

December 2020

Dear Brethren:

It is a blessing to write to you, those whom God has called and who value His Way of Life. Now that we have returned from the Feast of Tabernacles, have become ensconced in our daily lives, and see the end of the year rapidly approaching, it is a good time to reflect upon the past year. We recall our successes, failures, and can set goals for the next year to keep our momentum going.

### **What Do We Believe?**

To do that, we should review and confirm what we believe. By reviewing fundamental concepts we can better focus upon and prioritize what is profoundly important to us and minimize distractions.

Where there is no vision, the people perish: but he that keepeth the law, happy is he (Proverbs 29:18).

The *New King James Version* explains it plainly: "Where there is no revelation, the people cast off restraint; But happy is he who keeps the law." A characteristic of the carnal mind is that when focus or vision is lost or clouded, adherence to a set of principles diminishes. When we lose sight of our goal and purpose in life we can "cast off restraint" and begin to live by our carnal minds. Physically and mentally we may begin to act and react based upon our carnal minds and emotions, and not according to revealed spiritual Truth. Out of routine and habit we may observe God's Law on a physical basis, but the mind can revert to its built-in, natural way of thinking. Satan will attempt to attack our minds, too. The danger is that we may not catch it unless we are constantly evaluating ourselves.

Is it not easy to be consumed with a busy life, filled with family, school, work and other obligations? Our minds are filled with these current needs while we diligently try to "fit" spiritual time into our days. Often, we seem unable to find enough time for prayer, Bible study and meditation. Without that daily spiritual support, we in effect cast off restraint and live more according to our natural minds. The balancing act is not easy. Frequently, there will be things that we want to accomplish but need to set aside while we choose spiritual time instead. Many of these things involve choice, and these daily choices are part of God's evaluation of us as we demonstrate to Him what is most important in our

lives. What physical things might we need to set aside, or reduce, to ensure we are properly adding spiritual things?

Lay not up for yourselves treasures upon earth, where moth and rust doth corrupt, and where thieves break through and steal: But lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust doth corrupt, and where thieves do not break through nor steal: For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also (Matthew 6:19–21).

Why would someone even want to sacrifice now and forgo a "better life"? As a reminder, what is God offering? Eternal life in His Family. What is necessary that we might be found worthy to be added to His Family? The development of righteous character. How do we develop righteous character? By changing our minds and remaining faithful to Him no matter what trial, obstacle, or difficulty we face.

## **Our Goal**

If we want to become God and be added to His Family, we need to make certain choices in our lives. We can make proper choices if we clearly see, understand, value and remember the promise. Are our top goals in life to change our minds, develop righteous character, withstand difficulties, and endure to the end? Are we willing to sacrifice completely, or only up to a certain point?

If we are honest with ourselves, we will know that we have not totally given up the self. It may be that we do not want to give up certain habits or thoughts, so we avoid thinking about them. We may not even see certain things that need to be changed in ourselves. We also may identify habits and thoughts that need to change but fail as we continuously struggle to overcome weaknesses. Numerous things affect our thinking and actions. Regardless of our shortcomings, Jesus Christ provided an example to follow. He willingly subjected Himself to the will of the Father and overrode all carnal, human desires. He had perfect clarity of vision, supplemented with perfect action. He had a carnal mind just like us, but was able to control it through the power of the Holy Spirit, always staying focused spiritually. Before His crucifixion, Jesus Christ understood what He was about to encounter, and, as a human, did not want to go through the horrendous experience. But He overrode that thought instantly and subjected Himself to the Father's will.

And he was withdrawn from them about a stone's cast, and kneeled down, and prayed, Saying, Father, if thou be willing, remove this cup from me: nevertheless not my will, but thine, be done (Luke 22:41–42).

Jesus Christ's goal was to fulfill the Father's will and become the Savior of mankind. He never wavered or lost focus. He was killed for us. He was martyred for us. He taught us the path to follow. He taught us to willingly lay down our lives.

Therefore doth my Father love me, because I lay down my life, that I might take it again. No man taketh it from me, but I lay it down of myself. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it again. This commandment have I received of my Father (John 10:17–18).

### **Examples of Martyrs**

A common definition of *martyr* is a person who is put to death or endures great suffering on behalf of any belief, principle, or cause. The Bible provides numerous examples of those killed, in one way or another, because of their faithfulness and adherence to God's laws. You can say that Abel was the first martyr. Both he and Cain were taught what was expected of them. Abel followed God's command and brought an acceptable offering. Cain's was not accepted because he decided to alter it somehow. When told his offering would not be accepted, he became angry and later killed Abel.

Because of Abel's actions, those of righteousness, he was slain. When we think of martyrdom, do we think a similar thing may happen to us, and for a similar reason—someone sees you living a righteous life and is so convicted by their unrighteous life that they choose to remove their conflict of conscience by killing you? That may happen, and hopefully we will be living that kind of exemplary life. But that does not really help us, today, during our conversion. It may feel good to think of ourselves as being martyred due to righteousness, but are any of us in that category? Don't we all have much more work to do? What other examples might help us today?

We infrequently think of Antipas, partly because there was not much known about him.

And to the angel of the church in Pergamos write; These things saith he which hath the sharp sword with two edges; I know thy works, and where thou dwellest, even where Satan's seat is: and thou holdest fast my name, and hast not denied my faith, even in those days wherein Antipas was my faithful martyr, who was slain among you, where Satan dwelleth (Revelation 2:12–13).

God called Antipas a faithful martyr, which means he adhered to the revealed Truth and would not compromise. This is precisely the category in which we want to find

ourselves: faithful to the revealed Truth that can be traced all the way back to Moses. We do not know details, but we can deduce that Antipas was being coerced to deny Christ in some fashion and to accept a corrupt doctrine. He refused. History and tradition indicate Antipas was martyred in 92 A.D. by being placed in a brass, bull-shaped container and roasted.

How gruesome is that! Because he chose to hold on to the Faith Once Delivered he was killed in a horrible way. He must have been given an opportunity to compromise but resisted. He made a deliberate choice. Why? Because he remembered the promise and believed. That promise meant more to him than his current circumstance and physical life. If we are faced with any life-or-death situation what will we do? Will we hold on to the Truth and refuse to compromise? Or, will we try to preserve our lives? Antipas had the Holy Spirit guiding and strengthening him. We do too! Should we not be able to withstand likewise?

Yes, but if we are not fully onboard with God's plan, if we are not confident in God's promise, if we are not convinced of the Faith Once Delivered, if we do not value it more than everything else, will we really stand strong? Most likely, no. If we are not making decisions to resist temptations and pass small tests now, can we rightly assume we will suddenly change and be able to pass a "big" test in the future? Can a person run a marathon of 26.2 miles while being a couch potato? Is not training needed to run two, then five, then ten miles and eventually a full marathon? It takes time, dedication, and sacrifice over a protracted period of time. Your spiritual race is no different.

Think of the example Mr. Raymond Cole frequently gave of a spiritual ladder and the necessity of building one rung of faith before we can step up to the next rung as we climb higher. Our first step cannot be a rung five feet high but needs to be close to the ground. As we build and exercise faith, we are then able to take the next step. If we do not have the desire or strength to resist small things now, why would we suddenly have it in the future for something like a life-or-death situation? Does that start to impress upon you how important it is to know and believe what comprises the Faith Once Delivered, and to begin making small choices and sacrifices every day as part of your spiritual training? Are you spiritually in shape, or a spiritual couch potato?

### **Sir Thomas More**

Sir Thomas More is another great example. He was not called, and he did not have the Truth revealed to him. But there is something valuable we can learn from his life. Thomas More was born in London in 1478. When he was young, he served as a page in the

household of John Morton, the Archbishop of Canterbury. Later, he studied at Oxford University and then was admitted to one of England's legal societies to study law in preparation for a legal career. He was torn between a profession and becoming a monk, but his sense of duty to serve his country overrode that and was the basis for him entering Parliament in 1504.

In 1517, he entered King Henry VIII's service and became one of the King's most trusted and effective civil servants. He acted as his secretary, interpreter, speechwriter, chief diplomat, advisor, and confidant. In 1521 he was knighted and in 1523 he became speaker of the House of Commons. He was building an impressive career and life. Over the years, he also gained a reputation as a scholar and remained a passionate defender of the Catholic faith. He wrote pamphlets against heresy, banned unorthodox books, and even interrogated heretics.

Things began to turn sour for him in 1527 when King Henry VIII tried to use the Bible to prove his marriage to Catherine of Aragon was void. The problem was that she did not produce a male heir, and King Henry used that as justification to divorce her. Thomas More, however, did not agree. Over the next several years, the King began to disregard more of the laws of the church and grew closer to separating from the Church of Rome. King Henry then declared himself the supreme head of the Church of England and divorced Catherine of Aragon in order to marry Anne Boleyn. Sir Thomas More continued to argue against the King's divorce and break from Rome. He was exercising faith, and building strength, in his daily life, year by year. In 1534, he was arrested after refusing to accept the King as head of the Church of England and the annulment of his marriage to Catherine of Aragon.

Sir Thomas More was tried for treason and beheaded on July 6, 1535. His final words were: "The King's good servant, but God's first." Sir Thomas More held to, and lived by, his convictions throughout his life, including the resolve not to water down or modify the Catholic doctrine on divorce. He could have saved his life if he had compromised on doctrine a little here or there. But he did not. He chose to lay down his life, willingly, instead of compromising. When the time came for his life-or-death choice, he was strong enough to hold firm. He was strong enough in his convictions because he had been living them, and standing up for them, year after year. What an example!

How many of God's called children, who had the inspiration and power of the Holy Spirit, compromised that exact point in the mid-1970s in order to pursue their doctrinal preferences? How many over the decades received the Truth, only to reject Jesus Christ by compromising doctrine? How many in this fellowship now retain small errors in doctrinal concepts, or customs, that have been clearly stated by this ministry as not being part of the Faith Once Delivered? How many are still putting personal desires over accepting what God may have them endure to prove what matters most?

## Our Lives

It is easy to think of ourselves as standing firm for the Truth in the face of imminent death because we like to see ourselves that strong spiritually—a martyr for God and righteousness! For some, there is even a facet of vanity in the thought of being martyred because of a desire to show other people their righteousness. The fact is that some will indeed be martyred. But how is it that any one of us will be strong enough at that time? To begin, we need to step on the first rung of the ladder of faith and work to climb higher. Eventually, we should be high up the ladder, or strong spiritually.

We do not need to think of a future time to demonstrate our willingness to be martyred. In a sense, we have already committed to being one. If a martyr is a person who is put to death or endures great suffering on behalf of any belief, principle, or cause, does that not describe our commitment at baptism? No, there is no outside force putting us in harm's way or attempting to kill us. There is no challenge to deny Christ or die if we do not comply. What can we learn from these examples? Each lived, daily, according to his conviction and would not compromise, even to the point of death.

Know ye not, that so many of us as were baptized into Jesus Christ were baptized into his death? Therefore we are buried with him by baptism into death: that like as Christ was raised up from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life. For if we have been planted together in the likeness of his death, we shall be also in the likeness of his resurrection: Knowing this, that our old man is crucified with him, that the body of sin might be destroyed, that henceforth we should not serve sin (Romans 6:3–6).

Baptism symbolizes the death and burial of our old selves—the self that was governed by a carnal mind and contrary to God and His laws. Baptism signifies that our old, selfish, vain, and sinful nature must die. It shows that we have willingly started the process of laying down our old lives for a new life.

If you find that you do not have the strength or resolve to put maximum effort toward overcoming your carnal mind now, is it plausible to think that in the future you will lack the strength or resolve when faced with a serious challenge? Why do you honestly think you can do something in the future that you are not doing now? So how do you climb that ladder of spiritual faith? How do you exercise your spiritual muscles and demonstrate your desire and willingness to stand up for the Truth?

## Die a Little Every Day

You must die a little every day by making choices to resist the pulls of your carnal mind. Each time you make a choice to resist a carnal temptation and hold to a spiritual principle, you are gaining spiritual strength. The more you do this, the stronger you should become. The less you do this, the weaker you remain. This, in essence, is your spiritual training, and your goal is to become strong in all areas of your life.

Physical observance of doctrines is step one in the process, and is required. But physical observance alone will not develop righteous character, nor will it give us the strength to stand firm and be martyred. We must believe and change our minds. We kill the old and add the new. Remember, for our qualification, Jesus Christ will evaluate whether we have added and lived by the traits of the Holy Spirit as part of the development of righteous character.

How exactly do we add, and live by, traits of the Holy Spirit? Let us start with several basics. Listed below are traits that are rooted in a carnal mind, and things we must change. Identify yourself in these points, and then begin the work of changing your mind. It may take a short time to accomplish, or be a lifelong battle with continual failures. Either way, by fighting to change, you will be demonstrating your willingness to lay down your carnal mind and add a spiritual mind. This is standing up for the Truth today—*by living it*. Prove that you will be willing in the future by doing it today.

1. Do you actually listen, or do you simply wait for someone to stop talking so you can continue talking about your interests?
2. Do you take advantage of someone else's kindness and willingness to help and serve for your personal benefit?
3. Do you remember that you may be judging a person incorrectly because of a lack of information, or lack of understanding of their weaknesses?
4. Are you critical of others but lenient with yourself? Do you give little time and space for others when they make mistakes, yet desire patience and tolerance while you work through weaknesses?
5. Do you think, "How long do I have to keep putting up with this person's weaknesses?" How long does Jesus Christ do that for you?

6. Do you treat some people better by giving them the benefit of the doubt or overlooking faults, but instantly criticize others? Do you accept criticism from some, but not others? Would not God call you a respecter of persons?

7. Do you think about your reasons and motives before doing something? Is it out of service, or is there a desire for personal gain?

8. Do you criticize anyone when they have a different view of right and wrong, apart from doctrinal matters? Do you criticize people for not doing things your way, or get frustrated when they do things differently than you? Do you spend more time thinking about other people's faults rather than your own?

9. Are you a peacemaker, or do problems constantly surround you?

10. Have you blinded yourself to applications of fundamental teachings because at heart you do not want to obey? For example, do you say you are diligent with diet but give yourself plenty of excuses? We avoid pork and shellfish and work hard to eliminate refined sugars and flours from our diet. But how many times do we need to be reminded that just because a product is labeled organic does not mean it is not laden with white sugar or white flour? "Organic" does not always mean good for us. It may simply be poison without extra chemicals and pesticides! In a desire to solve a dietary problem, have we assumed that if it says "gluten free" it is healthy to eat? How much modified tapioca starch, potato starch, modified cellulose and guar gum is good to have?

11. Have you given up or stunted your spiritual growth? Have you stopped trying to get over hurt feelings because of being treated unfairly? Do you feel that because of a past event you are not able to respond positively now? It is true that we can be damaged emotionally and face major difficulties in resolving problems. There are things that may take many years to overcome. Are you really trusting God, using the power of the Holy Spirit, and making an effort? Or have you given up by saying it cannot be done? If so, whose mind just gained dominance?

### **Tomorrow Is No Different Than Today**

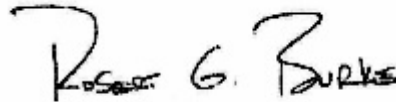
Jesus Christ was the Word made flesh. He gave us the Law and told us to remain faithful in order to receive the promise of glory.

But he that shall endure unto the end, the same shall be saved (Matthew 24:13).



Do you have enough love and regard for the Truth that you would remain faithful unto death? If it is that valuable and special to you, then you will not compromise at that time. But if it is that valuable and special to you, neither will you be compromising today. You stand for the Truth today—and demonstrate your love and regard for it—by making maximum effort to change your carnal mind and to lay down your old self the way Christ instructed. We do that by changing our thinking and developing righteous character. The points listed above are only a few examples of what we need to change. We have weaknesses and may face repeated failures. Even so, let us work diligently on ourselves and our minds, and leave the rest in God's hands. If we do, we may indeed have the strength to face whatever we encounter in the future.

Your servant in Christ,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Robert G. Burke". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large initial 'R'.

Robert G. Burke

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Jon W. Brisby". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large initial 'J'.

Jon W. Brisby