Blessings to you in the name of Jesus our Lord

*For everyone who partakes only of milk is not accustomed to the word of righteousness, for he is an infant. But solid food is for the mature, who because of practice have their senses trained to discern good and evil.*

 Hebrews 5:13-14

One does not have to have great knowledge of the Bible to be saved. All that takes is faith in Jesus as our Christ and Lord and Saviour. And that is a good and merciful thing because so many in the world don’t have Bibles or even preachers to tell them about the word.

But for those of us who do have access to God’s word, we have the responsibility to dig into it and learn. Reading the Bible is good; but we will be so much better off if we study it. This means reading slowly and thinking about what we have read. It means praying for the Holy Spirit to give us understanding. It means checking other sources be they books or other Christians.

In this way, we develop our teeth and systems so that we may handle God’s word rightly and be able to trust and act on what we read. The word of God is our offensive weapon, it is the sword of the Spirit. If it is not sharp, it will not be of much use to us.

Evil is subtle and deceptive; the Bible tells us that satan can appear as an angel of light. Proverbs tells us that wisdom calls to us from the gates, but so does folly. How can we tell the difference between wisdom and folly; how can we discern that the bright angel before us is actually satan? How can we catch the tricks and traps of evil?

It is all by the study of God’s word and putting it into practice. And we will have plenty of practice.

In Christ’s love

John

 01-15-23

Luke 4:16-21

Sometimes, as we go about anything we do in life, we need to reconsider what is basic. That also goes for the Christian life and Christian beliefs. As we are sanctified and as we learn more about Jesus and salvation and all the Bible has for us, it is easy to forget foundational elements. I think we all know that the foundation is important. Probably the most basic element of the Christian life is the Gospel.

The Gospel is so simple, yet so profound. We can easily explain it to someone in just a few minutes, but as we continue to grow in our Christian faith, we learn how far reaching it is; how far it spreads throughout God’s word and our lives; how it ties so many things together; and how complex it really is. It is amazing that we can understand only a fraction of the Gospel, accept it, and be saved. The rest of our lives can be spent in gaining a deeper understanding of what the Gospel entails.

This dual simplicity and complexity is a powerful indication that it comes from an all-powerful God; the God of the Bible. The Gospel comes out of the private council of the infinitely wise Trinity from eternity past; its full implications will probably never be completely understood by us.

Very simply, the word “Gospel” means “good news”. The word actually comes from the old English “Godspell”, where god (long o) means “good” and spell means “tale”. The word is equivalent to the Greek word “evangel”, and the Latin word “evangelium”. All these words and their families refer to good news; and for the Christian, they mean the good news of Jesus Christ.

The Bible lets us know that we need good news; and that is because there is such terribly bad news for us as we are. It is important for us to have an understanding of how bad things really are, so that we appreciate how good the Gospel is; and also, so that we take it seriously. The world is full of people who don’t appreciate what deep trouble we are all in and they will receive the dire consequences for eternity.

While we can’t comprehend what good news the Gospel really is, likewise we will probably not be able to comprehend how bad the bad news really is. But we sitting here today, need to have a good grasp of these things; both for our own good, and for sharing the Gospel with others.

First, we must have the understanding that the God of the Bible is real. Our first evidence is the natural world. In Romans chapter 1, Paul talks about those who deny God and suppress the truth that He exists. In verse 20 he says, “*For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes, His eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly seen, being understood through what has been made, so that they are without excuse.*” If we truly consider the world and the universe, the only conclusion that makes perfect sense is that there is an all-powerful creator who has put everything in place.

In the Garden of Eden, Adam and Eve had access to God in person. In that setting, while they were still sinless, they could get to know God through personal interaction with Him. But with the entrance of sin in the world, people could no longer interact with God directly. In order for us to know more about God, we have to receive special revelation.

In His mercy, God spoke to us through His prophets and apostles. The Bible is our special revelation. From it comes our knowledge of God’s attributes and of the Gospel. Not everyone has a Bible; that’s why it is so important for us to spread the Gospel verbally.

In God’s special revelation to us, we learn that God is perfectly holy. This means that He will not accept sin of any kind. We learn that He is perfectly just. This means that, as Creator, He must punish any and all sin. The Bible also reveals that God is infinite. He is all-powerful, all-knowing, and exists in all places. This means that we, as finite beings, would have to suffer for eternity to pay the price for sinning against an infinite God.

The place of suffering where people pay the consequence of their sin is called hell or the lake of fire. The Bible describes it as a place of unquenchable fire and darkness and isolation. Is this a literal description of hell? It doesn’t matter. Whatever hell is, it is at least as bad as the Bible describes. It is not a place we want to be at all, let alone spend eternity there.

Here is the bad news: This is the destination for all of us when left on our own. The Bible is clear about this. Clear back in Genesis 6, God made note of the condition of our heart. Verse 5 says, “*Then the Lord saw that the wickedness of man was great on the earth, and that every intent of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually.*” That was a long time ago and it was even before the flood; but mankind has not changed. In Romans 3:23 Paul tells us, “*for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God*”.

No matter how good we try to be, we will fail. That is because we are born with a sin nature. We are naturally drawn to sin. We are rebellious and we don’t want to do what God wants us to do. Our sin nature comes from our first parents, Adam and Eve. With complete free-will, they chose to rebel against God.

With their first act of rebellion, sin and evil were let into the world; and all of us are affected. As we are told in Romans 5:18, “*through one transgression there resulted condemnation to all men*”. In other words, all of us are now condemned through the one act of Adam and Eve. This is known as “original sin”. Even though we weren’t even present with Adam as we are now, we were already there in his genetic makeup. In his “loins”, so to speak. This idea is verified in Hebrews chapter 7 where the tribe of Levi is said to have paid tithes to Melchizedek since they were in the loins of Abraham.

We are sinful from our very beginning. Psalm 51:5 says, “*Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity, And in sin my mother conceived me.*” Even though we tend to think of young children as innocent, they are not. No parent has to teach their child to lie, steal, or be defiant; all these things come naturally. This is the sin nature that resides in all of us. Because of that sin nature, all are condemned to hell.

We may ask how we can be condemned when we can’t help our nature. The reason is because even though our inclination is to sin, we still make the decision each time we do. In making the decision to sin, we are then responsible; our condemnation is just, and punishment must be carried out.

God warned Adam that to disobey Him would bring death. When he disobeyed, Adam suffered an immediate separation from God; a spiritual death. Years later, he suffered a physical death. All of us share in these same deaths. Death is the consequence of sin. But there is more. Hebrews 9:27 tells us, “*it is appointed for men to die once and after this comes judgment*”. So, because of sin, we will all die. But once we die, we face the judgement of God. This is where He will give out the punishment our sins deserve. But we already know the sentence: Eternity in hell.

All of this paints a very bleak picture. It is a true and a very serious bleak picture. Hebrews 10:31 puts it very well*: It is a terrifying thing to fall into the hands of the living God.* In a nutshell, we don’t stand a chance unless someone helps us.

This is where the Gospel comes in. The good news is that Someone has offered us help; and that Someone is God Himself. Very simply, God the Son was born Jesus, a human-being in every way except sin. He suffered the punishment we all deserve in our place. He took our punishment for us. The requirement we have now is to believe on Him as our means of salvation; trust in the work He has done for us; stake our eternity on Him. Period.

When we believe on Him, because we still sin, He has covered us with His own righteousness; so we can once more have fellowship with God; we are spiritually alive again; reborn. God has done it all; and so, we can have hope.

Let’s look into this a little more. Faith is the absolute here. In the Old Testament it was faith in God, now it is faith in Jesus Christ. But as Jesus said in John 10:30, “*I and the Father are one.”* So, just as we read in Genesis 15:6 “*Then [Abraham] believed in the Lord; and He reckoned it to him as righteousness*,” we also read in John 3:16 “*For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life*.”

As we read through God’s special revelation to us, the apostles make it clear that salvation only comes through belief in Jesus Christ. The Roman centurion Cornelius wanted to know the way to salvation and Peter responded, “*Of [Jesus] all the prophets bear witness that through His name everyone who believes in Him receives forgiveness of sins*.” When the jailor in Philippi asked what he must do to be saved, Paul and Silas replied, *“Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household.”*

To be saved means to be saved from hell. The Gospel comes down to faithful belief in Jesus Christ. It is strictly by believing in Jesus that one is saved; it has nothing to do with good works, church attendance, giving of alms or anything else. It is only through faith in Jesus.

Now, my beloved brothers and sisters in Christ, I must wade into a thorny issue. What does “believe” mean in the context of salvation. I ask you to look into your Bibles and study the things I bring up.

First off, God knows what is going on in a person’s heart. If that person truly believes in Jesus, they are saved. I think it is possible for a person to believe in Jesus, yet demonstrate little life change. However, that person is resisting the Holy Spirit and causing Him grief. There will be no reward in heaven.

How about those who give an intellectual assent to Jesus being real. They believe that Jesus was really here on earth but that He was simply a good person, teacher of righteousness, or even prophet. Does that belief save someone? If we simply take the English word “believe” at its face value, then yes, those people would be saved. I hope they are, because there are a lot of people in that category.

However, I truly fear for their salvation. The indications of the Bible are that belief involves more than what the English word conveys by itself. The Greek word translated “believe” certainly has the idea of acknowledging something or someone exists. But it also contains the idea of trust; of trusting in what you believe in. It involves a commitment to the person you believe in. There is the strong presence of faith in the one believed in.

Putting this together with believing in Christ for salvation means that you not only believe He exists, but that you specifically trust in the work He has done on your behalf; that you commit your life to Him because He is your Lord and Master; and that your faith is in Him. You believe that He alone saves you.

We have these things from the definition of the Greek word; but let’s look at Scripture. Here are some terrifying words from Jesus in Matthew 7:21-23. “*Not everyone who says to Me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father who is in heaven will enter. Many will say to Me on that day, ‘Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in Your name, and in Your name cast out demons, and in Your name perform many miracles?’ And then I will declare to them, ‘I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness.’*

These are people who use the mighty name of Jesus to perform mighty and miraculous acts. They believe Jesus existed and even in the power of His name. They professed that He was their Lord. But in their lives they continued to practice carnality. They practiced lawlessness. They did not commit their lives to Him. This is not the occasional sin like all of us fall into. These people live in sin. This is an antichrist spirit. Remember that the Antichrist claims divinity and works miracles, and also that Paul calls him “the man of lawlessness”.

Here's another scary passage; it’s 2 Peter 2:20. *For if, after they have escaped the defilements of the world by the knowledge of the Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, they are again entangled in them and are overcome, the last state has become worse for them than the first.* This verse is often used to show that a Christian can lose their salvation. That is a misrepresentation of this verse. No one can snatch us from the hand of God once we are there; not even ourselves.

The context of this verse is false prophets or false teachers. They learn of Jesus and believe that He was a good moral teacher and try to follow His moral principles. They try to live moral lives based on their knowledge of Jesus. Yet claiming to follow Jesus, they are actually not trusting in Him but in themselves. They try to work their way into heaven. This cannot be maintained without the Holy Spirit, so they fall back into their old life habits. Once they reach this point, they won’t try Jesus again so they effectively remove any chance for their salvation. And often they try to take others with them by false teaching and denying the Gospel. This is currently called “deconversion”.

I invite you to study Hebrews 6:4-8 on your own. This is people who do believe and even experience the power and love of God through the Holy Spirit, yet they do not put their trust in Jesus and are put away from Him forever.

Churches have many people attending them who are not saved. Please don’t be one of them. Honestly and directly ask yourself why you think you are going to heaven. If it is because you go to church or you give money to the poor or your family has been Christian for generations; you have a problem. If you believe in Jesus but hedge your bets by doing good works or even thinking there are some other gods who might help out; you have a problem.

You must believe that Jesus Christ exists; that He is the Son of God; that He is God Himself. You must understand that what He did on the cross is all you need for salvation; His work was perfect and we can add nothing to it. Put all your trust in Him, knowing that He is the only way to the Father. Commit your life to Him; He paid a high price for you, you are His. Have all your faith in Him.

This is the good news; this is the Gospel. God has given us a way out of eternal damnation. But we have to accept it on His terms, not ours.

Prayer

Lord God, thank You for the Gospel; the good news of salvation in Jesus Christ. You are amazing God; the Gospel is so far reaching and so deep, yet it is so simple for someone to accept. Merciful God, You look into the heart. You know the ones who believe on Christ in simple childlike trust. That is what You are looking for. Even those who don’t fully understand the depth of salvation, they are saved by trust, by the faith given by Your gracious Holy Spirit.

Help us, we who are fallible and sinful people, to commit to our Lord Jesus. Dear God, may we never hear those awful words, “Away from Me, I never knew you.” While it is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of almighty God, that is where we want to be as believers in Jesus Christ. There is no safer place for us to be.

If there is any here who has not turned to You in saving faith, I ask that Your Holy Spirit would work with their spirit; convict them and draw them to Jesus for salvation. We also pray for those we know who haven’t turned to You. Call them Lord, call them to the sweet freedom offered in Christ.

It is in His name we pray

Amen