,
Teacher

I. Truly it would be difficult to overemphasize the importance of God's communication to us in this Chap. 11 of Paul's second letter to the believers at Corinth. Some Bible students assign Paul's personality as haughty, proud, overly circumspect, sexist, and even spiritually aristocratic. However, this portion of the letter demonstrates Paul's personal modesty, for he, in realizing that eternal, unadulterated truth was being proclaimed through him, was careful to make clear "the wretched man that he was! who shall deliver me from this body of death? I thank God through Jesus Christ our Lord," Rom. 7:24-25. Vs. 1 is soliciting from the Corinthians the reality that though he was a mortal human being, his simple message of faith in Christ should nonetheless be accepted as the whole and complete promise of God. The apostle was jealous about those who would discredit the simplicity of the Good News of God through Christ. His jealousy was a "Godly jealousy," for he had "espoused them to one husband" ready to be presented as a "pure virgin" unto Christ, vs. 2; Rev. 21:1-4. In vss. 3, 13-15 Paul weaves into his thoughts (from God) the part Satan plays in continually seeking to distract believers from the truth of God through Jesus his Savior. As Satan deceived Eve in God's paradise, Eden, so does he attempt to "corrupt the minds of believers," corrupted "from the simplicity that is in Christ," vs. 3. It is important for us to note that Satan had captured the minds and imaginations of some who were presenting themselves as God's apostles, but who were, in fact, representing Satan himself rather than God Almighty. Simply put, these representatives of Satan are "false apostles, deceitful workers, transforming themselves into the apostles of Christ. And no marvel (Don't be surprised!); for Satan himself can transform himself into an angel (messenger) of light (truth). Therefore, it is no great thing if his ministers (servants) also be transformed as ministers of righteousness; whose end shall be according to their works (deception)," vss. 13-15. We have noted before in this class that there are good and bad angels. That truth is based upon Jesus' statement at Matt. 25:41 where the Lord said that hell is "prepared for the devil and his angels." The deception is earmarked by those who claim and act as though they are God's apostles, i.e., that they speak for and are representatives of God when they are really serving Satan and his rebellion against our heavenly Father. We should remember that Satan tried desperately to influence our Lord himself at the beginning of his special service period, Matt. 4:1-11. We should again note that this deception (of which Paul speaks in II Cor. 11) began during the apostolic period (when God's Word was being given and codified in writing), and his Word states that the deception would continue until the culmination of the ekklesia period, II Thess. 2:7; Jude 4,17-18; Rev. 2:2. There have been no apostles of God following what we refer to as the Apostolic Period during which God was codifying his Word, I believe. But there are those who claim to be God's apostles as God's special representatives on the earth and who claim to speak God's Word with the same authority as the Bible itself. Beware!

II. In vs. 4 the apostle (God's Word) says, "For if he that cometh preacheth another Jesus, whom we (Paul and the other true apostles) have not proclaimed, or if you receive another spirit, which you have not received, or another gospel, which ye have not accepted, ye might bear with him." Paul is at this point being facetious as he chides the Corinthian believers about even considering that Christ is not the same yesterday, and today, and forever, Heb.13:7-9. Paul is saying, in effect, "My apostleship is authentic and my message is not to be transcended by any other "apostle" even though he takes your money as though his message were correct and mine wrong, in need of change or is incomplete. It is true that I did not charge you but lived with the support from other congregations in Macedonia. However, because you did not financially support me does not mean that I do not love you genuinely. God knows my position to be upright and true. My lack of personal attention to you there in Corinth has been caused by God's priority in my efforts in Achaia. Do not let my absence deter you from the simple Gospel which you first heard from me and which others (these false "apostles") are trying to usurp by changing. If I appear to be a fool (sound foolish), let me, through personal testimony, prove that which has happened as God has directed me. Since you have put up with these false "apostles," let me sincerely tell you what they are trying to do to you. They have brought you again into religious bondage (put you under the Law's requirements), have devoured (captivated) you (with teachings outside God's generous grace), have taken your money, have exalted themselves above everyone else - including Paul, and have even slapped your faces (the height of Jewish humiliation - see Lk 22:64; Acts 23:1-5), vs. 20. If these false "apostles" are approaching you with such boldness, I will likewise present my credentials (I speak foolishly - as one seeking base, human fame.), vs. 21. Are they Hebrews (Jews)? So am I! Are they members of the Israelite nation? So am I! Are they offspring of Abraham? So am I! Are they servants of Christ? I am a better servant (again I speak foolishly). I have labored with greater results, have suffered more beatings (more than I can remember), have been imprisoned more frequently, and have been very afraid of being killed more often. Five times have the Jews beaten me with the maximum thirty-nine strikes, three times beaten with rods, once stoned, three times shipwrecked, and spent twenty-four hours in the sea water. I have traveled extensively by sea and on land in danger of robbers, Jews, Gentiles, and those who claimed to be believers, [but obviously were misled]! Those who would brag about their humility are no meeker than I, for if I need to glory, it would be because of my suffering in order to spread God's Good News in and through Jesus, my Lord. The God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ knows the truth of my testimony." Lastly, Paul relates how he escaped from Damascus just following his new found faith in Jesus Christ as Lord. There the Jewish authorities tried to capture him, and he escaped through a window in the wall around the city of Damascus. The Jews apparently did not take lightly his acceptance of Jesus as the Messiah, and enlisted the civil authorities to try to capture him. Paul practiced on this occasion what we call "civil disobedience."

Dec. 22, 2002

"To Heaven And Return"
II Cor. 12-13

Couples Class
Wendell Alford,
Teacher

In vs. 1 Paul sets the stage for a revelation which God had afforded him that was still vivid in his memory some fourteen years after it occurred. Remember in the last two lessons we noted that the apostle was reluctantly and modestly promoting his own position, because his opponents (false "apostles") were announcing Paul's message to be too simple and lacking in finality, i.e., his Gospel message needed "fleshing out" and more sophistication, II Cor. 11:3. Something as far reaching and important as pleasing God for eternal life must require ones earning at least part of the goal. Jesus' part only provided the beginning of spiritual salvation, and after accepting him, a believer must earn the rest of the package, II Cor. 11:19-20. Now in Chap. 12 Paul expresses what is perhaps his most vital spiritual experience apart from his Damascus Road acceptance of Jesus as God's Messiah, Savior of believers' spirits. In both of those experiences Paul had physical difficulties. On the Damascus Road he was blinded and went into Damascus led by a helper to the house of one Ananias who aided Paul in receiving his sight and immersed him, Acts 9:17-18. In the portion of God's Word which we are considering today, Paul tells of a physical setback which apparently affected his activities for the remainder of his physical life. In vs. 2 he recalls the incident which had happened some fourteen years previously. At that time Paul and Barnabas entered Iconium during the former's second missions journey, and they were literally chased out of town. In the nearby towns of Lystra and Derbe, where in Lystra the apostle was used of God to heal a man who had not walked since birth. The man leaped to his feet, and the people believed Paul and Barnabas to be gods, Mercury and Jupiter. The local priests of Jupiter aroused the local citizenry, and Jews from Antioch and Iconium stoned Paul so badly that he was left for dead along the road outside Lystra. They dragged him farther away from the city and supposed that they had ended this leader of this awful "false sect" of Judaism. After the persecutors had left him for dead and returned to the city, some believers came to bury him (stood about him), but "he rose up, came back to the city, and left the next day with Barnabas," Acts 14:6-20.

II. How long Paul lay there on the outskirts of Lystra before his believing friends came to him, we are not told. It is very reasonable to believe that the experience which the apostle reveals here in Chap. 12 of II Cor. occurred at that time. Normally he would not have related this marvelous experience had he not thought that these false apostles' false criticism needed abrupt and emphatic reminders that God was directing his life. Ordinarily Paul would not have considered it to be "profitable for him to boast about this special vision and revelation of the Lord," vs. 1. Then he outlines what happened, I believe, to him there outside Lystra fourteen years before. Whether he remained in his body or not, he could not tell, but he was sure that God knew and was in control of the situation. The apostle was caught up to the "third heaven." Further, he was carried into paradise where he heard and saw that which is inexpressible in human terms and which he felt compelled

(was not permitted) to withhold from others. Paul goes on to say, in effect, "I could boast about this experience, but really this and other blessings I have received have been the results of my weakness and what some would classify as terrible misfortunes," vs. 5. "If I claimed that my ability to escape death were from my own valor and ingenuity, people would see in me characteristics which belong only to my Lord Jesus Christ," vs. 6. Immediately following his relating this Lystra experience, Paul refers to what he calls his "thorn in the flesh," vs. 7. It is not unreasonable to relate being stoned to death (as was supposed by the stone throwers) to believing that Paul's physical well being was marred permanently. Could he have been mauled about the face with damage to his eyes, nose, and mouth? If so, this damage could have adversely affected his ability to see, to speak clearly, or his normal facial appearance, Gal. 4:12-15. At any rate, whatever the "thorn in the flesh" was, Paul had fervently requested God three times to remove the disadvantages from him. The Lord refused and told him, "'My grace is sufficient for thee: for my power is made complete (perfect) in [your] weakness.' Most gladly therefore will I rather glory in my weaknesses, that the power of Christ may rest upon me. I take pleasure in infirmities - - for when I am weak, then am I strong [through Christ]," vss. 9-10.

III. As modest as Paul was attempting to be in presenting his credentials (testimony) concerning his qualifications as an apostle, he feels it necessary to state that "in nothing am I behind the very chiefest apostles, though I be nothing [to these false apostles]. Truly the signs (evidence) of an apostle were demonstrated in your presence: perseverance, miracles, wonders (Acts 15:12) and mighty deeds (Acts 14:8-10; 16:16-18; 19:11-12; 20:6-12; 28:1-10) have all been performed [through God's power]." Apostles were commissioned and empowered by God to heal, raise the dead and to speak languages which they could not otherwise speak (without God's special gift). As an apostolic missionary, Paul was required to speak Latin, Greek and Hebrew as well as dozens of dialects spoken in the areas where he proclaimed the Gospel. In fact, Paul's linguistic abilities were used extensively by God in recording God's Holy Word for the generations following the apostolic period. In vs. 13 the apostle again mentions the fact that he, during his eighteen months of service at Corinth, did not receive food and lodging from the congregation. Evidently the Corinthians felt badly that he had not asked them for support as he had at other locations, at Philippi for example. Neither did Paul nor any of his associates ask the Corinthians for support, and he now says that he is coming back for a third visit and will not expect help then either. He states that his chief concern was the spirits of the congregational members, not their finances. As Paul put it, "for children ought not to lay up for the parents, but the parents for the children," vs. 14b. He wanted so much for the Corinthian congregation to be lovers of Jesus Christ and to express that love by keeping the Lord's teachings, John 14:23. Not one of us today can testify that he or she has suffered for our faith as was required of Paul, God's apostle, but we can strive to live as the Lord Jesus taught and be thankful that we serve a loving, merciful and forgiving Lord.

Dec. 22, 2002

"Examine Yourselves"
II Cor. 12-13

Couples Class
Wendell Alford,
Teacher

I. In this last chapter of his second letter to the Corinthian believers the apostle Paul introduces a quote from Deut. 19:15 where Moses relates God's laws to Israel just before they were to enter the Promised Land. The disputes or bad deportment among the members of the Corinthian congregation was to be examined in the presence of God's especially commissioned apostle, Paul. Decisions were to be made about corrections on his next visit. Those members who had sinned were not only responsible for the adverse effects upon the congregation's witness in Corinth, but also the entire group was wrong for not having corrected the errors, vs. 2. Paul here issues a forewarning to the congregation that his third visit will be a time of "catch up" for tying up the immoral "loose ends" which were outstanding. A time for an inspection was soon coming. In giving consideration for proper preparation for this time of evaluation of their "faith maturation," the apostle admonished them to review his teachings of Jesus to them during his eighteen months with them just following his founding the ekklesia at Corinth. Paul's appeal to them was not to his own strength but his message, the truth in Jesus Christ, vs. 3. God in Jesus Christ had exposed himself to the creatures of his creation as weak and helpless. The Potter had been willing to permit the clay, mankind, to take the physical life of his only begotten Son and by crucifying him in a most dastardly manner publicly. Paul then identifies the truth of the message which he had delivered to them originally and by which, believing, they had become followers of God's Holy Spirit and children of God. As the apostle put it: "You Corinthian members of God's ekklesia, the bride of Christ, are such because of my witness to you. If I am a weak, false apostle [as some claim me to be], then your faith is resting on a false foundation (message). But remember that Christ Jesus also gave every appearance of being weak (smitten of God, Isa. 53:3-4) before the Heavenly Father resurrected him to life anew, John 1:10-11; Acts 2:22-24, 29-33. This resurrection by God Almighty is absolute and conclusive proof that Jesus was not weak as many supposed. Your (Corinthians') spiritual rebirth from above (by God) is decisive proof that my message to you gives credence to my having been commissioned and sent by God as an apostle to speak for God to you," vss. 3-4.

II. In vs. 5 Paul tells the Corinthian believers to, "Examine yourselves, whether ye be in the faith; prove your own selves. Know ye not your own selves, how that Jesus Christ is in you, even though you may appear to be disqualified?" The verse designations here make it easy to take this quote out of context. Paul's (God's) communication to the Corinthians (and us) is that their (our) being true believers certifies Paul's apostleship as noted in I above and to us that Paul's writing is the very Word of God. In fact, we need only God's Word to assure us that we are God's children with eternal life through our faith in his only Son, Christ Jesus. The clause, "except ye be reprobates" ending vs. 5 is properly translated, "unless you don't stand the test." But in vs. 6 he assures them that they do stand the test, because Paul's word is

God's Word. Therefore, "we are not reprobates." Only some of the believers who were not behaving like God's children "may seem to be disqualified," end of vs. 7. One of the congregational members had been cohabiting with his father's wife. Others were claiming allegiance to Paul, Apollos, Peter or Christ rather than being unified around their faith in Jesus Christ alone. Recall that in Chap. 2 the man who had been living with his stepmother against God's will repented, changed his life style accordingly and was accepted back into the fellowship of the congregation with the apostle Paul's blessing and approval after he began "faithing" properly again, II Cor. 2:6-10. The man never ceased being God's child, but for a time he was not behaving as a child of God should, I Cor. 5:1-5,13. It is proper for us believers to "examine ourselves" periodically to test our lives whether our testimonies are properly reflecting our relationship with our Lord as given in God's Word. Are we following the leading of God's Holy Spirit? In vs. 7 Paul admitted that he had prayed to God that the Corinthian believers would grow strong and live spiritually mature lives, not to garner praise for himself (Paul) as one who had first introduced them to God's love in Christ, but that the members would demonstrate honestly that they were God's obedient children. They should live holy lives even though they seemed to be disqualified, at times, to be true believers (appeared to be reprobates), vs. 7b. It is impossible for one to deny the truth. We cannot deny what God has promised those who have placed their trust for eternal life upon Christ Jesus, "For we can do nothing against the truth," vs. 8.

III. Paul repeats his earlier statement that he rejoices in his own weakness realizing that, even though he himself appears weak, their acceptance of his message (God's Word) can enable them to grow in God's grace until they are mature (perfect, complete), vs. 9. It is for this very purpose that Paul has written this letter to them in his absence. He feared that in person (weak in appearance and oratory skills) he would appear to be judgmental in exercising his prerogatives as one commissioned by God, an apostle. The Lord wanted Paul to edify (encourage) the Corinthian congregation so that they would mature, not be destroyed (discouraged) through humiliation vs. 10. (See also Eph. 6:4; Col. 3:21.) Finally, Paul closes the letter with his usual admonitions to those who had come to accept Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord. "Farewell. Be perfect (complete, mature), be of good comfort [Do not be fearful, because your glorious future is as firm and sure as the promises of God through Jesus Christ.], be of one mind [Do not consider anyone of you or any group of you to be committed to any being other than God's Son, the Lord Jesus Christ.], live in peace [Your spirits are safe, 'And the peace of God, which passeth all understanding, shall keep (guard) your hearts and minds (emotions and thoughts) through Christ Jesus,' Philip. 4:7.], and the God of love and peace shall be with you. Greet one another with a holy kiss." This last admonition was in accord with the then current display of close, familial affection. It demonstrated that the members looked upon each other as members of a spiritual family. Paul wanted so much this feeling of love and oneness among the members of the local congregation, because that is what their Heavenly Father wanted even as he does ours today. Today our manner of expressing the same love and oneness is the "right hand of a believer's fellowship."

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