

**Abundant Life—Today and Tomorrow #2;
Foundation—God's Law**

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Well, as you recall, brethren, last night we began to talk about this concept of abundant life and the theme that I am providing in my messages this year entitled, "Abundant Life—Today and Tomorrow." And so, last night, for the opening service of this Feast of Tabernacles, we saw that God does want us to be richly blessed—and that includes both spiritually and physically. Turn with me again to John chapter 10 and verse 10—the base text, now, for my theme this year. John 10 and verse 10: The statement of Jesus Christ that, as I told you, basically defines His very mission—that which He is here to accomplish on behalf of the Father. He said:

The thief cometh not, but for to steal, and to kill, and to destroy: I am come that they might have life, and that they might have it more abundantly.

And so, if this is so important that God has designed His entire purpose in dealing with humankind around this issue—in granting us life, and not just in any form of existence, but, more specifically, abundant life, enriching life, joyous, overflowing in our sense of fulfillment—the question becomes, what do we have to do in order to actually achieve that?

God is perfect—He is righteous, He is loving, He is merciful—and He wants us to have His rich blessings. The question, then, becomes, what must you and I do to take advantage of those things He is offering? How are we going to get them?

We also began to see last night that to have—to receive—that abundance we must learn to seek Him. We must learn to seek Him first and foremost—primarily—in all that we do. But what does it mean to put God first?

What does it mean to "seek first the Kingdom of God"—the text that I read to you last night? Because human beings are very good at making up their own definitions for what it means to seek God. And, as I mentioned to you, they very often, then, enshrine their own lustful, carnal pursuits in a wrapping of religion, so that they convince themselves that they are actually doing God service while they are getting the things—the lusts, the cares of this world—that they think are going to make them happy. And we understand that's not the case at all. So what does it really mean to "seek first the Kingdom of God"—which is the key to ultimately achieving the abundance that God has promised?

Well, in the message this morning, brethren, we are going to focus on the foundation of what it means to seek God first: And that is commandment keeping. The foundation of all abundance is found in God's Law. We already began to talk about that Law, as a foundation, last evening, but we want to expand upon it this morning.

Let's begin in Ecclesiastes chapter 12 and verse 13. Ecclesiastes 12 and verse 13. Here we read, "Let us hear the conclusion of the whole matter." This is actually the summary of the whole book—after all that Solomon expressed concerning his pursuit of happiness and success. Ecclesiastes is one of my favorite books for all that is contained in it. And God inspired Solomon to write these things down. And here he was, one of the greatest kings in history—the most powerful, the most successful, the most wealthy king—although human history doesn't actually document the reign of Solomon. You can't find it often in history books, although you used to be able to years ago. You can't find it anymore. I'm sure that's not an accident: that Satan has tried to hide and to mask real history—the last six thousand years—of things he doesn't want us to know. And so you hear about all of these great kingdoms of the Gentiles from years past. And, yet, you don't hear about Solomon, but he reigned over one of the most prolific kingdoms that ever impacted the world. And so, he was a mighty king—he was wealthy beyond measure. If anyone could be satisfied—satiated—through the wealth of the mammon of this world, it should have been Solomon, right? He had it all. Nothing was withheld from him in any way. And, yet, the very point of the book of Ecclesiastes is to convey that he pursued it all, he tried to satisfy himself every way possible, and in the final analysis it was all emptiness—vanity he called it. There was no satisfaction for his human mind. In spite of all that he achieved physically, he was not happy; he

was not satisfied. And in the final analysis, he came to understand—God led him to understand—that real contentment for any human being comes from putting God first and pursuing those simple things that God commanded. Here we find it: "Let us hear the conclusion of the whole matter." After all that he had achieved, after all of the effort he had expended, the conclusion was: "Fear God, and keep his commandments: for this is the whole duty of man." *Fear God, and keep his commandments, for this is the whole duty of man.* "For God shall bring every work into judgment, with every secret thing, whether it be good, or whether it be evil."

So, there is going to be a judgment, and all human beings are going to stand before their Maker in that day and be evaluated on whether they will receive eternal life, or whether they will not. And even in this life, brethren, it is obedience to, a respect for, a fear of God and His commandments, which is the foundation for that abundant living. Solomon came to understand it. Unfortunately, as we know historically, he turned away in his older years. In spite of all of the wisdom he possessed, all of the lessons that he learned, he was a forgetful hearer—or a forgetful listener—and, therefore, his end was not good. But God recorded the book that He inspired through Solomon for our benefit today.

Notice, next, 1 John chapter 5. First John 5 and verse 3: "For this is the love of God . . ." Many are out there claiming to love God—they do it all the time. I've mentioned to you many times before, I always think of that bumper sticker I see now and then. The ones that say, "I love the Lord." Easy to say, hard to do. But there are a lot of people who really think they love God and that they are showing love for God. And, yet, God is the One who defines what that love is and how it is legitimately, honorably, expressed. "This is the love of God"—if you want to know what that love is—"that we keep his commandments." That we keep His commandments. And so, it comes to mind that, "Well, okay, I guess what He is promising in the future is significant enough—eternal life, power and glory in the God Family, to rule with Christ for a thousand years and then beyond into eternity, all of the riches of that reward—that *I suppose* it's worth it to sacrifice all of the good things we *could have* in this life for that which we can have in the future." That's the typical orientation of mind, unfortunately, for many in the church: the idea that "we could make ourselves so happy if we could do all of these things: like not having to keep the Sabbath or the Holy Days; if we didn't

have tithing, if we didn't have all of these other things; if pork wasn't forbidden for us to eat, boy, what tasty meals we could have. Oh, we could be so happy if we just had all of these good things in the world. But it's worth giving it up for the sake of the reward of eternal life and all that God is offering us in the future. So we will withhold those good things from ourselves; we will bear our burdens. We will be under the heavy burden of the Law of God and we will suffer so that we might have those good things in the future." Is that the way we think about it? And, yet, here God said, ". . . this is the love of God, that we keep his commandments: and his commandments are not grievous." He says His commandments are *NOT* a burden—a grievous obligation that restricts and confines and abuses humanity. His commandments are actually a blessing, *even here and now—today*. Do we think of them that way? Not always—very often not. Because, you see, our carnal orientations—the lust of the flesh which we deal with, day in and day out—draw us toward those things which are opposed to God and His Law. You see, it's a false concept that we still carry in our minds: if God allowed us to do these things, they would make us happy. But God is the righteous, glorious, wise parent who basically is telling us, as His children: "Don't touch the hot stove. It will burn you. You will be sorry." And, so, His commandments are not grievous. They are not there to harm us or to withhold anything good from us. They are there to tell us how to have abundance—how to be blessed, how to be satisfied, how to be enriched to the full. Which is why, brethren, when we put God's Law first as a foundation, through our fear of God—our respect for Him which shows love—we can have not only the promises of the future for all eternity when Jesus Christ returns, but in the meantime, while we are living that Law today, we are going to be richly blessed. You are going to be blessed in all of the ways that really matter. You are going to have real abundance today, as well as tomorrow. It is a double blessing. But it requires us to put away the deceptions of this world—of Babylon and Egypt under the sway of Satan, the Devil—which are a part of our own natural thinking, by nature, and to say, "Stop chasing the lie. Stop chasing the counterfeits of this world that promise you the moon, but ultimately result in emptiness and guilt, heartache, sorrow, misery and then, ultimately, death. Stop chasing after the lie and come to recognize that what your Heavenly Father has commanded is that which will make you greatly and abundantly blessed."

Do we view God's commands as grievous—a requirement of a total sacrifice of everything good today so that we might have something good tomorrow? Or

have we come to value them even today? Proverbs 3 and verse 1. Proverbs chapter 3, here beginning in verse 1: "My son, forget not my law"—the same requirement as with anything else: find out what God's commandments are. ". . . forget not my law; but let *thine heart* keep my commandments." You see, this is an admonition for us not just to grudgingly say, "Okay, I know, I know. God is like the 800-pound gorilla, and He created everything. So He can do what He wants. And He says we have to obey His Law or else He is going to curse us. So, okay, if I have to, I'll go along. I won't like it, but I'll do it." Like the rebellious child who figures out there *is* going to be a punishment if I don't do what Mom and Dad say. "I don't like it, but I don't have a choice, so, alright." And that's the way we deal with God, as our Heavenly Father, very often.

But there is a transition that needs to take place for those who are converted: and that is coming to love the body of that Law—the same way that a child doesn't appreciate many of the instructions and commands of a parent. But once they are an adult, once they gain in wisdom and understanding, they look back—and usually, especially once they've had their own children—and they say, "Yes, now I understand. Mom and Dad were really trying to take care of me and protect me from harm. They wanted me to have abundance. They wanted me to have good things. They wanted me to avoid the bad things. That's why they gave me rules, and that's why they said "no" to certain things. That's why they said "no" to a lot of things. Because they *did* love me. They didn't want to withhold anything that was good. They wanted me to be richly rewarded and blessed in life." And so, the process of maturity, physically, is part of the recognition of those things—in coming to appreciate what your parents did for you. In the same way, brethren, spiritually, with God as our Heavenly Father who is teaching us, we must come also not just to a grudging acceptance of the requirement to obey the Law, but to the point where we begin to value and to appreciate that Law—we see it as a blessing that we've been given those instructions by divine revelation.

"My son, forget not my law; but let *thine heart* keep my commandments." You don't do it with just the mental, intellectual part of the brain. You come to internalize your love for that Law down deep in your very being—the heart. It touches you very closely and you value it. Verse 2:

For length of days, and long life, and peace, shall they add to thee.
Let not mercy and truth forsake thee: bind them about thy neck; write

them upon the table of thine heart: So shalt thou find favour and good understanding in the sight of God and man. Trust in the LORD with all thine heart; and lean not unto thine own understanding.

Yes, that's the conflict that is going on in your mind and mine. We have our own understanding—our own rationalization—that comes very naturally to us: what we think will work to make us happy and fulfilled. And God is saying, "Don't listen to it. It's going to lead you astray. You are going to find it doesn't work." Put aside, He says, the natural carnal inclinations, no matter how enticing, and come to recognize that the Way that He has revealed is what is going to give us the true riches and blessings of abundance.

Trust in the LORD with all thine heart; and lean not unto thine own understanding. In all thy ways acknowledge him, and he shall direct thy paths. Be not wise in thine own eyes: fear the LORD, and depart from evil. It shall be health to thy navel, and marrow to thy bones.

Do you know what this is? This is a description of the recipe for abundant living. And notice the foundation of the recipe is a healthy portion of God's Truth. It is the root. Turn over to Proverbs 4 and verse 20. Proverbs 4 and verse 20:

My son, attend to my words; incline thine ear unto my sayings. Let them not depart from thine eyes; keep them in the midst of thine heart.

That means, brethren, don't let it continue to be some intellectual surface thing in your life. Ask God for the capacity to come to value His Law—that it may really reside down deep within you, where it can take root and become that compass by which you live and make your decisions day by day.

"For they are life unto those that find them, and health to all their flesh." *There* is your source for real abundance—of health, physically, mentally and spiritually. And it is all rooted in the principles of God. "Keep thy heart with all diligence; for out of it are the issues of life." It is the recipe for success, brethren.

Third John. The book of 3 John and beginning in verse 2: "Beloved, I wish above all things that thou mayest prosper and be in health, even as thy soul prospereth." So here, God through the Apostle John is saying He wants you to

have abundant life. "I wish above all things that thou mayest prosper and be in health . . ." Sounds like abundant living, doesn't it? That's what God wants. He doesn't want to withhold anything good from you. He didn't give you His laws, His commandments, in order to deprive you of good things—just to see if He can make you jump to His tune. That's not it at all. His commandments are there to be a blessing to you. Because they are the guidepost which shows us how to avoid the traps and the pitfalls which are naturally going to befall us in this life. And when you obey God's Law, you are automatically steering between the beacons in order to avoid the sandbars, the pits, the turbulence and other things that threaten to rob you of your substance. God's laws are there for your good. "I wish above all things that thou mayest prosper and be in health, even as thy soul prospereth." So He is referring to the spiritual—the orientation of mind which gives you peace and contentment—but also desiring that you might have physical health and prosperity as well. You have abundance both today and tomorrow.

"For I rejoiced greatly, when the brethren came and testified of *the truth* that is in thee." There it is. The Truth which is defined as what? The foundation—God's Law—the commandments personified in the doctrines we have been taught. "I rejoiced greatly, when the brethren came and testified of the truth that is in thee, even as thou walkest in the truth"—not just that you *have* the Truth, that you have been taught the Truth, that you know it, that you can recite what the commandments are, but that you have come to internalize them, to love them and to cherish them down deep in your hearts so that you practice them. They are living commandments played out day by day in the decisions that you are making—the way that you are orienting your steps in life. You've come to love them beyond the intellectual acceptance of the technical positions. You've come to value and cherish them; therefore, they have become the compass by which you walk and direct your steps.

[T]he brethren came and testified of the truth that is in thee, even as thou walkest in the truth. I have no greater joy than to hear that my children walk in truth. Beloved, thou doest faithfully whatsoever thou doest to the brethren, and to strangers; Which have borne witness of thy charity [that love] before the church: whom if thou bring forward on their journey after a godly sort, thou shalt do well.

And what is a major aspect of the commandments of God—the Ten Commandments, the ten basic principles on which the entire Law is founded? Six

of them have to do with showing love to your fellow man. The first four involve love to God, specifically, and the last six, then, refer to showing love in taking care of those around you. And so that expression of love—outgoing sacrifice and concern for others—is a major part of the fulfilling of the Law.

How does it apply today in more of an expanded fashion in the last-day Church of God in this era in which we live—believing, knowing, that the return of Jesus Christ is not far off? Because of the events that we see taking place in the world around us, it is evident that it is nearer than ever before. And we see pieces falling into place on the world scene which go hand-in-hand with the prophecies that God said would need to be fulfilled before the imminent return of Jesus Christ. We are living in that era, brethren. We don't know how far off or how close it might be, but it's getting closer all of the time. So, now, how do these principles apply to the last-day Church and the prophecies that God gave concerning those who would be called to be part of the Body in that time leading up to the literal return of Christ? What about our former brethren and their practices regarding God's commandments? Many of you are aware of the history of our parent organization over the last seventy years—the departure from the original doctrines. And you've still got hundreds—thousands—around the world who are gathered together in many different places that they are calling Feast of Tabernacles assemblies. Many of them—maybe even most of them—are still keeping them on the same days we are keeping them. For example, this high, Holy first day of Tabernacles. And a lot of them have changed even that because they have rejected the Hebrew calendar. So now they don't accept that God revealed through Herbert Armstrong the knowledge of when those Holy Days actually fall. So now they are making up their own rules for when they are going to keep them. Some of them probably started earlier and some of them will start later than us—some of them may be as much as a month off in certain years. So they are all doing what makes sense to them, but they think—many of them are absolutely convinced and sincere in the belief—that they are worshiping God in Spirit and Truth. And, yet, the reality is, brethren, they are not keeping the Law of God at all. They are not honoring the foundation of the Ten Commandments and the statutes and the judgments, although they are going through the motions. Notice, now, Isaiah chapter 58. We are going to start in verse 1 and read through the whole thing because it is an exposé that God recorded in advance concerning the very orientation of His rebellious people who don't intend to do it God's way. Isaiah 58, verse 1:

Cry aloud, spare not, lift up thy voice like a trumpet, and shew my people their transgression, and the house of Jacob their sins.

So we start off from the very beginning with the understanding that God is not pleased with something that His people are doing. And we understand it, historically. Ancient Israel *invariably* went away from the teaching of God. He gave them the Truth—He revealed the statutes and judgments and said, "Here is what I want you to do if you want to honor me, if you want to respect me, if you want my favor, if you want my blessings, if you want my gift of abundant life; here are the rules. Do it my way, and then I promise that I will provide these things as a benefit to you." What did Israel do? "No, we know a better way. Thank you very much, God, for what you have given us but, you know what? We've got a few improvements we need to make in that. Because these things, when we amend them, are going to allow us to *really* have abundant life." Of course it never has—it never did. All they did was cut themselves off from the God who made the promises and they went right down a path of destruction—emptiness, misery and anguish—because they wouldn't do it God's way. And so here you have a people who are still wrapped in the trappings of the religious system. And it still looks enough like what God originally commanded that it makes them feel as if they are doing what God requires of them. The only problem is, that for all of their religious exercise—even in keeping "weekly Sabbaths and Holy Days"—God is not blessing them. They are not receiving the abundance. It's empty. They don't have the good things that they know they are supposed to have, and they are perplexed and they don't understand why. Well, God begins here in verse one by saying it's because they are transgressing. What is transgression? Violation of the Law. They are breaking the fundamental Law of God and, therefore, they are not receiving the blessings. That's the root cause.

Cry aloud, spare not, lift up thy voice like a trumpet, and shew my people their transgression [where it is they are breaking the Law], and the house of Jacob their sins. Yet, they seek me daily . . .

Oh, so these are not people who have totally turned their backs on God or the concept of worship, or the concept of service. These are people who are still very religious. These are people who are still very much pursuing, in many cases, a belief in the seventh-day Sabbath and the annual Holy Days, and many of the original tenets we learned through Mr. Herbert Armstrong in this age. But there is something that is not pleasing to God. "Yet they seek me daily." Oh, they are

having their Feast of Tabernacles sites all over the world. ". . . and delight to know my ways." They're coming and sitting in church services just like we are. They are listening to a minister stand before them and preach, and they are looking for that minister to give them the words of life that will help them to do what? To be happy, to be fulfilled, to be enriched. Because they want the key. They want the dream. They want abundant life.

So they are assembling—they are going through those motions—and many of them I acknowledge, brethren, are very sincere. They really think they are doing the right thing, but, at the same time, they are absolutely miserable and they are perplexed and they don't understand why they are not receiving what God said they should.

They seek me daily, and delight to know my ways [they want the key], as a nation that did righteousness.

On the outside they are doing so many things that look like they should be the recipients of abundance as if they were a nation that did righteousness. As if they are fulfilling the command of God. ". . . and forsook not the ordinance of their God." As if they are doing what is required and honoring the Law of God. They should, therefore, be the recipients of His good blessings, but there is something wrong. Verse 3: "Wherefore have we fasted, say they"—whether that is referring specifically to the Holy Day we just kept a few days ago, the Day of Atonement, or to personal fasts throughout the year in order to grow closer to God, or both. They both fit.

"Wherefore have we fasted"—wherefore have we fulfilled this obligation God gave us to fast? ". . . say they, and thou seest not?" Why is God not honoring those sacrifices? We're doing these things God told us to do and He said if you do them—if you obey me—you will receive blessings, you will receive abundance. So they say, "We've obeyed; we've gone through the motions; we've gone to the assemblies; we've worshiped; we've fasted, but we are not enriched; we are not blessed; we are empty; we're hungry; we're unsatisfied." And they don't understand why.

"They ask of me the ordinances of justice; they take delight in approaching to God." These are not, in many cases, brethren who have totally rejected God and walked away from His Truth. No, we're talking about the ones who still have a

conscience. They still recognize and value the revelation of God, to a certain extent, and they are still doing at least some of the pieces of it.

"They take delight in approaching to God. Wherefore have we fasted, say they, and thou seest not?" Why are our sacrifices to God not bringing the benefits God said would and should result? "Wherefore have we afflicted our soul, and thou takest no knowledge?" It's like He is ignoring their sacrifice—He's not giving them that close relationship with Him in return for what they are doing.

Wherefore have we afflicted our soul, and thou takest no knowledge?
Behold [God gives the answer], in the day of your fast ye find
pleasure, and exact all your labours.

Now, this is not just speaking of not honoring the Sabbath appropriately—we're going out and doing all of these things we shouldn't do on the Sabbath Day. It means—in an overall orientation of mind—brethren, that they are not doing what God requires. God gave the guidelines for how to keep the Sabbath and the Holy Days, and human beings say, "Well, we think we can improve upon that."

"In the day of your fast [or of your sacrifices] ye find pleasure"—meaning they turn to their own orientations of mind, human wisdom, to supplement or to amend the direct commands of God, because they think they have a better way to serve God, and they think that He should be happy to accept their sacrifices.

Do you know the first one recorded to have done that? Cain. God doesn't tell us exactly what was wrong with his sacrifice, but Cain brought a sacrifice, didn't he? You see, Cain didn't say, "Well, I know God commanded us to sacrifice, but I don't think that's necessary. I'm not bringing a sacrifice." No, Cain did bring a sacrifice. He brought an offering before God. But God rejected it; He didn't honor the offering of Cain.

God doesn't tell us exactly what he did wrong. We can speculate about it. One possibility is that since he was a farmer, very likely the command spelled out—even though the Bible doesn't record it in Genesis so that we can understand it—so that the only appropriate sacrifice was a lamb, which was to picture Jesus Christ who would be that Lamb for the Church. And what if Cain said, "But I have to go out and trade my produce. I'm a farmer. I grow vegetables. And I

have to trade and barter to get a lamb, but I think God should be just as happy if I bring my tithes and my offerings before Him in the form that I grew them"? Makes perfect sense to me. That's good human reasoning, isn't it? That's just one possibility: Cain shows up and says, "Here God. Here's my offering. I've set aside this worship and this respect for you. Here are my vegetables." And God said, "I gave you the instruction, Cain. I told you exactly how you are to worship me. And I make the rules—not you. I reject your sacrifice."

However it happened—whatever the specifics were—Cain didn't follow the rules, or God would have accepted it. God wasn't looking to dishonor Cain. He would have accepted him had he followed the rules—if he had obeyed the Law.

So Cain was religious. He was coming to worship. He brought an offering. But it didn't get him anywhere because he didn't do it the way God said. And, therefore, Cain was separated from God. And here you find in Isaiah 58 the very same circumstance of people who are going through the motions; they are being very religious; they are offering sacrifices; they are fasting; they are assembling together in certain places, and yet, they are empty; and they are unfulfilled; and they are perplexed, and they don't know why. And the answer is precisely what God said to Cain in Genesis chapter 4: "If you do well, are you not going to receive the benefits? And if you do not well, it's because sin lies at the door." What is sin? The transgression of the Law—a violation of the way I told you to do it. If you don't receive the abundance, there is a reason, He said to His people, and it's because we are not following the rules. And God cares about the rules. "Behold, in the day of your fast ye find pleasure, and exact all your labours." He says, "You are changing the rules and you think I should accept the way you choose to do it, and I don't."

"Behold, ye fast for strife and debate [that goes to the root of human arrogance], and to smite with the fist of wickedness [vanity; trying to use religion to promote the self because they are trying to climb ladders within the congregation, or whatever it is they are doing]: ye shall not fast as ye do this day, to make *your* voice to be heard on high." What were they really doing while they were going through the motions of obeying and worshiping God? They were making up their own rules. They were amending the procedures of worship according to their own wisdom. And they thought God should be just as happy as if they had obeyed—even with the changes they had made. And God said, "Sorry."

"Is it such a fast that I have chosen?" What's the real point? What is God saying here? "Is this the way I specifically told you to worship, to fast, to come before me—the procedures to use? Are you following the rules as I gave them?" And, obviously, the answer is no, or else He would not have called it transgression back in verse 1. "Is it such a fast that I have chosen?" He says, "Who is the author of the stuff that you are doing, that you think I should accept? Did I give you that instruction—that Law—or did you make it up yourself? ". . . a day for a man to afflict his soul? is it to bow down his head as a bulrush, and to spread sackcloth and ashes under him?" He says, "Is it that you just look good on the surface, that you go through the motions, and I am supposed to accept it?"

"Wilt thou call this a fast, and an acceptable day to the LORD?" Is that, therefore, the proper Holy Day worship that God should accept and then give you abundance in response?

Verse 6, "Is not this the fast that I have chosen?" By contrast, now, to what they were doing, whatever it was, He is saying, "Here, let me remind you that this is what my Law is, what I revealed. This is the way that I told you, if you will do these things, *then* you will receive the abundance that you have been missing." What are they?

". . . to loose the bands of wickedness." Well, to begin with, "wickedness" is a violation of God's Law, isn't it? Anything which opposes God's revealed Law is evil—it's an abomination. So, part of loosing the bands of wickedness is to get back to the faith once delivered—to put away all of these human concepts which have polluted the worship of God. It also means, brethren, to put away the vanity and the arrogance of human minds and stop using the supposed worship of God as a way to enrich the self in greed—which is what many human beings have done over our entire human history. They have used religion to make money—to merchandise people in the name of God.

Is not this the fast that I have chosen? to loose the bands of wickedness [He says to put away the selfishness and the arrogance], to undo the heavy burdens [the man-made rules and obligations that they added and heaped upon their brothers and sisters], and to let the oppressed go free, and that ye break every yoke?

This also includes, because I've used this in past years, brethren, a reminder to us of our responsibility to forgive—to stop holding grudges against other human beings. Because, if you want to separate yourself from God really quickly, if you want to find yourself adrift—without hope, without help, in your time of need—just hold on to those grudges; just let those hard feelings continue to seethe under the surface. It is a violation of what Christ does in forgiving and bearing—forgiving us through His shed blood. But, no, we are going to hold on to those things that we think are important—the sleights that we may have received at the hands of other human beings. And we are not going to let them go. And God says that's part of the reason that we have separated ourselves and that we're not living abundantly.

". . . to undo the heavy burdens, and to let the oppressed go free, and that ye break every yoke?" He says, put all this vanity and this self-pride aside—bury all of that stuff which is worthless. "Is it not to deal thy bread to the hungry." Again, back to the orientation of—as Mr. Armstrong called it—the way of give versus the way of get, sacrifice, outpouring for the benefit of others, which is a huge part of the Law of God.

Is it not to deal thy bread to the hungry, and that thou bring the poor that are cast out to thy house? when thou seest the naked, that thou cover him; and that thou hide not thyself from thine own flesh?

Who is it that is included in this category, brethren—our own flesh? Physically, it is your own immediate family—those responsibilities, those obligations that God gave to families to take care of one another: Parents to children, children to parents—when they are older and need that help—brothers, sisters. There are those family obligations, and God is looking at what we are doing in fulfilling those things as a measure of our love, our respect, and our fear for Him. Beyond that, spiritually, brethren, you've got brothers and sisters of the common faith, because as baptized members of the Church of God—which is the Body of Jesus Christ—you share something that is stronger than blood. You share Spirit. You share the receipt of God's Holy Spirit within your minds and within your hearts, and that makes you closer in kinship to those other members of that same Body than any blood relationship can give you. How are we taking care of one another in our Family?

". . . and that thou hide not thyself from thine own flesh?" Verse 8: If we do all of these things that God just listed—which are rooted in obedience to the Law—He says, "*Then shall thy light break forth as the morning, and thine health shall spring forth speedily.*" *There* is the key to abundance. There is the thing that is going to cut loose the dam that's been holding back all of these blessings that we have deprived ourselves of receiving. This is how we can have it: Put God's Law first and begin to focus on service to others—not this way of get. Cut loose the bands of wickedness, stop holding grudges against others, let the oppressed go free—let them out of prison, brethren. It is in your hands. How many doors can you unlock if you just choose to do it? And you just let them out—you are not going to hold them any longer. Let them go free. Turn and serve, believing that you are not one who deserves any good thing, but that you are going to be a servant. You are going to manifest the same character that Jesus Christ did in the fulfilling of the Law—through His example.

Then shall thy light break forth as the morning, and thine health shall spring forth speedily: and thy righteousness shall go before thee; the glory of the LORD shall be thy rereward.

To find that reward again—to find, finally, the blessing of that relationship with God that has been lost, that has been missing, during the interim in which His people have rejected and turned away from the Truth. He's asking, "Do you want the reward back?" The rereward—the original reward you first had when you received this way of life with joy and began to obey. And you received the richness of God's blessings and His mercy and the fulfillment in your mind—the fulfillment of the joy and satisfaction which came from that way. We call that first love.

Somewhere along the way, then, we think we have become mature enough that we can say, "Well, we don't need to keep doing this the way we have been. That's not all required. Let's make this a little easier." And what we end up doing is cutting ourselves off from God, and before we know it, we are without the blessings. And God asks, "Do you want the rereward?" Do you want to go back into a relationship again of reward like you had at the beginning during the era of time in God's Church when that Body was greatly blessed and received divine healings—which were commonplace? Why are they not today? They used to be commonplace.

". . . the glory of the LORD shall be thy rereward. Then shalt thou call, and the LORD shall answer." He will be nearby—it won't seem as if He is a long way off. "Thou shalt cry, and he shall say, Here I am. If thou take away from the midst of thee the yoke, the putting forth of the finger." That is, accusations, hard feelings, against others. ". . . and speaking vanity." That means empty words spoken by human beings which are not consistent with the faith once delivered. He says, "Put all the garbage aside that I did not reveal"—human wisdom by which they think they know how to worship God better or more appropriately, or by which they think they have the authority to change the teachings. And God says, "No, you don't. None of you do. Do it the way I told you to do it; simply follow the instructions the way that I gave them, and then you will have the benefits."

And if thou draw out thy soul to the hungry, and satisfy the afflicted soul; then shall thy light rise in obscurity, and thy darkness be as the noon day: And the LORD shall guide thee continually, and satisfy thy soul in drought, and make fat thy bones: and thou shalt be like a watered garden, and like a spring of water, whose waters fail not.

Isn't that beautiful, poetic language which describes the blessings of abundant life? ". . . satisfy thy soul in drought, and make fat thy bones: and thou shalt be like a watered garden, and like a spring of water, whose waters fail not." Boy, I would like to have that. Wouldn't you? Wouldn't you like to feel that way—that God is so near and close to you that He hears you when you cry out? You feel satisfied; you feel full; you feel complete; you feel enriched—no thirst, no hunger for things that are really important, for things of value. You feel satisfied.

And they that shall be of thee shall build the old waste places: thou shalt raise up the foundations of many generations; and thou shalt be called, The repairer of the breach, The restorer of paths to dwell in.

That's a prophecy of the coming Millennium that we are celebrating now during this seven-day Feast—a time when Christ is going to restore and to repair. And those of you who are doing what you should now—you are building your treasure in heaven, you are honoring Him—you are going to be in that first resurrection, and you are going to be working side by side with Christ to reform this earth, to put it back in its pristine condition, as it was at the beginning of creation, and to make it a habitation fit for the blessing of humankind.

"If thou turn away thy foot from the sabbath." There is your confirmation. We got almost to the end of the chapter to confirm one of the key things He was talking about. What were these transgressions to which He referred in verse 1? Here you go: "If thou turn away thy foot from the sabbath, from doing thy pleasure on my holy day." The Holy Days are the days in which God commands us to come before Him in assembly to worship and to bring an offering—an offering and sacrifice of your time, your focus, your mental energies. Within those services we ask Christ to be with us; we lift up our voices in hymn-singing—which is an offering—we have special music; we have sermons. But all of us are participants in this worship—offering, sacrificing before God—on these Holy occasions which He set apart, and we are doing it in the way He commanded us to do it. And, yet, there is something wrong with the Sabbath-keeping practices of the people of God. And even though they are assembling, and even though they are coming to worship services; and they are singing; and they are hearing sermons; and they are going through the motions, God says, "I don't accept it." I don't accept it. Because they are not following the rules. They are not doing it the way God said to do it—just like Cain didn't follow the rules with the sacrifice that he made.

"If thou turn away thy foot from the sabbath, from doing thy pleasure on my holy day . . ." I wonder, brethren, could this maybe include a prophecy of the perversion of the Holy Day of Pentecost? Because I guarantee you, from 1974—when the majority of the physical body changed from a Monday to a Sunday Pentecost—and since then, they have quit worshiping on the right, revealed, day. Which means that while they are still keeping their version of Pentecost—they are coming and worshiping; they are coming together on that day which they think is Pentecost, and they are having their service—it is not a holy day. It's not the day God set apart. It's not the day He said to appear before Him. HE'S NOT THERE. It's a work day. The Holy Day of Pentecost is the day He revealed—either the Monday, the twenty-four hour period following the day they are keeping, or in some years, about every three or four years, it comes a whole week later than what they are keeping. And so, those who are earnest, who think that they are doing what God requires—and I give them credit, many of them, for being sincere—the end result, brethren, is that they are worshiping on the wrong day. Which means, guess what they are doing on the true Monday Pentecost day? They are going about their normal efforts—they are going to their jobs. They are not thinking about the worship of God because they think it's a work day. They are doing just what He said here: "If thou turn away thy foot from the sabbath,

from doing thy pleasure on my holy day." And, brethren, they have been violating the Holy Days, minimally, from that time in 1974 to the current day.

" . . . and call the sabbath a delight, the holy of the LORD, honourable; and shalt honour him, not doing thine own ways"—not according to their human scholarship which had them change the date for that Holy Day, and now many of them have even rejected the Hebrew calendar so that they have changed ALL of the Holy Days. ". . . nor finding thine own pleasure, nor speaking thine own words"—human wisdom, intellectual interpretation over revelation.

If they will do those things, if they will put all of this garbage out of their minds and get back to the fundamentals that God taught us from the beginning, *then*, verse 14, "shalt thou delight thyself in the LORD; and I will cause thee to ride upon the high places of the earth, and feed thee with the heritage of Jacob thy father: for the mouth of the LORD hath spoken it." There it is. All of these curses came upon the people of God when Israel turned to the scholars of this world for their concept of truth. They thought they had better ways and they amended the worship practice and thought God should accept it and be just as pleased as if they had done it the way He commanded. They were wrong.

Notice Jeremiah 2, verse 13. Jeremiah 2:13: "For my people have committed two evils"—two major categories of mistakes they have made. What are they? Number one, "they have forsaken me the fountain of living waters"—living waters, always an analogy to the Holy Spirit, which is life-bringing, spiritually. And so, they rejected the source of life—the Holy Spirit—and they said, "No, we have a better way to make ourselves happy and fulfilled and satisfied. We have our own way to bring abundant living, and in pursuing that way which they thought would make them happy, they cut themselves off from the real source of knowledge and wisdom and truth. That's number one: "They have forsaken me the fountain of living waters," and, number two, "hewed them out cisterns, broken cisterns, that can hold no water." What did they do? They came up with their own concepts of truth—like a Sunday Pentecost, like the interpretation of the marriage doctrine, like all of the other changes they made in the name of "growing in grace and knowledge," which wasn't growing in grace and knowledge at all, but was a rejection of God. And, then, what did they do? As God gave the analogy here, it's like they built their own cisterns—these big containers to hold drinking water. So that when the rains come, it fills the cisterns and then you have a supply of water for when there is

drought—and that's going to sustain them; they are going to drink from this water. Do you know what the problem was? They were bad engineers. Their cisterns, which they built to give them life-giving water, did not work. They had cracks and they had holes. The rains come and instead of filling them up, it just seeps right out through the bottom—which means they are always dry; there is no water; they can't hold water. So what they think will satisfy them and give them abundance in times of drought, when they go to the well, it's dry. It's not satisfying. They are thirsty. They are empty. Because, number one, they rejected the source of real truth—the fountain of living water, which is the Holy Spirit—and they said, "We don't want that source. Dam up that river; we don't need it. We will make our own cisterns over here. We'll catch our rain water and we'll have all we need without this river over here." But their cisterns don't work—they leak and they're dry—and therefore they are empty and unfilled and unsatisfied. That's the analogy God is giving here. Two mistakes: they rejected the real source of water, and the ones they created for themselves do not work. What a pickle.

Obedience to God's revealed Law brings blessing. And disobedience to the simple commands of God brings curses. It's that simple—it's so simple, brethren, it seems like any human being with half a brain ought to be able to figure this out. But, you know what? They don't. And year after year, generation after generation, from ancient times, they have done the same things and they always trade the revelation of God for something of their own making which they value much more highly—and it is a broken cistern that won't hold water.

Some break God's Law through defiance—there are some out there, brethren, that know better. I especially would not want to be in the shoes of many of those ministers who are out there leading Feast of Tabernacles sites around the world right now, in these other splinter groups as we call them. There are some of them—old-timers—who were taught at the feet of Herbert Armstrong and they were taught that revealed Truth, and they are not doing it anymore. And do you know why they are not doing it anymore? It became politically difficult to hold on. They would have had to sacrifice too much in order to continue to keep a Monday Pentecost. They would have had to have given up their positions of power, wealth and prestige in the parent organization in order to do what Mr. Raymond Cole did: Keep a Monday Pentecost without compromise. It would have required too much of a physical price. They would have had to have given up their "abundance" in this world in order to keep God's Law, and they were not

willing to sacrifice it. But they know better—they know better, brethren. I wouldn't want to be in their shoes. But I hope they will repent before it's too late.

By contrast there are a lot of very well-meaning brethren in those assemblies, and they think they are doing the right thing. They are deceived. They don't understand. They are trusting their leaders whom they depend upon to teach them the Truth and to tell them how to have the abundance of God; and they are dutiful students; and they are paying attention, but what they are being fed is empty and unsatisfying. We pray for the day when God is going to open their eyes to see the Truth, that which you have come to understand by a great blessing—that for which we do not take credit whatsoever. But we appreciate highly the fact that He called us out of that deception and has given us a chance to understand how really to have the abundant living that He wants us to enjoy. First Timothy 6 and verse 17. 1 Timothy 6:17:

Charge them that are rich in this world, that they be not highminded, nor trust in uncertain riches, but in the living God, who giveth us richly all things to enjoy [He is the source of real abundance]; That they do good, that they be rich in good works [*there* is that element of service to others], ready to distribute, willing to communicate; Laying up in store for themselves a good foundation against the time to come . . .

What is that foundation, brethren? The revealed Law of God—the rulebook, the way God told us to do it. It doesn't need the interpretation, the "improvement," of human beings. It cannot be improved upon. God gave it perfectly from the beginning. ". . . that they may lay hold on eternal life." Remember, isn't that what Christ promised in John chapter 10? Why did He come? "That they might have life and that they might have it more abundantly."

". . . that they may lay hold on eternal life. O Timothy, keep that which is committed to thy trust . . ." What is Paul, through the Holy Spirit, telling Timothy—that evangelist under his charge? He is saying, "You hold on to the faith once delivered; don't ever get to the point where you become arrogant in thinking that you can improve upon what you were taught. You hold on to exactly what I taught you—that which God gave me through divine revelation—and you never change. No matter what the pressure from whatever source, you don't give in. And I don't care what sacrifice you have to make. You refuse to compromise and you hold on, and you will preserve your abundance—the true riches of

God—no matter what, physically, you might have to sacrifice in order to do it." That's what he is saying.

. . . keep that which is committed to thy trust, avoiding profane and vain babblings, and oppositions of science falsely so called.

Boy, did we have a lot of that starting in the 1970s in the church of God. ". . . vain babblings, and oppositions of science falsely so called." And that was the basis upon which they made the changes in Pentecost, divorce and remarriage, divine healing, and all of the others that came down the pike in the next 20, 30, 40 years—all rooted in justification by the scholars of the world who *ARE NOT CONVERTED, WHO DON'T KNOW THE TRUTH*—who don't even keep God's Sabbaths and Holy Days properly, and yet, they were the source of our supposed "improvement" in "growing in grace and knowledge" by changing the Holy Days. How absurd. I can't think of a better definition for what happened than what God said right here: ". . . vain babblings, and oppositions of science." Which God says are "falsely so called"—it's the foolishness of human wisdom; it is not the Truth at all. "Which some professing have erred concerning the faith"—and boy did they. And boy have we all paid the price for it in the ensuing 30 to 35 years. We have all suffered because of that apostasy which took place in the very body of God's people.

But, do you know what? If through that suffering and through that anguish, you have learned, you have become aware of the principle of divine revelation of Truth as the foundation of all righteous knowledge, and you have come to accept the value of the revealed Truth of God's Law, you are much better off, even with the pain of the persecutions and tribulations you have endured. You are better off now than you were early in your calling—those of you who are old enough to have been back there during that time and went through the turmoil in the Worldwide Church of God. You are better off. I know you have been through a lot. I know you are like an old alley cat with your ears chewed—you've been in a lot of battles. You show the scars.

But you are better off. Because, do you know what? You have learned through hard difficulty—but through God's guidance—the way to judge. You have learned to value the fact that God reveals Truth from the beginning and it never changes. And if any man—I don't care who it is—comes along and tries to convince you that we need to change our teaching, our practice on something

because of this or that new interpretation of the Bible, or this paper, or this bit of knowledge or wisdom from some technical scholar—Hebrew or otherwise—you can look at him with confidence and say, "No way. I can spot that a mile away as a deception. I don't need to be a technician; I don't need to be able to follow every rationalization; I don't need to be on your level intellectually; but I know you are dead wrong because that is not what we were taught from the beginning through the chosen servant that God used to reveal Truth in this age." And if that is your standard for evaluation, you see, you are better off, because you can't be deceived. And thirty-five years ago, we were not yet in that position. We were babes because we had not been tested; we hadn't had to go through it to learn the hard way; we never thought our leaders would ever lead us astray. We thought we could just follow them and whatever they said, and they would get us into the Kingdom.

So, the lessons of the last 30 plus years have been brutal. But you are better off if you have come through it and have learned the lessons, because now you are in a strong spiritual condition of being able to discern, so that you cannot be deceived—if you stay close to God and you continue to be inspired by His Holy Spirit. You are in a position to be able to judge and to evaluate. That's a position of power, brethren. That is a position of confidence. That is a position that gives you peace of mind; you don't have to be agitated; you don't have to be worried; you don't have to be concerned about, "Well, I wonder what is the next doctrine they are going to stand up to preach about and to change? I wish things would just stay as they are." But in those other groups, brethren, it's just a matter of time before they change—more and more and more and more. And their people wait for the other shoe to drop: "What are they going to change next? What are they going to claim came by new revelation in a dream, or whatever else, and that God inspired them to make this or that change in doctrine or teaching or practice?" They never know what is coming. They can't ever get their feet down because it's all a shifting foundation under their feet. For you it's not. You have come to value divine revelation and the foundation that really represents Jesus Christ. He is a Rock. He doesn't move. You can stand there and your feet will be solid. If you keep your mind and your eyes upon those things, you are going to be okay. 1 Timothy 4, verse 6:

If thou put the brethren in remembrance of these things, thou shalt be a good minister of Jesus Christ, nourished up in the words of faith and of good doctrine, whereunto thou hast attained. But refuse

profane and old wives' fables, and exercise thyself rather unto godliness. For bodily exercise profiteth little [or a little]: but godliness is profitable unto all things, having promise of the life that now is [that means now, today, brethren, you can have abundance], and of that which is to come [a restatement of Christ's mission in John 10:10: "that you might have life, and that you might have it more abundantly"—blessings physically and spiritually]. This is a faithful saying and worthy of all acceptation. For therefore we both labour and suffer reproach, because we trust in the living God, who is the Saviour of all men, specially of those that believe.

So, yes, you are going to deal with persecution. If you are going to hold on to God's Truth—His Law—and you are not going to compromise it, oh, you're going to suffer; it's not going to be a cakewalk; it's not going to be easy, because you are going to have very many enemies, and yet, you will still have peace of mind which the others do not enjoy. You will have to review on your own Malachi chapter 2, verses 1 through 14—a condemnation of God toward the priests, meaning the ministry, who were entrusted with that doctrine in order to teach it to the people, to Israel. And they didn't do what they were supposed to do because they wouldn't give glory to God's name—they turned and sought the wisdom of human beings for their substantiation of doctrine and teachings, and God said, "I don't accept human wisdom. I gave you the Truth." And, therefore, they are reaping the curses. He says, "Yea, I have cursed them already, because you do not lay it to heart." Malachi 2 and verse 3:

Behold, I will corrupt your seed, and spread dung upon your faces,
even the dung of your solemn feasts.

But I don't think most of them stop to consider. Yes, there are solemn "feasts," there are "holy" convocations going on in these other groups simultaneously with ours in various places around the world, but many of them, God says, He considers as dung. I didn't say it. He did. I don't think any of those people think they are participating in a service which is actually so abominable in the nostrils of God that He treats it as dung, but it is. He says, "even the dung of your solemn feasts." They think they are giving Him an offering that should be acceptable, and God says, just as He did about the offering of Cain: "I don't accept it."

". . . and one shall take you away with it." One what? One particular solemn feast became their Achilles heel—if you will—their downfall. What particular feast was it? Their changes, according to human scholarship, set them on the path of separation from the spring of living water, and they constructed their own broken cisterns that wouldn't hold water. Could it have been Pentecost? It sure seems to fit. Verse 8: "But ye are departed out of the way." They had the Truth. You can't depart from that which you never had. So they did receive it at one time—at the beginning, from a chosen servant. But they just wouldn't hold on to it.

"Ye are departed out of the way; ye have caused many to stumble at the law." Instead of keeping the Law—honoring the Law—and, therefore, receiving the abundance of God's blessings physically and spiritually, these priests, these ministers who corrupted the teachings, have caused the people to stumble at the Law so that they are no longer keeping it. And God is no longer accepting their sacrifices, and so they are not living abundantly—they are not enriched; they are not fulfilled. They are empty, spiritually. They are hungry; they are thirsty; and they don't understand why. We pray for the day when God will help them understand why so that they can get back to receiving the abundance God desires to give them. Read the remainder through verse 14 and you will find that the corruption of the marriage doctrine is the other key thing God highlights here in Malachi chapter 2.

So they have corrupted a particular solemn feast and they have dealt treacherously against the wives of their youth. Does that ring a bell to anybody? Isn't that exactly what they did in that same year of 1974? Three months after the Pentecost change they changed the interpretation of the marriage doctrine to allow wholesale divorce and remarriage, destroying families—and it's still going on. And they wonder why they are cursed today. God help them one day to come to recognize the Truth. Until they repent of their corruption of Pentecost and divorce and remarriage—and the other doctrines they have polluted—they will not enjoy God's abundance. It just won't happen.

Revelation chapter 2 in closing. Revelation 2 and beginning in verse 1:

Unto the angel of the church of Ephesus write; These things saith he that holdeth the seven stars in his right hand, who walketh in the midst of the seven golden candlesticks . . .

Here, brethren, is a prophecy for the last days which is related to those who are pictured under the church of Ephesus. And that's another thing with these other groups: They've gotten into focusing so much upon this church-era theory that they don't think the message to Ephesus applies to us. They think that was the first generation of the church way back in the first century. But it is a prophecy for the last days. And it fits exactly what we have seen happen in the twentieth century, and this small amount of the twenty-first century thus far. What does He say to them? Verse 2:

I know thy works, and thy labour, and thy patience, and how thou canst not bear them which are evil.

A core of these people are sincere—they legitimately care about the things of God; they do fear Him. They love what is pictured by the Holy Days—the plan of salvation—they relish the idea of the Millennial reign of Jesus Christ and this Feast of Tabernacles, and they want these things. They are sincere about that, but there is something wrong.

". . . and thou hast tried them which say they are apostles, and are not, and hast found them liars." They recognize a lot of the imposters. There are certain ones of them of which they say, "I know that he is not it." And, yet, they have still been fooled. Verse 3:

And hast borne, and hast patience, and for my name's sake hast laboured, and hast not fainted.

They are working hard. They are doing all sorts of things in the service of God. They are assembling on Sabbaths and Holy Days; they are tithing; they are doing all of these good works to serve one another; they have many of the pieces of the puzzle; they are energetic; they are sincere. But is it enough? "Nevertheless," verse 4, "I have somewhat against thee . . ." Why? Why are they not receiving the abundance—even though they are doing all of the good things that were listed above? ". . . because thou hast left thy first love." He says, "Because you are not preserving the revelation in full the way I gave it to you. You've still got some pieces of it, but you have allowed your leaders to talk you into changing aspects of it, which I never authorized. So you still look like a faithful church, but you are not, because you have polluted it subtly with these other things."

. . . thou hast left thy first love [the original revelation]. Remember therefore from whence thou art fallen.

They had to have had it in order to have fallen away, brethren. What did they have in the beginning with those teachings? "Remember therefore from whence thou art fallen, and repent, and do the *first works*." "Get back to the Faith once delivered," He is saying. "Put away all of the garbage that your leaders have interjected over the last three decades—which I did not give them—and you get back to what I gave through the chosen servant in these last days." That's what He is telling these represented by Ephesus.

. . . and repent, and do the first works; or else I will come unto thee quickly, and will remove thy candlestick out of his place, except thou repent.

That's what is going to be required in order for them to have the promised abundance. That's what it is going to take for the entire church to be restored—for spiritual Israel to come back into a close relationship with their Heavenly Father; to have repentance under the shed blood of Jesus Christ and to have their senses spiritually satiated through the Holy Spirit; to be filled and not wanting in the midst of their tribulations; to be full; to be satisfied; to have a clear conscience; to have peace of mind; and to feel satisfied.

What did Solomon say was the whole duty of man? To obey God's commandments; to put Him first; to do it the way He said. If we do that, brethren, we have the foundation of the abundance God desires us to enjoy.