

December 2023

Dear Brethren:

As the world continues to grow more chaotic and confused, and people, in general, are pondering why seemingly illogical decisions made by world leaders cause more destruction and suffering than good, those called by God can have confidence by knowing His plan of salvation. Peace of mind, even in uncertain times, can be achieved by knowing that the true objective in life is to be born into the Family of God via a conversion process.

He that overcometh shall inherit all things; and I will be his God, and he shall be my son (Revelation 21:7).

Only those presently called have the opportunity, and responsibility, to overcome through the power of the Holy Spirit. Others will have their opportunity at a future, God-ordained time. The called know that their job is to overcome the pulls of the carnal mind and demonstrate a true, unwavering love for God. But even with this knowledge, an understanding of the Faith Once Delivered, and an appreciation for that revealed Way of Life, many will ultimately fail for a variety of reasons.

But the fearful, and unbelieving, and the abominable, and murderers, and whoremongers, and sorcerers, *and idolaters*, and all liars, shall have their part in the lake which burneth with fire and brimstone: which is the second death (Revelation 21:8) [emphasis mine throughout].

This verse is not primarily directed to the deceived, sinful people of the world because they are not yet eligible for the second death. They need to be given an opportunity for salvation first. This verse is a direct warning to those who are part of that spiritual body, Christ's Body, and the categories of people God says will face the second death: the fearful because they compromise the Truth when faced with adversity, the unbelieving because faith is required for salvation, the abominable because of continually living sinful lives, the murderers because hearts filled with hate and resentment will be rejected by God, the whoremongers and sorcerers because of adhering to the carnal mind's desires, and the liars because they mimic Satan, the father of lies. But why will *the idolaters* face the second death, and who might be included in this broad category? Before you read further, what are your answers to these questions?

## Idolatry in Israel

Israel was called to be a special people. They were not special because they were inherently better, but because they would become possessors of something special—God's Law. They knew obedience to the Law would bring physical blessings.

And it shall come to pass, if thou shalt hearken diligently unto the voice of the LORD thy God, to observe and to do all his commandments which I command thee this day, that the LORD thy God will set thee on high above all nations of the earth: And all these blessings shall come on thee, and overtake thee, if thou shalt hearken unto the voice of the LORD thy God (Deuteronomy 28:1–2).

Israel was provided with all the details of how to worship God, honor Him, and conduct their lives. In principle, this sounded good, and the people agreed to the commands. They were also given the warning that they would be tempted to alter their worship of God away from His direct commands and toward a style that incorporated their carnal desires. One reason for this was that the nation of Israel would possess land where the prior inhabitants had set up physical systems of worship that were abominable to God, and the remains of them would be visible. A second reason was that Israel would be continually surrounded by nations that worshipped strange gods and included methods of worship that God detests. Because these methods and styles of worship would be enticing to Israel, God instructed them to destroy all vestiges of them, and to remain separate from them.

These are the statutes and judgments, which ye shall observe to do in the land, which the LORD God of thy fathers giveth thee to possess it, all the days that ye live upon the earth. Ye shall utterly destroy all the places, wherein the nations which ye shall possess served their gods, upon the high mountains, and upon the hills, and under every green tree: And ye shall overthrow their altars, and break their pillars, and burn their groves with fire; and ye shall hew down the graven images of their gods, and destroy the names of them out of that place (Deuteronomy 12:1–3).

And it shall be, when the LORD thy God shall have brought thee into the land which he swore unto thy fathers, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, to give thee great and goodly cities, which thou buildedst not. . . . Ye shall not go after other gods, of the gods of the people which are round about you (Deuteronomy 6:10, 14).

The commands that God gave to worship Him were clear, and Israel understood them. But, being carnal, they succumbed to the temptations of false worship, or idolatry, while at the same time claiming they had not!

For of old time I have broken thy yoke, and burst thy bands; and thou saidst, I will not transgress; when upon every high hill and under every green tree thou wanderest, playing the harlot. . . . Only acknowledge thine iniquity, that thou hast transgressed against the LORD thy God, and hast scattered thy ways to the strangers under every green tree, and ye have not obeyed my voice, saith the LORD (Jeremiah 2:20; 3:13).

To worship God is to show reverence and respect for Him. Israel demonstrated reverence and respect when they adhered to the Law, such as by observing Sabbaths, rules for cleanliness, rules for land management, and rules for offerings. While they continued to engage in worship activity, over time it became the wrong way to worship due to the inclusion of pagan practices. As they added these abominable practices, Israel claimed to be properly following God as well as remaining faithful to Him because they had not completely abandoned Him by name or practice.

It may be easy for any one of us to question why Israel could not just adhere to precise physical worship. We can think, "How hard could that have been?" Sacrifice like this. Make an offering like that. Remain outside the camp for this many days. How easy. If we think that, we are in error. Israel represents the story of how the carnal mind naturally drifts away from God toward carnal desires. They represent failure while seemingly doing the "right things" to receive promised blessings. Today, we are no different.

To worship God and show reverence and respect to Him, the called today will adhere to the Faith Once Delivered, demonstrate fruits of the Holy Spirit in their lives, and love God above everything else.

And he answering said, Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy strength, and with all thy mind; and thy neighbour as thyself (Luke 10:27).

### **We Need to Ask for Our Needs**

The commands God has given us to worship Him are clear, and we understand them. We also know that we need His help to properly follow the commands. Remember, we do have a loving Father who wants us to have love, peace, joy, and abundant life. We can realize these blessings when we are obedient to Him in the manner described by Luke, and when we ask Him for things in the manner that He tells us. It is a requirement that we ask Him for our physical and spiritual needs. However, for us to see ourselves correctly as God sees us, we must expand the literal act of asking to include the time we are simply thinking

about things. We need to consider the totality of our thoughts because they represent our most important desires and orientations of mind. A complete view of our minds and thoughts provides a gauge of how much progress we have made in converting our minds from carnal to spiritual.

Ask, and it shall be given you; seek, and ye shall find; knock, and it shall be opened unto you: For every one that asketh receiveth; and he that seeketh findeth; and to him that knocketh it shall be opened (Matthew 7:7–8).

But for what do we ask, and—by extension—think about? On what do we spend our mental time and energy? Very often on the wrong things, or good things in the wrong proportion. By doing this we can be similar to Israel and commit idolatry, except that ours is a dangerous form of idolatry of the mind.

Ye ask, and receive not, because ye ask amiss, that ye may consume it upon your lusts (James 4:3).

Israel was the physical example. Jesus Christ elevated the physical requirements of worship to include a spiritual dimension. For the called, idolatry goes beyond physical changes to law-keeping and extends to covetousness, which is having an inordinate craving for something. This includes physical things as well as concepts of mind.

Mortify therefore your members which are upon the earth; fornication, uncleanness, inordinate affection, evil concupiscence, *and covetousness, which is idolatry* (Colossians 3:5).

## **Idolatry of Self**

Through Luke, we are given insight into an aspect of worshipping God, which is to love Him with our whole heart, soul, strength, and mind. What follows is instruction for accomplishing one aspect of this: love your neighbor *as much as yourself*. This is often overlooked, but is a powerful statement about an aspect of modern-day idolatry—the self. Since we were made with carnal minds, it is very easy for the self to become an idol when we disproportionately focus upon our desires more than our spiritual and physical needs. Do we recognize when we idolize the self? What guidelines can we follow to properly evaluate?

Mr. Herbert Armstrong explained so well how the love of God is contrasted with the carnal mind when he stated that godly love is the way of give, not get. When we focus our time and energy upon others, we will be more often demonstrating the way of giving. When

we focus our time and energy upon ourselves, we can easily lose proportionality and demonstrate the way of get because we focus too much on our desires, and not our real needs.

The things for which we have personal desires can be part of God's blessings to us as He willingly provides an abundant life. Friends, family, house, health, leisure time, and advancement in employment are examples. There is nothing wrong with wanting these things in concept. But we need to first differentiate between needs and wants, and then the proportion of time we dedicate to our desires versus our spiritual and physical needs. When we correctly focus upon one, the others may follow.

But seek ye first the kingdom of God, and his righteousness; and all these things shall be added unto you (Matthew 6:33).

Can personal desires be fulfilled? Yes, indeed. The condition, though, is to have the Kingdom of God as our main priority. Back to Luke's statement. Part of seeking the Kingdom of God first in our lives will be to love our neighbor as ourselves. This means some of our time and energy will be directed toward others and not the self. We all do this to some degree, so we may assume we satisfy that requirement. Mr. Raymond Cole comments on this very topic in his sermon, "What Does God Require of Us?" stating that when we ask God to provide needs, at least fifty percent of the time should be directed toward the needs of others. *Fifty percent!* Are we even in tune with others enough to be doing this? If we are not doing this already, we may need to change drastically our minds by focusing a whole lot more upon others. "But there is no time." "I am too busy with my life." "If I had the time, I would." "Is it really that important?" Sound familiar? When God says that we are to love one another as ourselves, He means it. We are not demonstrating love to one another if we rarely think about, pray for, or stay in contact with each other. And if we rarely think about, pray for, or stay in contact with each other, we are not showing proper love to God. Our priorities are not balanced but skewed toward the self. This illustrates one way we may be idolizing the self and, like Israel's blindness, not even recognize or admit it.

When we are not contemplating the needs of others, God has given us time to focus upon ourselves. With that time, how much is focused upon our spiritual and physical needs versus our desires? God has the power and will to provide for our needs. But as a loving Father, He may not provide certain things that we want, so that we may grow and develop righteous character. To identify needs properly, we must allow God to inspire us by the Holy Spirit *daily* through prayer and meditation if we are to correctly separate needs from wants. Far too often we categorize our wants as needs and then end up thinking about, or emphasizing, our wants. Or, we simply focus upon our wants frequently because we are enticed by them, just like Israel was by Baal worship and other forms of idolatry. This can

lead us into covetousness, or idolatry, because our minds will be out of balance if too much time is spent thinking about the things we simply desire.

The majority of our time should be focused upon our true needs, especially our spiritual needs. Our spiritual needs are developing the fruits of the Holy Spirit, and anything else that helps us battle our carnal natures. There is no limit to asking for or thinking about our spiritual needs, and that is precisely where God expects us to wisely spend our time. When we focus upon our desires more than our needs—and the needs of others—we literally place God second in importance. That is idolatry. Even though we have not forgotten about God, nor corrupted doctrine, nor quit our struggle against our carnal natures, we mimic Israel by similarly committing idolatry.

### **Idolatry of Good Things**

But what if the things we think about and ask God for most often are *good things* that He frequently provides as blessings to others? Are we not to ask for them? Yes, we are. But if He has willed not to provide them at the moment, then asking for, or thinking about, them too frequently can become idolatrous. The reason is that we may not be submitting to God's will in our lives, choosing to concentrate on our desires, or too infrequently focusing upon the true needs of ourselves and others. This is the idolatry of good things, and it can hurt us in three significant ways. The following information will provide specific guidance to identify if we are concentrating on our wants too much of the time. If we find these apply to us, then we need to consider seriously if God and salvation really are our first priorities regardless of what we claim. God is the ultimate Judge and knows our individual weaknesses and challenges. But think about it this way: When He looks at us, is He pleased with how we spend the time He has given us?

*The idolatry of good things weakens our relationship with God by elevating something in our hearts above Him:* We of course do not think we put anything above God. However, if our lives feel incomplete without this good thing, and we feel sadness when thinking about never having it, we may find it rises higher in our minds until it becomes what we think we need for happiness. In fact, it may have reached the point where we cannot be happy, satisfied in life, or content without it. And if that is true, we need to answer the question, why not? What does this "thing" have to offer that God cannot, except a desire of the flesh? Is being called, knowing the Truth, and submitting ourselves to God's will in our lives not enough for our happiness, knowing that this can lead to salvation? God says that it should be enough. The Apostle Paul provides an explanation of this, as well as confirmation that God provides our needs.

Not that I speak in respect of want: for I have learned, in whatsoever state I am, therewith to be content. I know both how to be abased, and I know how to abound: every where and in all things I am instructed both to be full and to be hungry, both to abound and to suffer need. I can do all things through Christ which strengtheneth me. . . . But my God shall supply *all your need* according to his riches in glory by Christ Jesus (Philippians 4:11–13, 19).

Our relationship with God will be weakened if we demonstrate that we need something more than Him and His will in our lives to be happy. How can our relationship with God be strong if, by thoughts and actions, we do not live by what He commands?

*The idolatry of good things diminishes our relationship with God because it steals our time:* Time spent studying the Bible is slowly replaced with personal time. We may end up spending more time thinking about our own desires than things of God. We warp this good and beautiful thing that we so desperately want into something that consumes our days and thoughts. Time that we could spend upon godly things gets sucked away, leaving only the remnant of time for Him. We cannot build a stronger relationship if we choose to spend less time with Him.

So be careful how you act; these are difficult days. Don't be fools; be wise: make the most of every opportunity you have for doing good. Don't act thoughtlessly, but try to find out and do whatever the Lord wants you to (Ephesians 5:15–17, *The Living Bible*).

We need to remind ourselves that our purpose in life is to gain salvation through our conversion. Can we honestly say that we use our time wisely for this purpose?

*The idolatry of good things causes us to incorrectly view God's character:* Since we know that every good and perfect gift comes from God, we can fall for the assumption that the good thing missing in our lives is being withheld from us. We look at what we lack and can interpret that God is not fulfilling His promises, not listening to us, might be cursing us, or just not wanting to bless us. It might not be His will at all, or else it is a season for us to demonstrate character by waiting patiently. We may view God as being unfair, uncaring to our requests, or preferring to bless others out of partiality. If we view God in that way, we discredit His character.

Are not two sparrows sold for a farthing? and one of them shall not fall on the ground without your Father. But the very hairs of your head are all numbered. Fear ye not therefore, ye are of more value than many sparrows (Matthew 10:29–31).

God knows everything about us and is in total control. If deep down we believe this, but we still cannot find peace and happiness without our *good thing*, or while being in a certain condition that we do not like, it is because our personal desire is more important to us than God's will. If this is true, God can help change it!

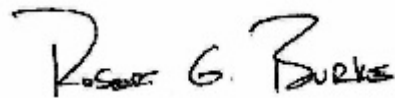
### **Christ Is Our Example**

In so many ways, we are instructed to follow the example of Christ. His life demonstrated the magnificence of living by the fruits of the Holy Spirit, and we are to emulate that. But He did something that we as carnal beings find very difficult. He put God, the Father, first in His life, always. He knew from where His power, His strength, and His purpose in life came. His priorities were correct.

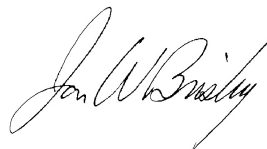
I can of mine own self do nothing: as I hear, I judge: and my judgment is just; because I seek not mine own will, but the will of the Father which hath sent me (John 5:30).

Who then are the idolators referenced in Revelation 21:8? They are the ones who received the Truth and understood the requirements for salvation, which included the command to love God more than themselves. Why will these individuals face the second death? Because over time they demonstrated a primary love for their desires. God, while still important to them, was put in second place. Brethren, for what do we seek most often and what is our source of happiness? We all need to make an honest judgment of ourselves because we are hard-wired to idolize the self. As the return of Jesus Christ gets closer and our time alive gets shorter, are we making God smile with our priorities in life? Is there any possibility that Revelation 21:8 currently applies to you?

Your brother in Christ,



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