

Wilderness Wandering (Part 2)

Does Doctrine Really Matter?

John W. Ritenbaugh

Given 10-Nov-01; Tape #529

We are going to begin this sermon in Proverbs 16:25. This is a proverb which Herbert Armstrong very often used, and it is one that is given twice in the book of Proverbs. The other time is in Proverbs 14:12.

Proverbs 16:25 There is a way that seems right unto a man, but the end thereof are the ways of death.

The proverb is a warning that any evil activity that seems successful and safe could take any number of turns to destruction. It is interesting that the Hebrew in this instruction is in the plural, and it could easily be translated "the *roads* of death." Or if we want to make a more literal translation of the verse, we could say, "The roads of death are many, but they all end at one place: death."

Direction, or a course of life, is not always what it seems to be. The imagery that is used in this scripture is that of a traveler who feels that he is on a strange road at the time, and it seems safe, but it is fatal because the destination is wrong. An issue in the proverb is one of how deceptive evil is. It might promise, and even deliver large quantities of happiness, of power, and a seemingly good life, but it cannot sustain what it gives beyond the grave.

Several months ago during the period that we were looking intensively into the Pentecost issue, I gave a sermon that asked a question, "Do not little things matter?" This explores the world's proposition that one can afford to overlook little things, thinking they no longer matter under the New Covenant, that all that really matters is the spirit of the activity, and if you are in a good spirit, and if you are in a good activity, then everything is okay.

This sermon follows the same general theme, but it is more directly focused on what we would consider doctrines, especially doctrines important to the church of God. This subject came to mind because David Grabbe recently downloaded an interesting report from the Internet involving the Sabbath. I think that you would consider the Sabbath doctrine to be important to the church of God, but to the rest of the world of religion it is a matter of small concern.

It seems that the pastor of an Illinois Seventh Day Adventist Church offered one million dollars to anyone who could show him anywhere in the Bible that one is commanded to keep any day other than the Sabbath. He may have received some challenges from some sincere but uninformed people. The serious theologians know that such a command does not exist in the Bible. The Seventh Day pastor is on safe ground; however, shortly thereafter a second report appeared which featured comments made in response to the first report.

The overall tenor of the comment followed a familiar pattern. That is, if you cannot really defeat the challenge, ridicule it or the author. Attempts to make the challenge seem foolish. This

approach is nothing but a dodge, but one person likened it to trying to determine how many angels can dance on the head of a pin. The underlying thought in this ploy is that it does not matter *when* you worship God, because one can worship God at any time.

Another person used the "time has been lost" theme. In other words, there is no accurate calendar available to mankind, so it is a spin of the dice, and any day is as good as another. Even Jerry Falwell chipped in to what I think was a fairly surprising one. I do not know that he sent it in himself, or that somebody quoted him, but at any rate he was given credit because he said that he personally believed that Jesus was crucified on a Wednesday, and He arose at six o'clock p.m. three days and three nights later. However, he said, "When Jesus arose from the dead, it was already Sunday by Jewish and biblical reckoning."

Turn now to Romans 14:1-5. This is a set of scriptures that is fairly frequently used in this particular argument.

Romans 14:1-6 Him that is weak in the faith receive you, but not to doubtful disputations [that is, hair-splitting arguments]. For one believes that he may eat all things: another, who is weak, eats herbs [or vegetables]. Let not him that eats despise him that eats not: and let not him which eats not judge him that eats: for God has received him. Who are you that judges another man's servant? To his own master he stands or falls. Yes, he shall be held up: for God is able to make him stand. One man esteems one day above another: another esteems every day alike. Let every man be fully persuaded in his own mind. He that regards the day, regards it unto the Lord, and he that regards not the day, to the Lord he does not regard it. He that eats, eats to the Lord, for he gives God thanks; and he that eats not, to the Lord he eats not, and gives God thanks.

It is true that by adhering rigidly to the common misunderstanding of what people think the word *worship* means, that one can worship God on any day that one chooses, but the common misunderstanding is not what this context is concerned with. The weaknesses that Paul is talking about here is in reference to matters of "the *faith*". The Fourth Commandment is not at issue here. At issue here are matters of personal preference such as some matters pertaining to diet, eating or fasting, or not eating, or eating things sold in market places fearing they may have been offered to an idol.

If the keeping of the Sabbath were simply a matter of personal preference, and therefore morally indifferent, we would have to apply the same principle of judgment to the rest of the Ten Commandments, because then the rest would also be matters of merely personal preference. One could say, "I prefer to murder, and that person does not prefer to murder," or "I prefer to commit adultery, and that person does not prefer to commit adultery, or lie." We are not talking here that the commandments are matters of personal preference. The Sabbath is **not** a matter of personal preference.

The common misunderstanding of the word "worship" is limited to a formal worship service. Biblically, the word "worship" can mean to reverence God in a formal manner or setting in a church service, but it also includes things like bowing and praying in reverence, because God confronts one at any time different from a normal service. I want to show you an example of

this in Genesis 24: 26 and 52. This is just so clear. Now this is worship happening at any time.

Genesis 24:24-26 And she said unto him, I am the daughter of Bethuel the son of Milcah, which she bare unto Nahor. She [Rebekah] said moreover unto him [the servant of Abraham], We have both straw and provender enough, and room to lodge in. And the man bowed down his head, and worshipped the LORD.

It does not say that this was the Sabbath day. This is something that can happen at any time, and the Bible is showing that you can worship God at any time. It does not necessarily have to be a formal service.

Genesis 24:52 And it came to pass that when Abraham's servant heard their words, he worshipped the LORD, bowing himself to the earth.

This is not worship as is intended in the Sabbath commandment. In its widest application worship can also mean what one does *all* the time in reference to God, whether work, play, education, within marriage and childrearing, or in business. In other words, all the activities of one's life are devoted to God out of respect in regard to Him. In its broadest sense, this can be considered in the biblical sense as worship.

But this is a far cry from the Fourth Commandment where we are commanded to keep the Sabbath in a holy convocation. That is not at issue in Romans 14. Since biblical worship is not limited to the common misunderstanding, that statement that one can worship God at any time is nothing more than another misleading dodge. It does not address the issue regarding the Sabbath question.

We are going to turn to the book of Isaiah as we begin to broaden out the overall subject of this sermon to include *why* people get these strange ideas in the land of Israel. And the way things are today in the land of Israel, these things need to be understood.

Isaiah 1:2-3 Hear, O heavens, and give ear, O earth: for the LORD has spoken, I have nourished and brought up children [the Israelites, and specifically here the Judahites], and they have rebelled against me. The ox knows his owner, and the ass his master's crib: but Israel does not know, my people do not consider.

Israel does not know the God of the Bible. On television recently the entire nation was privileged to witness the vivid display of the typical Israelitish approach to religion. We witnessed three Protestant clerics, including a woman, a Catholic priest, a Jewish rabbi, and an Islamic cleric participating in the same worship service at the National Cathedral. They did this in a spirit of unity because of the national emergency, even though they all believe differently about many things relating to God and religion. Normally they have very strong disagreements over doctrine.

Now did the same God teach all of them different things about Himself, and what pleases Him? I think that the overwhelming majority of people watching that display are led to that impression, that it does not matter what one believes about the way to God, and thus God Himself does not care either. Not only does that suddenly teach that God does not care, but also it implies

strongly that He has no plan, that any old way will do as long as one is a nice person, because all God wants is for people to accept Jesus Christ and to be saved, and that there is no specific goal to which God is bringing them.

The answer to my question about God being the same God who taught them things about Himself and what pleases Him is "yes." It was the same god, but it was not the God of the Bible. It was not the God of the Bible who did this confusing and hypocritical practice, and it ought to be clear to us that Israel *does not know* the true God. That is just as it says here. "Israel does not know."

To add to this, I recently heard of a woman who is obviously drifting away from the church of God. She is still interested in religion, and so she has gotten into the habit of routinely watching Protestant preaching services on television. In question on this, her justification about doing this practice was that, "They are all so nice." She meant that they conduct themselves well, and that she felt safe listening to their messages because their conduct leads her to conclude that they believe the same things that we do. It apparently never entered her mind that being *nice* can be nothing more than a public relations skill.

Evelyn and I met a very *nice* young man yesterday, and another very *nice* young woman at the hotel that we are staying in. But let me ask you a question. "Did Satan appear before Adam and Eve in the Garden as some monstrous apparition scaring them half to death? That is not the picture that I get. He came with every appealing public relations ploy, confronting them with a seemingly logical rationale that any choice they made was just as good as the one that God appointed. They of course fell for it.

Proverbs 31: 30 says that *charm*—being nice—is deceitful. It is charming, and it can hide a multitude of not-so-obvious flaws. It can be nothing more than a ploy to hide, or to achieve, what God would surely call vanity, useless goals, pursuits, or practices.

That assembly of ministers that we witnessed at the National Cathedral overwhelmingly believes that this is God's world, and therefore they do not really separate themselves from it, and they participate fully in its wars and politics. They believe that heaven is the reward of the saved, and that keeping the law is not necessary for salvation, and thus repentance is rarely a sermon subject, nor is growing in the grace and knowledge of Jesus Christ, or going on to perfection.

They believe that one can be buried in baptism by dropping a few drops of water on one's head. Most of them do not believe in the *laying on of hands*. They believe in a god who tortures people in an ever-burning hell that one goes to immediately after death, because it is all tangled up regarding the resurrection. They do not believe that God is going to give everyone a fair chance for salvation by fully revealing Himself to each and every other person in His own good time.

They do not believe that mankind's ultimate destiny is to be part of the Family of God, even as God is God, even though by putting together a number of clear scriptures it can easily be seen and understood.

I know that you know that I could go on naming specific doctrines this world's Christianity deviates from, but I have a question. If it does not matter much at all what a person believes, why are some portions of the Bible filled with specific instructions regarding *who, what, why,*

where, and how things are to be done?

In my last sermon I showed you from Scripture that God directly led Israel the *whole* way to a specific end: the Promised Land. Now suppose a Protestant, Catholic, Jewish, or Muslim cleric was leading the Israelites in the wilderness. Would they end at the same place as God, with each one of them going a different way? That is utterly impossible.

Acts 9:1-2 And Saul, yet breathing out threatenings and slaughter against the disciples of the Lord, went unto the high priest, and desired of him letters to Damascus to the synagogues, that if he found any of this way, whether they were men or women, he might bring them bound unto Jerusalem.

My Bible has a center reference, and it says in regard to the word "this" is verse 2, "the." ". . . if he found any of *the way*."

Acts 18:24-26 And a certain Jew named Apollos, born at Alexandria, an eloquent man, and mighty in the scriptures, came to Ephesus. This man was instructed in the way of the LORD; and being fervent in the spirit, he spake and taught diligently the things of the LORD, knowing only the baptism of John. And he began to speak boldly in the synagogue: whom when Aquila and Priscilla had heard, they took him unto them, and expounded unto him *the way* of God more perfectly.

That is very clear.

Acts 19:23 And the same time there arose no small stir about that way.

Again, in the margin it changes the word "that" to "the." Turn now to Acts 24. In this chapter Paul is before Felix, pleading his case.

Acts 24:14, 22 But this I confess unto you, that after the way which they call heresy, so worship I the God of my fathers, believing all things which are written in the law and in the prophets. . . And when Felix heard these things, having more perfect [or complete or accurate] knowledge of that way, he deferred them, and said, When Lysias the chief captain shall come down, I will know the uttermost of your matter.

Again my Bible changes the word "that" to the word "the" in the margin.

Acts 16:17 The same [a demon-possessed woman] followed Paul and us, and cried, saying, These men are the servants of the most high God, which show unto us the way of salvation.

"*The way*." In every case the definite article is used, not indicating something general, but rather in sharp contrast something very specific, as shown by the repeated use of "the."

The word "way" in my *Reader's Digest Oxford Complete Word Finder* has twenty distinct applications in the English language; however, three of them caught my eye in particular. They are: 1) A course or route for reaching a place, especially the best one; 2) A method or plan for

reaching an object; 3) A specified direction.

From the same dictionary you will find one of "way's" usages is to describe *the unique*. This is very interesting. Now because of the definite article "the," that is *exactly* how it is used in these verses here in the book of Acts.

In the book of Isaiah, does not somebody speak out from behind a person and say, "*This* is the way. Walk you in it."? This is a specific direction that is unique.

Christianity, as inspired by God, is a *unique* way of life, which by following, one can obtain salvation. That is what all of those verses in Acts says: a *unique way* to be saved.

The word "unique" from the same dictionary is described as meaning: "all of which there is only *one*." If something is unique, there is only *one*. It means unequaled; having no like, equal, or parallel. It means something that stands by itself. By God's own testimony, in His Word, there is only one way to get there, and that is the way He is leading each of us—the emphasis on the word *He*, because He says in His word, "I have led you the *whole* way."

I was encouraged by a very brief letter to the editor that appeared in *The Charlotte Observer*. This letter was written in response to a whole series of articles, arguments, and essays that appeared in *The Charlotte Observer* on October 15, that were taken up with the current crisis in the world and Christianity, specifically as it applied to the United States.

The entire viewpoint on Religion Page of October 15 was taken up with war and Christianity. Would it not suffice to say that since Christ taught love for one's enemies, do good for evil, turn the other cheek, etc., that a nation practicing Christianity cannot long survive? We've pitted ourselves too long with the flag wrapped around the Bible. A Christian nation killing the enemy, and promising to kill the enemy, is an oxymoron. There's nothing wrong with America defending itself. Christianity works great too. They just won't work together.

Jesus said, "My kingdom is not of this world. If it were, then My servants would fight." Christianity and this world are *not* compatible with the United States and its way, or any other way, in any other part, in any other nation of the world, and yet the church has to live within the hostilities of the ways of these nations, and it is something that we have to deal with. This world and its religions, its politics and warfare are not part of God's way. Adam Clarke's comment on Acts 9: 2 states:

That "way" implies the whole of the worship due to Him, and prescribed by Himself—the way or path in which He wills men to walk, that they may get safely through life.

Better than insight, the statement, especially as it contains the word *whole*—"the whole of the worship due Him"—this world's Christianity is in the very seriously damaging habit of eliminating any of God's requirements if they decide that they are too uncomfortable to deal with. Why is it this way since the Word of God is so easily available? I think that I know what has happened in our cultures, and there is an eerily familiar parallel between ancient Israel and modern-day Israel, giving evidence once again that human nature never changes.

Go now to Acts 20: 27. Paul is addressing the Ephesian elders for the very last time. He is on his way back to Jerusalem. He knows that he will probably never see them again, and he never did,

but he claims to them:

Acts 20:27 For I have not shunned to declare unto you *all* the counsel of God.

The word "counsel" here can be translated "advice," "will," or "purpose." "I have not failed to give you the whole will or purpose of God." Paul was a vehicle through which God's doctrines were given the called-out ones. Let us apply this first of all to the Israelites in the wilderness. We see a first century example that Paul did not fail in the job that was given to him, and I am sure that none of the other apostles failed either.

Hebrews 4:1-2 Let us therefore fear, lest a promise being left us of entering into his rest, any of you should seem to come short of it. For unto us was the gospel preached, as well as unto them; but the word preached did not profit them, not being mixed with faith in them that heard it.

I am absolutely certain that the apostle Paul, the prophet Moses, and Aaron did not fail to give the counsel of God to the Israelites in the wilderness. But what did they do? They rejected it. They did not believe it, and with a multitude of rationalizations they refused to believe it, and they died in the wilderness. In other words, they were not saved. They did not reach the land of safety, the land of inheritance, because their personal conduct shows that they refused to follow *the way*. By their conduct they kept deviating at forks in the road.

Paul made another statement in regard to the Israelites of his day in Romans 10:13. I want to apply this to us today, because the principle that is here applies to us.

Romans 10:13-17 For whosoever shall call upon the name of the Lord shall be saved. How then shall they call on him in whom they have not believed? [That is the world in general out there.] And how shall they believe in him of whom they have not heard? And how shall they hear without a preacher? And how shall they preach, except they be sent? As it is written, How beautiful are the feet of them that preach the gospel of peace, and bring glad tidings of good things! But they have not all obeyed the gospel. [There is the problem. It is not that they did not hear. It is not that they did not have the opportunity to hear. They simply did not obey it.] For Isaiah says, Lord, who has believed our report? So then faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of God.

Through the written word—if we start applying this in a modern setting—has there ever been a time in the history of mankind when the Bible has not been so readily available as it is now? The United States alone turns out millions of Bibles every year, and they are distributed all over the world in I do not know how many different languages. For the purpose of this sermon I am only concerned about Israel at this time what they got through the written word, because the Bible is so easily available, and verbally through mass communication. God has made the gospel available to modern Israel in this wilderness of religious confusion, but modern man has refused to believe the whole of it. Romans 1:16-17 makes it very clear.

Romans 1:16-17 For I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ: for it is the power of God unto salvation to every one that believes: to the Jew first, and also to the

Greek. For therein [in the gospel] is the righteousness of God revealed from faith to faith: as it is written, The just shall live by faith.

In the days of Moses it was preached and not believed. The way of salvation was given to them, and they died in the wilderness. In the apostles' day in the first century, Paul is saying in principle the same things, but very few were hearing and believing, and we are seeing the witness in modern Israel. The Bible has never been more available than it is now, and the church of God, at least through Herbert Armstrong, God made a witness available to millions—tens of millions, and maybe hundreds of millions of people—over almost a sixty-year period of time.

But what has happened in practical application? The world of Christianity has focused on Jesus Christ to the virtual exclusion of everything else, picking and choosing doctrines. Sometimes it seems almost at random, and thus neglecting commanded responsibilities like keeping the laws of God that Jesus clearly stated that He did not come to destroy. This includes such obvious things as keeping the Sabbath and the holy days which the Bible shows that Jesus Himself kept.

I am sure that you are aware that except for the Psalms, most of Christianity has virtually rejected two-thirds of "the every word of God" that we are commanded to live by, and so they are confronted with the impossible task of attempting to produce a specific product without using many of its ingredients.

Let me give you some principles that appear first of all in the book of Leviticus that we went over in some past sermons. I am only interested in the principle that is here. This instruction broadly applies to the meal offering.

Leviticus 2:11-16 No meal offering, which you shall bring unto the LORD, shall be made with leaven: for you shall burn no leaven, nor any honey, in any offering of the LORD made by fire. As for the oblation of the firstfruits, you shall offer them unto the LORD: but they shall not be burnt on the altar for a sweet savor. And every oblation of your meal offering shall you season with salt; neither shall you suffer the salt of the covenant of your God to be lacking from the meal offering: with all your offerings you shall offer salt. And if you offer a meal offering of your firstfruits unto the LORD, you shall offer for the meal offering of your firstfruits green ears of corn dried by the fire, even corn beaten out of full ears. And you shall put oil upon it, and lay frankincense thereon: it is a meal offering. And the priest shall burn the memorial of it, part of the beaten corn thereof, and part of the oil thereof, with all the frankincense thereof: it is an offering made by fire unto the LORD.

I will not go into the technicalities. I said all that I wanted from here was the overall principle. Do you see how specific the instructions are? Those specific instructions are given by God and are part of the "ALL" of the Word of God that we are to live by.

Exodus 30:9 You shall offer no strange [anything that He has not commanded] incense thereon, nor burnt sacrifice, nor meal offering; neither shall you pour drink offering thereon.

He is talking about the incense altar.

Exodus 30:32-33 Upon man's flesh shall it [oil] not be poured, neither shall you make any other like it, after the composition of it: it is holy, and it shall be holy unto you. Whosoever compounds any like it, or whosoever puts any of it upon a stranger, shall even be cut off from his people.

At its worst, that can mean not merely disfellowship, but put to death.

Exodus 30:34-38 And the LORD said unto Moses, Take unto you sweet spices, stacte, and onycha, and galbanum; these sweet spices with pure frankincense: of each shall there be a like weight: And you shall make it a perfume, a confection after the art of the apothecary, tempered together, pure and holy: And you shall beat some of it very small, and put of it before the testimony in the tabernacle of the congregation, where I will meet with you: it shall be unto you most holy. And as for the perfume which you shall make, you shall not make to yourselves according to the composition thereof: it shall be unto you holy for the LORD. Whosoever shall make like unto that, to smell thereto, shall even be cut off from his people.

Instructions like this are given in order that we understand that His doctrinal teachings are to be followed exactly, and nothing is to be consciously excluded. It was factors similar to this that were central to the Pentecost issue. Let me go through a number of the Pentecost instructions here. I am not going to go through them in detail; I just want to number them.

1. There had to be a harvest.

The offering had to be made from seed that the Israelites planted in their own fields they had worked and reaped. No other grain is acceptable, because that is what God's instruction says.

2. Pentecost must be counted to.

The Wave Sheaf offering, the harvest, and the count all occur on the same day because the count begins the same day the harvest begins, and therefore the Wave Sheaf, harvest, and count must be performed on a common work day. That is very important. Harvest is work. You do not do that on a Sabbath.

If the count begins on a fixed date even though that fixed date follows a holy day Sabbath, this eliminates the need to count, because Pentecost will also fall on a fixed date which God could have easily given. But He did not. Pentecost has to be counted.

3. The count must begin *within* the day following the Sabbath.

The only Sabbath that is not a fixed date is the weekly Sabbath and therefore the count must begin the day following the weekly Sabbath.

Whether the weekly Sabbath falls within the Days of Unleavened Bread is immaterial because no rule demands it, and Jesus' example in the New Testament is impossible to be perfectly met every year.

If we do not follow these rules, we will end on the wrong day. The same principle of disbelieving

and throwing out certain rules of God affects the far and larger and more important issue of salvation itself. Each doctrinal deviation or omission can be compared to a fork along the way to salvation, and each deviation or omission from the way alters a person's perspective, his worldview, the way he looks at things, the way he thinks, and thus conducts himself.

Herbert Armstrong often compared the way of salvation to a picture puzzle, and that is a good illustration because it takes all the pieces to give one a clear picture. I am not saying that the church of God has all of the doctrinal pieces correctly in place. I am saying that the church of God is far in front of whomever it is who is in second place, if we can even consider there is somebody in second place.

Let us go back to Matthew 7 to a very interesting section, I think, when viewed this way.

Matthew 7:13-14 Enter you in at the strait gate: for wide is the gate and broad is the way that leads to destruction, and many there be which go in thereat: Because strait is the gate, and narrow is the way which leads unto life, and few there be that find it.

These two verses are at the beginning of a series of contrasts that begins Jesus' conclusion to the entire teaching that is contained within the Sermon on the Mount. Each one of these contrasts shows that choices must be made along the way. In other words, we are going to be confronted with making a choice between continuing following one way, or making deviations. God is warning us it is going to happen.

Matthew 7:15-20 Beware of false prophets which come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ravening wolves. You shall know them by their fruits. Do men gather grapes of thorns, or figs of thistles? Even so every good tree brings forth good fruit; but a corrupt tree brings forth evil fruit. A good tree cannot bring forth evil fruit, neither can a corrupt tree bring forth good fruit. Every tree that brings not forth good fruit is hewn down and cast into the fire. [Notice He does not say when.] Wherefore by their fruits you shall know them.

So two trees appearing to be similar until the fruit is examined. There are possible deviations there, and He is telling us where to look so that we can make the right choice.

Matthew 7:21-23 Not every one that says unto me, Lord, Lord, shall enter into the kingdom of heaven, but he that does the will of my Father which is in heaven. Many will say to me in that day, Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in your name? And in your name have cast out demons? And in your name done many wonderful works? And then will I profess unto them, I never knew you: depart from me you that work iniquity.

We have two contrasting professions of loyalty. We all know that God wants us to be loyal. At the very beginning when we are counseling people for baptism, we try to make sure that people count the cost. What Jesus is demanding is loyalty. So here we have contrasting professions of loyalty. The people out there in the world say that they are being loyal to Christ, but you see, *only one* does the will of God while the other perpetuates iniquity, even though they might look

nice.

Matthew 7:24-27 Therefore whosoever hears these sayings of mine, and does them, I will liken him unto a wise man which built his house upon a rock [or *the rock*, as it says in the margin]: And the rain descended, and the floods came, and the winds blew, and beat upon that house: and it fell not: for it was founded upon a rock. And every one that hears these sayings of mine, and does them not, shall be likened unto a foolish man which built his house upon the sand: And the rain descended, and the floods came, and the winds blew, and beat upon that house: and it fell: and great was the fall of it.

Here we have two contrasting foundations for faith that appear on the surface to be similar, until trials come, and only the one remains truly solid.

In verses 13 and 14 there are two gates, and there are two ways. The one gate and the one way is more attractive than the other, but it is the less attractive one—the more difficult gate and way—which is the correct one. Human nature wants gratification so badly that it is usually willing to take the easy way rather than the hard way.

One of the things that you can see here that Christ is teaching is that there are many possible ways of deviation. In the first contrast He is both the gate and the way. In the second, only the Tree of Life will produce the right fruit. In the third, only striving for sinlessness will prove loyalty. The fourth is especially interesting because it begins with the word "therefore." It is actually the conclusion to the entire Sermon on the Mount which contains a vast amount of teaching. Jesus' conclusion is that it is only those who both hear and do *His* sayings who will be saved. Jesus' counsel is that merely hearing His sayings will not change one's life.

I want you to just briefly think about the religious world in Israel. Those people *hear* the Word of God, but it is very obvious to you that they are not *doing* the Word of God. So this is what is happening in the Israelitish world.

The man whose house collapsed was at fault, not because he failed to labor, but because he labored at the wrong things. The shifting sands represent human opinion and the doctrines of men as contrasted to the sayings of Christ. I want you to notice Paul's comment regarding exactly the same thing in Romans 10:1-3.

Romans 10:1-2 Brethren, my heart's desire and prayer to God for Israel is that they might be saved. For I bear them record that they have a zeal of God, but not according to knowledge.

Is that not what Isaiah said? "My people don't *know* Me."

Romans 10:3 For they being ignorant of God's righteousness, . . .

This is what is happening out in the world. They are not taking from the Tree of Life. They are taking from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil that is very attractively packaged for them by the god of this world. These sincerely deceived people are thinking that they are worshipping the God of heaven, and they are not. The lesson for us is to understand that we

could very easily fall for that. Jesus is warning, "Don't!" The deviations are possible, and He allows us to deviate, but He certainly does not want us to deviate.

Romans 10:3 For they being ignorant of God's righteousness, and going about to establish their own righteousness, have not submitted themselves unto the right [righteousness] doing of God.

That is what the word righteousness means—the *right* doing of God. Both ancient and modern Israel almost completely misunderstand the purpose of God's law. This is one example. Keeping it will not save one. It has never been God's purpose to save men through lawkeeping. Nobody ever has, and nobody ever will. It is a guide about how life is to be lived, and it is a guide to lead us in the way that Christ lived, and it can be kept only in the same manner in which Christ kept it.

He kept it because He had the nature to keep it, and He kept it because of His close and abiding relationship with the Father. He Himself testified, "The Father that dwells in Me, He does the works." In the same manner Jesus opens the gate and the way to the Father, and the conclusion of His purpose of creating Himself in us in order that we might labor at keeping the doctrines of God that will aid in creating the finishing of that purpose.

Romans 8:6-9 For to be carnally minded is death: but to be spiritually minded is life and peace. Because the carnal mind is enmity against God: for it is not subject to the law of God, neither indeed can be. So then they that are in the flesh cannot please God. But you are not in the flesh, but in the spirit, if so be that the spirit of God dwell in you. Now if any man have not the spirit of Christ, he is none of his.

It is doctrines related to the law of God which are most likely to be rejected by human nature. Human nature will supply rationalizations in order to reinforce *why* we cannot do *what* God commands, and we are thus then led to reject those doctrines, and very likely our failure to submit will have its basis in a lack of humility. We will then follow the path of least resistance to human nature. That is what happened on a massive scale in Israelitish culture, motivating people to come up with rationalizations that all roads lead to the same place anywhere.

Do you know where I think the cliché—"All roads lead to Rome"—came from? I think it came, or was at least massively popularized by the world of Protestantism during the Reformation. Their theologians used to trace the routes of all that was wrong in the eyes of the world of Protestant religion to the Catholic Church, and the Catholic Church was headquartered in Rome.

But you see, that cliché is not absolutely correct either. It is a generality that applied only in the narrow perspective in the world of Protestant theologians. In like manner the same is true today. The very people claiming these things hypocritically believe that their way is the right way, or they would all be in agreement.

Deuteronomy 8:2 And you shall remember all the way which the LORD your God led you these forty years in the wilderness, [Why?] to humble you, and to prove [to test] you, to know what was in your heart, whether you would keep his commandments, or no.

Deviations from the way are a test. God wants to see what we are going to do, and so He is going to allow them.

Deuteronomy 8:3 And he humbled you, and allowed you to hunger, and fed you with manna, which you knew not, neither did your fathers know; that he might make you know that man does not live by bread only, but by every word that proceeds out of the mouth of the LORD does man live.

Deuteronomy 8:16 Who fed you in the wilderness with manna, which your fathers knew not, that he might humble you, and that he might prove you, to do you good at the latter end.

We must be aware that this same God is working in us *all* along the way, and that He will follow this well-established pattern. We are fully capable of creating our own troubles and trials, and along the way we do that very frequently, but there are going to be times that He *purposefully* creates them for us. That is what He says here. "I made you to go hungry."

We must understand that sin per se is not always the cause, but rather we are caught in the midst of *His* perfecting processes, His efforts, His labors to bring His children to maturity, to completion, to the end that He purposes.

The word "hunger" can represent to us a wide variety of specific situations in which we feel distinctly weakened, unable to confront the situation and to overcome it simply because we do not have the resources. We do not have the strength. Is this not what happens when we go hungry? Do we not become physically weak in carrying out our responsibilities? These weakness-revealing circumstances are brought upon us specifically to humble us.

I am going to go back and read something to you in Matthew 5: 3—the very first of the Beatitudes. It is the most important one, because all the others have their root in this one.

Matthew 5:3 Blessed are the poor in spirit: for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

God specifically points out that the reason He brought weakness upon the Israelites through trials, specifically of hunger, was to humble them. The application for us is that these things occur at God's direction to make us realize, to feel, to understand our spiritual bankruptcy. "Weak in spirit." "Bankrupt in spirit." When a person is bankrupt in society, it means he has no money. Those who have no money are the weakest people in society. Solomon himself said in the book of Ecclesiastes, "Money [representing power] answers all things." He meant carnally. Now Jesus draws on that.

What happens if we recognize spiritual bankruptcy, and we are too weak to fight the spiritual problems? Where do you turn to get strength? God brings these problems on us, brethren, to bring us humanly to our wits end, to force us, as it were, to reach out to God for help; to force us to reach out to the only completely truthful and faithful resource that we can trust and give us the correct solution. To human nature it is humiliating to be called upon to do something that it does not want to do, but is right according to the way of God.

What does God say here in Deuteronomy 8 that He responds with? It is to feed us with manna

to relieve the hunger. Here is another symbol. Elsewhere God's Word is compared to manna. Jesus said He is the Word of God—the true manna that came down from heaven. Manna is the strength-giving spiritual power that enables us to do the humiliating thing if we will just go out, gather it, take it in, and use it. This is something that we have not had much experience using. That is why He said that your fathers did not know, nor do you know, but this is what the pilgrimage is for.

The events of September 11th are a test for the western world, and especially for the United States. But I feel it is even more of a test for the church, because we know so much more and are therefore much more responsible for doing the right thing. Will the United States accept the challenge and turn in the right direction?

I hope so, but I feel that the possibility is very slim. It is true they have turned to religion in a way we have not seen since the narcissistic boomer generation was born. They are not turning to the true religion, but to the counterfeit, and I feel that the true doctrines of God will continue to be rejected because human nature is so demanding of being gratified according to its desire.

But brethren, let us make sure that we take advantage and turn to God with all of our heart, working to overcome, by and through using His solutions. Each of us has many things we need to work on, and the time is now.

Let us make sure that we do not reject the straight and narrow by allowing human nature to provide an accepted deliverance from confronting our weaknesses by rejecting a doctrine or a teaching of God.

Yes, there is a way that seems right, but the ends thereof are the ways of death. Follow Jesus' advice beginning in Matthew 7: 13 to the end of the chapter, and make the right choice. Make the right evaluation each and every time.