

Dear Friends,

The signs of spiritual coldness abound. People who formerly rejoiced in the gospel and in fellowship with other believers spend more time frowning and complaining than in joy and fellowship. All denominations of conservative Bible churches are in decline. In our culture, neighborhoods, workplace, and even in churches, the evidences of interpersonal tension abound over evidences of grace and respectful harmony. We hear much lip-service to an Old Testament passage, but little insight into its meaning.

If my people, which are called by my name, shall humble themselves, and pray, and seek my face, and turn from their wicked ways; then will I hear from heaven, and will forgive their sin, and will heal their land. (2 Chronicles 7:14 KJV)

Who are "**My people**"? No nation under heaven consists exclusively of "My people." Every nation is made up of saved and unsaved, elected and not-elected people. This verse does not apply to any

nation. It applies to "**My people**," the people of God, people, like those who gathered at the newly constructed temple of Solomon in Jerusalem for worship. To discover the true application of this verse, Christians should look in the mirror. Recast the words, "**If I will humble myself, and pray, and seek the Lord's face, and turn from my wicked ways, then the Lord will hear from heaven, and forgive my sin, and heal my life.**"

New Testament discipleship always appears in the form of individual believers.

And he said to *them* all, If any *man* will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross daily, and follow me. (Luke 9:23 KJV)

Jesus said, "**If any man...**" not "If any nation...." Peter--as do all the New Testament writers--perpetuates this teaching of Jesus. In our study lesson, Peter follows this pattern, "**For he that will....**" "**He**" is a singular pronoun, referring to one individual, not to a collective nation or larger group.

Do we see the majority of professing Christians in our culture manifesting that they love life, or do they often manifest anger, bitterness, and fault-magnifying of any who disagree with them? Do they give evidence of seeing good in people and in life, or have they become focused on all that is wrong-- or all that could go wrong?

Do we long for a better day for the people of God? The New Testament provides a simple and clear path. All the things we long for "**Us**" must begin with "**Me**." How do I control my tongue? My moods toward other believers? Do I work to avoid harmful words and actions toward others? The New Testament model of the godly, the "Good life" and an optimistic view of "Good days, must begin with me. If I accept Jesus' words that believers are to be the "Light of the world," how bright is my personal faith light shining? Do I seek and strongly pursue peace with people of different spiritual outlook to mine? A different political view than mine? We can disagree and still be peaceful and gracious. That is the noble life that Jesus taught and that Peter

reflects in our study lesson. Indeed, this is the message of the New Testament to those who believe in Jesus and long to live by His teachings. Although Paul sharply rebuked the Galatian churches in Galatians 1, later in this same letter, he fondly referred to them as "My little children." He would not compromise the truth of Jesus, nor give them permission to do so, but he never stopped caring for them and working for them--and with them--to regain the faith outlook of love and good in their faith and in their lives.

During the next week, month, year--for the remainder of our journey--let's work at looking in the mirror and investing in making the image we see more and more like Jesus, not more like the darkness around us. Then we shall truly shine as His Light in a dark world.

Lord help and bless,
Joe Holder

“The Good Life”—How to Attain It

For he that will love life, and see good days, let him refrain his tongue from evil, and his lips that they speak no guile: Let him eschew evil, and do good; let him seek peace, and ensue it. For the eyes of the Lord are over the righteous, and his ears are open unto their prayers: but the face of the Lord is against them that do evil. And who is he that will harm you, if ye be followers of that which is good? (1 Peter 3:10-13 KJV 1900)

At first thought, we might question this lesson. Doesn't everyone want "The Good Life"? True, but so many people think they can attain that good life by chasing their own windmills. Peter confronts and rejects this idea. God has taught us how to attain a truly good life. If we choose any other path, we shall fail.

Considering Peter's dominant theme in this letter, suffering as a Christian, we should expect some "In-the-trenches" teaching, and the letter doesn't disappoint us. Painful, unfair things invade every life. Solomon warns us of this truth.

I returned, and saw under the sun, that the race is not to the swift, nor the battle to the strong, neither yet bread to the wise, nor yet riches to men of understanding, nor yet favour to men of skill; **but time and chance happeneth to them all.** (Ecclesiastes 9:11 KJV)

This verse clearly rejects the idea that God, by some mysterious "Secret will," micromanages every detail of our life. Yes, He is ever present, and He intervenes and protects us often, but not in such an all-encompassing way as to micromanage every detail. "...**time and chance**" still happen in every life. How we choose to react to those painful, unfair events predicts how we will view life from that day forward. We may keep our focus on our God and His goodness, leading us to find the path of the truly "Good life." Or

we may turn angry and bitter at the pain and unfairness, blame God unfairly for it (Solomon cautions us; God doesn't cause everything that happens to us. "Time and chance" happen to all), and never find the way to the good life.

Peter defines our godly objective in two ways. First, **"For he that will love life."** He did not write, "He that loves life," did he? The human will, unchanged by God's saving grace, is incapable of any favorable thought or action toward God. However, Scripture frequently teaches us that our will, as changed by God's saving grace, is active in our life. We may "Will" to love the good life, or we may "Will" not to seek it. We may "Will" to practice Peter's teachings in this lesson, or we may "Will" not to practice them. Either way we "Will," we shall experience the fruit of our choices.

Secondly, our will to love life leads us to **"see good days."** Our working toward the first goal sends us well on our way to the second. We "See" good in each day. We look for it. Our failure to pursue God's way, loving life and seeing good days, grows a bitter crop. It leads us to find fault with the people around us and the things that happen in our life. We

become bitter and inclined to “See” only bitter, bad things in our life. I fear that many contemporary Christians have ignored this instructive lesson. Their failure is glaring in that they have joined the culture around them, forsaking the Lord’s reminder that we are to be—in our life, faith in Him, and subsequent conduct—the light of the world, not join the darkness around us. You see this failure in so many who profess faith in Jesus, but they are bitter, angry, and suspicious. They often join eagerly with any dark conspiratorial idea and lifestyle that comes their way. They compromise their faith so much that they lead joyless bitter lives. Loving life and seeing good days is out of their reach. In a different context, Paul taught the same lesson that Peter taught in our study passage.

Finally, brethren, whatsoever things are true, whatsoever things are honest, whatsoever things are just, whatsoever things are pure, whatsoever things are lovely, whatsoever things are of good report; if there be any virtue, and if there be any praise, **think on these things**. Those things, which ye have both learned, and received, and heard, and seen in me,

do: and the God of peace shall be with you.
(Philippians 4:8-9 KJV)

It is not always my inclination, but 82 years on this journey has taught me the sterling truth of these verses. When I've disciplined my thoughts to "**these things,**" I've been blessed to experience "Good." And when I've allowed my mind to focus on other things—any other things—the outcome was not good. I've lived the reality of this lesson from both sides, and my experience affirms the truth of God and His word. Instead of practicing Paul's teaching in these verses, many sincere believers have fallen into the same trap. Over time this world-focused mindset will lead to bitter skepticism. And it never results in their truly experiencing secure joy from the "God of peace." Instead of living their divine assignment of being the light of the world, they turn off their spiritual light and join the darkness. You can't spend the week nit-picking your brothers and sisters in the faith and then go to church on Sunday and see the joy of "Light."

...let him refrain his tongue from evil, and his lips that they speak no guile: Let him eschew evil, and do good; let him seek peace, and ensue it. As we see on every page of Scripture, God always shows us how to realize the blessings of the faith highway. True joy in the gospel requires both faith in Jesus and a lifestyle that He teaches us to follow.

...let him refrain his tongue from evil. Oh, how often our words destroy our joy. We don't need word studies to understand this conduct. "Refrain" means stop doing the named behavior. "Evil" means anything that harms someone else. Critical words toward another person always cause harm or hurt in one way or another. Those cutting put-downs you speak to each other at home about your brothers and sisters will invade your attitude toward the object of your "Evil" speaking when you see them. Although you might put on a good face in their presence, your secret thoughts will seep through and manifest in failed deep fellowship and joy with them. Unbridled speech may be the most compromising of sinful habits that Christians try to "Sanctify" and practice.

...and his lips that they speak no guile. Peter doubles down on sins of speech in this list of bad

habits that destroy our potential for good. “Guile” refers to insincere or deceitful words or actions. Our church culture has a habit of commonly referring to other believers with the title “Brother” or “Sister.” If we follow New Testament habits, we reserve that title for special and blessed occasions.

And Ananias went his way, and entered into the house; and putting his hands on him said, **Brother Saul**, the Lord, even Jesus, that appeared unto thee in the way as thou camest, hath sent me, that thou mightest receive thy sight, and be filled with the Holy Ghost. (Acts 9:17 KJV)

However, throughout Acts, when engaged in normal conversation, believers referred to each other by first names. We may become too focused on appearance and religiously refer to each other as “Brother” or “Sister.” Scripture empathizes much more how we treat each other than the title by which we refer to each other. We might practice the title as we speak words of anger or criticism, but Scripture

requires that we treat each other with sincere grace. Titles are far less important than conduct. Far less.

Let him eschew evil, and do good. “Eschew” is not part of our vocabulary. The simple meaning of the word is to stop doing what you are doing, in this case, “Evil,” anything that might be hurtful to another person. Instead of doing evil toward others, Peter reminds us. Seeing good days and love of life requires that we stop speaking or doing hurtful things toward others. Instead, he reminds us to “do good” toward them. During my college years, I read a story that powerfully exemplifies this teaching. After the end of the destructive Civil War in this country, President Abraham Lincoln came under sharp criticism from people because he started a truly constructive effort to restore the nation to one. They thought he should impose harsh penalties on the South, not try to heal the wounds and restore them. Supposedly, when a reporter asked Lincoln to explain his generous efforts to restore the South to the union, Lincoln gave the reporter a one sentence reply, “The best way to destroy your enemy is to make him your friend.” Wow! Amen, Mr. Lincoln. That is avoiding evil and doing good when our carnal inclinations would love

to strike out against another person.

...let him seek peace, and ensue it. The double admonition, “seek...ensue,” adds emphasis to the action taught. To seek anything identifies a mental bent, a desire for something. It is sufficiently intense to motivate action to gain the object of the desire. “Ensue” takes us from the mental to the actual conduct necessary to gain what we “Seek.” It identifies intense and continuing effort. Godliness is never a momentary or occasional “Flash in the pan” effort. It requires us to form long-standing habits. What is it that the lesson teaches us to “Seek and pursue”? **Peace.** Our relationships with others often mirror our relationship with self. **If we do not find peace within, our relationships with others will be stormy.** We find peace within as believers by cultivating and abiding in the faith-highway. Keep our knowledge, respect, and trust in our faithful God prominent in our personal choices and conduct. Emphasize “Keep,” not occasionally think about it. The more we find our own peace with the Lord the more we build stable peaceful relationships with other believers.

For the eyes of the Lord are over the righteous, and his ears are open unto their prayers. Although Scripture faithfully links personal blessings with our godly conduct, it equally teaches us that our motivating passion should be to honor the Lord, not gain something for self. Why are we to do all the things Peter teaches that lead us to love life and see good days? Because the Lord teaches us, not the one man who wrote this letter. Faith motivates us to act for the Lord's honor and glory. In this thought, we are to do these things, because we know that we answer to the Lord, and He always "Sees" and knows. If we speak a word of criticism against another believer privately to a close friend or family member, that person may never know what we said, but the Lord knows. Based on what we learn from Scripture, does our peace with our brothers and sisters in Christ matter to Him? Yes. We are children in His family, and He always teaches His children to respectfully and lovingly live at peace with each other. Your brother or sister may, in your opinion, not deserve your effort to live peacefully with them. What does that matter? Does the Lord deserve our faithful obedience to Him? So, if He teaches us to faithfully and constantly work for peaceful harmony with His

children, we should work to practice what He teaches because He deserves our obedience.

...but the face of the Lord is against them that do evil. The context of this lesson is all about how believers treat each other. It is not about who is eternally saved or lost. Therefore, “**...them that do evil**” primarily describes the hateful and hurtful actions and words of people in His family. If His “Face” is against us, rest assured, He is not happy with our hurtful words and ways. And His chastening shall affirm His disapproval in His time and way.

And who is he that will harm you, if ye be followers of that which is good? What value, spiritual value in the eyes of God, is there to all the sinful habits we often embrace from the darkness around us? Anger, bitterness, suspicion, and obsessing about supposed conspiracies of wicked men? What about investing our emotions and time in these trappings of darkness enhances our “**Think on these things**” teaching from Scripture? What about those habits of darkness evoke the “**Peace of God**” to be with us? Does evil exist? Of course, it does. There is nothing new about evil men and their evil designs.

It has always flourished in wicked people from the Garden of Eden.

So, what should we do to oppose evil and to pursue God's way? Peter's whole lesson answers the question, but his summary conclusion highlights the point. **Follow that which is good.** Did Peter teach us to do something in addition to following good? Not one thing. We cannot gain any ground against the real evil in the world by abandoning God's ways and pursuing our own. We win the battle against evil only to the extent we invest ourselves, emotions, time, and actions, in following God. And we follow good because the Lord teaches us to do just that. Trust Him to righteously judge evil doers. That is His prerogative. Ours is to practice His Word. In addition to the primary goal of honoring Him in this lifestyle, His loving Fatherly care also adds a special "Family" blessing. Along the way we grow to love the life of the faith-highway, and we discover the good which He has showered into our life. His way always works! Trust Him and pursue it.

Elder Joe Holder