

Back To Basics

A Foundation for Turbulent Times

Richard T. Ritenbaugh

Given 16-Aug-08; Sermon #896

We live in a high-speed, pressure-packed world. That world affects us tremendously, because we are connected to it through television, radio, and the computer. We might think that, by moving to the woods or going some other place else that we have found, we could bow out of the rat race—but this world will not let us go. It never will as long as it has any power over us whatsoever. It seeks us out wherever we are, no matter where we are.

You may have seen the television commercial of the man who walks onto the beach of a South Pacific island. There is a downed plane behind him. Yet he can find the Internet! The plane behind him is supposedly Amelia Erhart's, and he is just way out there in the South Pacific someplace. He can still find the Internet because he has a connection (by satellite, I suppose).

Ephesians 2:2 tells us that Satan is like that too. He is the Prince of the Power of the Air, and he broadcasts his attitudes all over this earth. It does not matter where we are. If we are in some bunker fifty feet below the surface, he can still reach us with those worldly attitudes—those satanic attitudes. He can find us, and his world can find us wherever we are.

We all know that Daniel 12:4 is where the angel tells Daniel to seal up the book, and he says that many shall run to and fro and that knowledge shall increase. "Many shall run to and fro" is a perfect description of our world. We have heard this before, and we will say it again: it has a dual meaning. It has a literal meaning and a figurative meaning.

The literal is that people are constantly on the move. We put a lot of miles on our bodies and on our cars. We are scurrying here and there, doing whatever, such as commuting to work, which might be ten, twenty, thirty, or forty miles. I know that every year they try to find the person who commutes the farthest to work each day, and it is into the few hundreds of miles that people in New England commute down into New York City to go to their jobs, everyday getting up at some ungodly hour to make it to work on time.

It may be something as simple as going to the store or going to the theater or going to the park or whatever. We just cannot sit still. We are on the move!

If there were such things as aliens looking down upon us from outer space, they might

Back to Basics by Richard T. Ritenbaugh (<http://www.cgg.org>)

think that the earth was a kicked-over anthill. We are all the little ants, scurrying about in a rush to live our lives at light speed, because there is so much to do and so much to see and so little time to do it. We just cannot sit still.

Figuratively speaking, especially when taken from the Septuagint (the Greek translation of the Old Testament) it says, "many shall rave violently." In other words, the end of this age will be a time of insanity—violent insanity, when people are unstable and stressed. They are at the ends of their ropes, on the verge of losing it altogether.

The angel goes on to add increasing knowledge. To put this all together, it suggests that these factors are what produces the madness: The speed, the instability, and the increasing knowledge all produce a kind of madness in people. Things are happening too fast. Nothing is certain. There is too much information for the mind to process. Under this burden, many are simply overwhelmed, and they go a little bit nuts. They lose their heads. They do not know which way is up, and they begin to act that way, too. They are going from pillar to post like a drunken sailor, weaving in and out, with no clear path.

This is the world in which we live, and we are assured in God's word that it is only going to grow worse, until we are living in the greatest time of trouble that mankind has ever experienced. Think about that: ever experienced in the whole history of mankind of 6000 years. The time of trouble that is ahead for the people of Israel is the time that is worse than the days of Noah, worse than Sodom and Gomorrah, worse than the Black Death, worse than the Holocaust, worse than the worst famines ever known, worse than the worst religious persecutions, worse than the worst natural disasters, worse than the worst oppressive regimes—Mao, Stalin, Hitler, Genghis Khan, Attila the Hun—worse than all the gruesome wars that have been waged upon this earth.

What do we do as Christians in a time like that—in a time like this—in the worst time that has ever been? What does a Christian do? How can we spiritually survive such a thing, with everything falling down around us, when the foundations are crumbling, as the Psalm says. What are we to do? What do we hang on to?

A person does not have the luxury of a smorgasbord of options. Times are too dire for that. Too much is happening for a person to dither over choices or to quibble over nuances. It has got to be red-meat things, if you know what I mean. He must prioritize everything carefully and give his time to only what is most important—only to what is going to help save his life.

In other words, he must get back to basics, including his spiritual life.

Today, we are going to consider the basic elements of Christianity for such turbulent times. These are things that we can apply now, but they are mostly looking forward to the future when times really get bad and we have to pare down to just the basic things. These are the basic spiritual things that I think are the most important things.

This subject arose, in part, after I reflected upon my recent health problems. When a person is sick, life reduces down to the basics immediately. A person who is ill wants nothing more than to be well again. What he has to do is drop everything else and concentrate on that one thing—his health, in this case. He searches for a cause for his ill health, and he looks for a remedy. He stops consuming junk and returns to eating basic foods, things that are easily digestible that his body can take without causing further discomfort. He tries to get his sleep.

For me, it was all these things, along with prayer. It was self-evaluation, diet, rest, and exercise. Those were the things that kept me going through this time. Talking on the phone with my mother helped a lot, too. Life really narrows down to the bare essentials until the illness has passed. During any crisis, we have to take away the frills that have not already been taken away for us and get down to brass tacks.

We surely are approaching a crisis, a crisis at the close of this age. As Mr. Herbert W. Armstrong said, "at the close of this evil age." It is a bad one. It is not something, as Amos says, that we should look forward to. "Woe unto those who anticipate the Day of the Lord, who want it to come, even to punish the wicked, because it is terrible day." Perhaps we need to be reminded of just how terrible it will be.

I think that we in the Church of God have had a false sense of security about this time of trouble at the end, about this bad time that is coming, the time of Jacob's trouble. We have believed that we will all just be whisked away to a place of safety and have to suffer nothing because, "We are the Philadelphians! God has promised us in Revelation 3:10 that He will keep us from the hour of trial! Are we not wonderful?"

That is how we thought in the past! God would take us on the wings of a great eagle, and we would have to suffer nothing whatsoever, because we have only a little strength, but we have been faithful (to pay and pray).

Well, have we? How faithful is the Church of God? As individuals, we have no guarantee of anything. Some will be kept from the hour of trial, while some will not. It is up to God to decide into which one of those categories we will be put.

We cannot just assume, by any means, that we are going to go to a place of safety and

get out of the Great Tribulation and the Day of the Lord. We must be worthy of such a situation, for one thing. On the other hand, there is a bit of a paradox in all of this that the more faithful that we are, the more God might require of us to witness for Him during such a time, because He knows that He can count on us to make a proper witness. We remember from the book of Revelation that there are martyrdoms that take place. That is where we walk by faith that God will make the decision that is best for us.

Let us not get any ideas that we are the lucky few that get whisked away. That is not what we are working for, anyway. That is a very false goal. The real goal is to be in the Kingdom of God, to live eternally with Him forever and ever. It is not to save our skin. What did Jesus say about saving your skin? You may just lose it all together, while those who lose their lives for His sake will find it.

I want to turn to Ezekiel 7, which we do not read very often when talking about the Tribulation and the Day of the Lord, but I think that it is a good description. I am going to read the whole chapter. It is a good review just of what is in store for the nations of Israel, and for the world.

Ezekiel 7:1-27 Moreover the word of the LORD came to me, saying, "And you, son of man, thus says the Lord GOD to the land of Israel: 'An end! The end has come upon the four corners of the land. Now the end has come upon you, and I will send My anger against you; I will judge you according to your ways, and I will repay you for all your abominations. My eye will not spare you, nor will I have pity; but I will repay your ways, and your abominations will be in your midst; then you shall know that I am the LORD!' Thus says the Lord GOD: 'A disaster, a singular disaster; behold, it has come! An end has come, the end has come; it has dawned for you; behold, it has come! Doom has come to you, you who dwell in the land; the time has come, a day of trouble is near, and not of rejoicing in the mountains. Now upon you I will soon pour out My fury, and spend My anger upon you; I will judge you according to your ways, and I will repay you for all your abominations. My eye will not spare, nor will I have pity; I will repay you according to your ways, and your abominations will be in your midst. Then you shall know that I am the LORD who strikes. Behold, the day! Behold, it has come! Doom has gone out; the rod has blossomed, pride has budded. Violence has risen up into a rod of wickedness; none of them shall remain, none of their multitude, none of them; nor shall there be wailing for them. The time has come; the day draws near. Let not the buyer rejoice, nor the seller mourn, for wrath is on their whole multitude. For the seller shall not return to what has been sold, though he may still be alive; for the vision

concerns the whole multitude, and it shall not turn back; no one will strengthen himself who lives in iniquity. They have blown the trumpet and made everyone ready, but no one goes to battle; for My wrath is on all their multitude. The sword is outside, and the pestilence and famine within. Whoever is in the field will die by the sword; and whoever is in the city, famine and pestilence will devour him. Those who survive will escape and be on the mountains like doves of the valleys, all of them mourning, each for his iniquity. Every hand will be feeble, and every knee will be as weak as water. They will also be girded with sackcloth; horror will cover them; shame will be on every face, baldness on all their heads. They will throw their silver into the streets, and their gold will be like refuse; their silver and their gold will not be able to deliver them in the day of the wrath of the LOORD; they will not satisfy their souls, nor fill their stomachs, because it became their stumbling block of iniquity. As for the beauty of his ornaments, He set it in majesty; but they made from it the images of their abominations—their detestable things; therefore I have made it like refuse to them. I will give it as plunder into the hands of strangers, and to the wicked of the earth as spoil; and they shall defile it. I will turn My face from them, and they will defile My secret place; for robbers shall enter it and defile it. Make a chain, for the land is filled with crimes of blood, and the city is full of violence. Therefore I will bring the worst of the Gentiles, and they will possess their houses; I will cause the pomp of the strong to cease, and their holy places shall be defiled. Destruction comes; they will seek peace, but there shall be none. Disaster will come upon disaster, and rumor will be upon rumor. Then they will seek a vision from a prophet; but the law will perish from the priest, and counsel from the elders. The king will mourn, the prince will be clothed with desolation, and the hands of the common people will tremble. I will do to them according to their way, and according to what they deserve I will judge them; then they shall know that I am the LOORD!"

It is not a pretty picture of what is coming upon the nations of Israel. Though we hope to escape it—and there is still that hope—we may all have to endure its prelude, if nothing else. Of course, God may have some of us live through it as witnesses, and He may have some of us die as martyrs during that time. We do not really know what God has in store for us, but the fundamentals of true Christianity will be there to carry us through to the end if we use them. I have whittled it down to four elements:

1. BELIEVE GOOD'S WORD

The vast majority of what we know about God and His way of life is revealed in the Bible. Yes, we can learn something about God from His creation, and as we go along with Him, we gather experience with Him along the way. The words and the acts of God that appear in scripture are the most significant, though. In them, we see His interaction with His people, Israel, and with the Church of God. We also have the revelation of God in the Person of Jesus Christ—how God in the flesh lived as a human being on this earth. Every bit of Christian doctrine and principle is found in the pages of the Bible. The Bible is absolutely indispensable to us.

Romans 10:17 So then, faith comes by hearing [what do we hear, and where does it come from?], and hearing by the word of God.

If we did not have God's word, we would have little basis for our faith. There would be nothing to hear! We would have no proof, no testimony. It would take God's personally and individually coming down out of heaven to each of us and revealing Himself to us. Instead, He has chosen to do it through His word. Thus, in a time of increasing knowledge and spiritual, philosophical, and cultural madness, the Bible is our only resource for what is authoritative and true. As Paul said,

Ephesians 6:17 ... and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God;...

...is our only weapon to parry and counterattack this world's wrong ideas.

If we do not trust the Bible, know the Bible, and use what it says, we are doomed!

You all know,

John 10:35 ...the word of God came (and the Scripture cannot be broken),...

What that means is that scripture cannot be gainsaid. It cannot be set aside; it cannot be rendered invalid in any way; and it cannot be annulled. God's word is completely reliable, and we have it from Jesus Christ's own mouth. What is in the word is right and true and is not in error in any way. Men's interpretations of it can certainly be erroneous, but what God has said stands true forever.

John 17:17 "Sanctify them by Your truth. Your word is truth."

People today say that nothing is universally true, that each person has his own personal truth. Whatever is true for them is true for them. It is all relative. That is what it is called: relativism. "It may not be true for me, but it might be true for you, so you would be better to go with the flow, you know."

Jesus contradicts this without qualification and says of the Father, "Your Word is truth." He means it. What God says is true. For us, when Pilate asked him (a few chapters later), "What is truth?" Jesus had already answered that question in John 17:17. God's word is truth. When times are tough, we must hang onto this like an anchor in a stormy sea. We do not want to get blown about. We need to trust the Bible and what it says.

Psalm 119:160 The entirety of Your word is truth, and every one of Your righteous judgments endures forever.

It does not matter what time it is in history. It does not matter where in the Bible you find this truth. It is true. God's judgment stands for all time. God's words are righteous and true—always. We can count on that. These next scriptures add another element to this:

Proverbs 30:5 Every word of God is pure; He is a shield to those who put their trust in Him.

Psalm 119:140 Your word is very pure; therefore Your servant loves it.

The word *pure* comes from a Hebrew word for, "tested, refined, proven; of the highest quality." Not only is God's word reliable and true but also it is the very best and purest word. There is nothing in there that is tainted by any means. He has given us only the best information to propel us toward the Kingdom of God. We can take great confidence in that!

The apostles realized this when they were still with Jesus, saying that He had the words of life, as it says in John 5:24—"Who would we go to? What would we do? You are the One who has the words of life! We cannot go anywhere else."

Jesus said a bit later, in John 6:63, that the words that He speaks are Spirit and they are life. Paul, in Philippians 2:16, called it the Word of Life again. When we realize this, we should have a great desire—an overwhelming hunger—for more of it, for more life. Satisfying that hunger through study causes growth, which we need to do. It may be tough in a time of turmoil to grow; however, with a good foundation of the Word of God,

we can do it.

II Peter 1:16 For we did not follow cunningly devised fables when we made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but were eyewitnesses of His majesty [alluding to the Transfiguration].

II Peter 1:19-21 And so we have the prophetic word confirmed, which you do well to heed as a light that shines in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts; knowing this first, that no prophecy of Scripture is of any private interpretation, for prophecy never came by the will of man, but holy men of God spoke as they were moved by the Holy Spirit.

Not only do we have the reliable, true, pure word of God, but we also have eyewitness accounts that substantiate the words and deeds of the Bible. Not only that—not only is it verified by the testimony of the apostles and prophets—but it is also directly inspired by God Himself through the Holy Spirit. How much more do we need? The internal confirmation of His word is pretty tight.

II Timothy 3:16-17 All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work.

The Bible is absolutely indispensable. It is one of those foundational things in which we must have complete trust that God has provided us with an instruction manual of the highest authority, purity, and usability. We can trust it, no matter how desperate life becomes in the future. If we remember what the Bible tells us to do, we can have confidence in doing it. Therefore, study it to know it and to use it at all times.

2. PRAY WITHOUT CEASING

Paul tells us this in I Thessalonians 5:17, and it is excellent advice, especially when times are tough. We know and we have been taught that prayer is not some esoteric, mysterious, religious practice. It is not some way-out thing.

It is rather simple, essentially communication with God—talking with Him. It is not just a one-way thing. It is communication in its strictest sense: it is a dialog. It is two-way. We might speak the words to God and not hear a response. However, how many times has

God inspired us with answers while we were there praying to Him?

Maybe we were going over some knotty problem, some difficult trial that we were having, and we did not quite know what to do. While we were asking God for help, suddenly the answer popped into our heads. Maybe it was a scripture. That is, indeed, two-way communication. God impressed something upon us. He did something to turn that memory on, to make us remember what we should be doing, what we need to do.

Hebrew 10:19-22 Therefore, brethren, having boldness to enter the Holiest by the blood of Jesus, by a new and living way which He consecrated for us, through the veil, that is, His flesh, and having a High Priest over the house of God, let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water.

Jesus Christ, through His sacrifice and resurrection and ascension to the right hand of God as our High Priest and Mediator, has opened the way for us to have direct access to the Father. The very God of the Universe bends His ear to us now, not because He has to, but because He wants to—because He has reached out and called each and every one of us and given us the opportunity to accept that sacrifice that was done by His Son, Jesus Christ.

Once we are covered by the blood of Christ, we can approach the Father intimately and boldly and purely. Therefore, we can ask Him for things that we need; we can discuss things with Him; we can praise Him and give Him thanks and worship Him. He is willing to hear us, and He does hear us. It is by that communication, by that intimate contact we have with Him, that we come to know God and can have an ever-deepening relationship with Him.

Prayer is our telephone line to God, if you will—but it is more than that. A telephone line is too impersonal. We have a living way, it says here, through Christ and the Holy Spirit that is given to us. We can have that close relationship with God like a son or daughter with her parents—all through prayer. He knows us, and He wants us to know Him.

Turn to where He is speaking to His disciples before His arrest:

John 14:12 "Most assuredly, I say to you, he who believes in Me, the works that I do he will do also; and greater works than these he will do, because I go to My Father."

He is going there in order to give us more power and help than He could as a human being. He can give us the Spirit and empower us to do great things. Then He links this with prayer:

John 14:13-14 "And whatever you ask in My name, that I will do, that the Father may be glorified in the Son. If you ask anything in My name, I will do it."

That is the power that we have now: to come before the Father and, through Jesus Christ, have our request made known to God and acted upon.

Romans 8:26-28 Likewise the Spirit also helps in our weaknesses [we are human]. For we do not know what we should pray for as we ought, but the Spirit Himself [Jesus Christ, see verse 34] makes intercession for us with groanings which cannot be uttered. Now He who searches the hearts knows what the mind of the Spirit is, because He makes intercession for the saints according to the will of God. And we know that all things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are the called according to His purpose.

This passage helps us to understand what Christ meant back there in John 14. Christ is our Intercessor and Mediator before the Father. We go before the Father, and we say, "Blah, blah, blah...." and Jesus says something like this to the Father, "He did not put that quite right. What he meant to say was and request of You is this, because he does not really know exactly what he needs in this particular situation. We want to work this out for good, and this is the request that I make on his behalf. It is the best option. May We do it?"

The Father replies, "Of course! He loves Us, and We love him. Because We want to work this out for the good of all concerned, let Us do this."

Thus, we have an Intercessor who makes us effective in our prayers, because we do not know what we really need to be asking for sometimes, but He does. He has lived life, and He knows us. He knows Satan the devil; He has done combat with him. He also knows the end result that He wants. Therefore, He helps us in speaking to the Father on our behalf so that matters work out for our good.

This is especially helpful in turbulent times when there is so much going on around us and so many things happening that we do not really know about, so many things that are going to intersect with our lives in the near future that we really do not know what the best course of action is. When we come before the Father, we can ask what we ask, in our own childish wisdom—but Jesus is there as our High Priest to ask God for what we really need.

Ephesians 5:15-17 See then that you walk circumspectly, not as fools but as wise, redeeming the time, because the days are evil. Therefore do not be unwise, but understand what the will of the Lord is.

From reading God's word, we come to understand what God's will is.

Ephesians 5:20 ...giving thanks always for all things to God the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ,...

Ephesians 6:18 ...praying always with all prayer and supplication in the Spirit, being watchful to this end with all perseverance and supplication for all the saints...

In evil days, Paul says, we have to use our time wisely. We have to be careful how we portion our time. Prayer, as he shows here, is way up high on the priority list. He specifically says, in this particular case, that it is not just prayer, but also the giving of thanks—not just asking God for things we need, because we are in such terrible straits, but thanking God for what He has given. It is not committing the sin of ingratitude, because even though we may be in perilous straits, God has already given us so much. Every breath we take He has given us. Therefore, we need to thank Him and not just pepper Him with requests, because He is doing stuff for us without our knowledge.

I want to concentrate on this idea of being watchful to this end with all perseverance and supplication for all the saints. Prayer enhances our watchfulness, because what it does is put us in tune with God. We are on the same wavelength with Him; and through prayer, through that closeness with God, through the deepening of the relationship, our eyes become opened to what is going on. If we are looking at the situation with God's eyes, or maybe with the mind of Christ, we then know His plan. We know what is going on. We can see Him at work; we can see His activities going on around us; things begin to clarify; and the way that we need to go becomes clear.

In a crisis, we want to be in God's head as much as possible, if I can put it that way. We want to be right beside Him, so that we can see things and do things as He does them. When He zigs, we zig; when He zags, we zag. We are permanently on His hip, following every move that He makes. However, we need to be praying so that we can have the proper perspective, so that we can watch properly.

Philippians 4:6-7 Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication, with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known to God; and the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus.

How about that for help in time of need? Notice what he says here. What could be better than to be at peace in the midst of chaos? Society is crumbling down all around us, and we can be at peace! Being close to God and putting our lives and circumstances into His hands in faith produces peace of mind. Why? Because we have just given that burden to the most powerful and wisest Being in all the universe, Who is Sovereign over all, and has absolute control over everything. If we believe all that, the stress goes away, and we can have true peace of mind.

You wonder how the martyrs could do it? This is how they did it. They committed themselves entirely to God through prayer.

The level of stress could be tremendous, but we can be in a bubble of calm knowing that God is in control and that He will do what is best. We just read Romans 8:28. It will work out. It may not be pretty in the meantime, but it is going to work out; and we can be satisfied that it is going to be the best.

Notice that this peace of God, which comes through prayer, guards our hearts and minds through Christ. It protects us. It keeps us. When Satan is out and about, roving around trying to devour Christians wherever he finds them, a guarded heart and mind through Christ is a huge asset. We will not be easily picked off if our prayer life is strong, because we will not be out there on the fringe of the flock and easy pickings for that lion that roars, as it says in one of the epistles of Peter.

Although this is not specifically that scripture about the Satan the lion that roars, I do want to end this section in his epistle:

I Peter 4:7 But the end of all things is at hand; therefore [conclusion] be serious and watchful in your prayers.

That verse puts the capstone on this section. At the time of the end, in that crisis at the close, as it approaches, our prayer life needs to be ratcheted up a few notches. Serious times demand serious, vigilant prayer.

3. FOLLOW CHRIST

This is such a simple command, but, oh, it is so hard to do. God has given us four gospel accounts plus the revelation of Christ as God of the Old Testament for us to observe how He thinks, how He speaks, how He acts and reacts—but how often do we actually imitate Him?

I would hope that it is often, but you have to be your own judge of that. When times are tough, many times our deceitful hearts turn us away from following His example because we, in our pride, think that we know a better way. "Well, that may have worked for Him, but for me, this way is the way that I should go." We do not actually think this out in this form, however; if we did, we would catch our self. Usually, when some kind of trial comes up, we just do what comes naturally rather than imitating our Savior Jesus Christ.

When we think we know better, it is just plain rebellion and idolatry. We have put ourselves in place of Christ and are not following Him anymore. We have taken the lead ourselves.

Jesus knew that this would be a tough command to follow. How many times did He come up to a disciple and say, "Follow Me"? He might leave his nets or his post and follow Him. That is not the end of the matter, thought, because all His disciples forsook Him at one point toward the end. They all had their weaknesses, and it happened more than just those few times.

Luke 9:57-62 Now it happened as they journeyed on the road, that someone said to Him, "Lord, I will follow You wherever You go." And Jesus said to him, "Foxes have holes and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay His head." Then He said to another, "Follow Me." But he said, "Lord, let me first go and bury my father." Jesus said to him, "Let the dead bury their own dead, but you go and preach the kingdom of God." And another also said, "Lord, I will follow You, but let me first go and bid them farewell who are at my house." But Jesus said to him, "No one, having put his hand to the plow, and looking back, is fit for the kingdom of God."

We often desire to follow Christ. I think that we all do—very deeply, too—but we come up with so many excuses not to do it. There is always something else.

In the first example, it is a bit inconvenient or might require a few more sacrifices than one is willing to give. In this case, He was saying that he would have to live an itinerant lifestyle because they did not have permanent lodging. The implication was that this person did not want to sacrifice that much. He liked living in a house and having a regular routine.

The second one incorrectly prioritized his duties. He wanted to do his duty of burying his father before his duty to Christ. This is when we might say something like, "I'd like to follow you, but I have to finish something first." We automatically made an idol out of that thing, because our first priority is to Christ, always.

In the third, we place our relationships with various ones ahead of our relationship with God. Jesus said, "Look, if you are going to start with me, you are not going to look back. If you do look back at your former life and those relationships, you are not fit to rule with Me in the Kingdom of God." This demands total dedication.

There are other things in the parable of the sower and the seed. He mentions distractions and things that come and snatch people away from following Him and take our eyes off the goal. We get distracted by the around and the about. We lose sight and are soon on a whole other path, while Jesus is miles away over there. From Jesus' own words, following Him is difficult. It is not easy. It is a simple principle, but it is not easy to do.

This next verse, by the way, is part of our logo of the Church of the Great God. I want to read this whole section. Christ is speaking to the Jews:

John 10:26-29 "But you do not believe, because you are not of My sheep, as I said to you. My sheep hear My voice, and I know them, and they follow Me. And I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; neither shall anyone snatch them out of My hand. My Father, who has given them to Me, is greater than all; and no one is able to snatch them out of My Father's hand."

Verse 27, "My sheep hear My voice, and I know them, and they follow Me," is as good a definition of a true Christian as any. There are three elements here:

1. It is a person whom the Shepherd knows.
2. It is one who hears the Shepherd's voice.
3. It is one who actually follows Him.

All three elements must be present for one to be a true sheep of the true flock of God.

Many hear God's words. How many churches are there that all believe in the Bible? However, how many of them have been called and chosen? These are not His sheep. Even though they hear the words, they have not had the calling. They are not His sheep.

Many also study the Bible deeply and fervently, but they do not obey what they read. They do not do it. Such people are also not His sheep.

All three elements must be present. There must be a miracle in hearing. There must be an election by grace. There must be obedience.

Remember back in Matthew 7, where the people say, "Lord! Lord! Look at all these things that I did in your name!" Jesus said, "I never knew you." They were not His. They may have been doing all these things, but they were not among His sheep. Why? They practiced iniquity—lawlessness. That is how He knew that they were not His. They were sinning, and not obeying.

Let us just see how important this principle of obedience—following Christ—is in the end time.

Revelation 12:17 And the dragon [Satan] was enraged with the woman, and he went to make war with the rest of her offspring [who are they?], who keep the commandments of God and have the testimony of Jesus Christ.

Those are the offspring of the woman: the people who keep God's commandments.

Revelation 13:6-7, 9-10 Then he [the Beast] opened his mouth in blasphemy against God, to blaspheme His name, His tabernacle, and those who dwell in heaven. It was granted to him to make war with the saints and to overcome them. And authority was given him over every tribe, tongue,

Back to Basics by Richard T. Ritenbaugh (<http://www.cgg.org>)

and nation....If anyone has an ear, let him hear. He who leads into captivity shall go into captivity; he who kills with the sword must be killed with the sword. Here is the patience and the faith of the saints.

Revelation 14:12 Here is the patience of the saints; here are those who keep the commandments of God and the faith of Jesus.

Revelation 14:1 Then I looked, and behold, a Lamb standing on Mount Zion, and with Him one hundred and forty-four thousand, having His Father's name written on their foreheads.

Revelation 14:4-5 These are the ones who were not defiled with women [false gods], for they are virgins. These are the ones who follow the Lamb wherever He goes. These were redeemed from among men, being firstfruits to God and to the Lamb. And in their mouth was found no deceit, for they are without fault before the throne of God.

Can you see how important it is to be keeping the commandments of God when the crunch is on, when the worst trials ever to hit this earth come? It is the keeping the commandments and having the testimony of Christ (the "faith of Jesus," as it says elsewhere and the "faith of the saints," as it says in another place) that will help the saints to endure those terrible times ahead. Thus, it is obedience to God—the keeping of the commandments—and then loyalty to Jesus Christ—the faith, trusting in Him.

Those who overcome, those who endure just will not give in. They will doggedly observe God's law in the face of all persecution. They will never deny Jesus Christ in the least little bit. As a matter of fact, they would rather die than renounce Him—and they will die. In chapter 14, they are rewarded greatly for this obedience and loyalty. Their reward for being pure and irreproachable is to be with Him as His intimate companion for all eternity. Because they have proven that they are willing to follow Him in every dire circumstance, their reward will be to follow Him forever in everlasting life.

I Peter 2:21-25 For to this you were called, because Christ also suffered for us, leaving us an example, that you should follow His steps: "Who committed no sin, nor was deceit found in His mouth"; who, when He was reviled, did not revile in return; when He suffered, He did not threaten, but committed Himself to Him who judges righteously; who Himself bore our sins in His own body on the tree, that we, having died to sins, might live for righteousness—by whose stripes you were healed. For you were like sheep

Back to Basics by Richard T. Ritenbaugh (<http://www.cgg.org>)

going astray, but have now returned to the Shepherd and Overseer of your souls.

I John 2:6 He who says he abides in Him ought himself also to walk just as He walked.

Christ left us an amazing example of what to do when the pressure is on. He never wavered once from God's law. He did not descend to the level of His persecutors, but He committed Himself to God, whatever came. He did what God had given Him to do all the way to the end. This is what it means to be a sheep following the Great Shepherd. We have to walk just as He walked—the highest standard that has ever been set.

4. SERVE OTHERS

In a time of crisis, it is a natural, human reaction to focus on oneself and immediate loved ones. We slip into a bunker mentality in which we become defensive and introverted because we feel like we are under attack all of the time. That is what a crisis does: it makes you ultra-sensitive. What you do is go in on yourself, just the opposite of the outgoing concern that God wants us to show at all times. In a time of crisis, we have to fight off the tendencies of human nature and reach out in loving service to others.

Here is an astounding example of this: the Passover night. Jesus Christ knew that He would be betrayed, arrested, put on trial, beaten, and then be killed—all within the next 18 hours or so. He knew what was coming. He knew it because all of the signs were there. He knew it because He knew God's will.

John 13:12-17 So when He had washed their feet, taken His garments, and sat down again, He said to them, "Do you know what I have done to you? You call me Teacher and Lord, and you say well, for so I am. If I then, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. For I have given you an example, that you should do as I have done to you. Most assuredly, I say to you, a servant is not greater than his master; nor is he who is sent greater than he who sent him. If you know these things, blessed are you if you do them."

Even though He was facing the most gruesome death the very next day, He took the time and the effort to serve His disciples one last time. He did the most menial job there was for their benefit, something that a servant or slave should have done or that

Back to Basics by Richard T. Ritenbaugh (<http://www.cgg.org>)

someone among them should have volunteered to do for the rest of them when they came in. No, it was the Master and Teacher who set the example of serving the brethren—serving His disciples, His brethren—despite the coming crisis.

Jesus Christ lived what He preached, and He said,

Mark 10:43-45 "Yet it shall not be so among you; but whoever desires to become great among you shall be your servant. And whoever of you desires to be first shall be slave of all. For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many."

Here we have the ultimate example of Jesus Christ. It does not matter what the time is; it could be good times or bad times. He served. He gave.

Galatians 5:13-14 For you, brethren, have been called to liberty; only do not use liberty as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another. For all the law is fulfilled in one word, even in this: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself."

Through Christ, we have been freed from Satan's bondage of us and from sin to live by faith. This means that we no longer live to satisfy our human nature or to please ourselves but rather to please God and to serve others through love. This service is what God's law is really all about. Keeping God's law of love should flow out of us in service.

I John 3:16 By this we know love [just as Paul showed up above], because He laid down His life for us [in the ultimate example of love]. And we also ought to lay down our lives for the brethren.

That is how we show that we understand that principle and make it a part of our own character.

I John 3:17-19 But whoever has this world's goods, and sees his brother in need, and shuts up his heart from him, how does the love of God abide in him? My little children, let us not love in word or in tongue, but in deed and in truth. And by this we know that we are of the truth, and shall assure our hearts before Him.

Perhaps in a time of great crisis, it may come to literally laying down our lives for one another. We do not know. In the meantime, John's exhortation is to sacrifice ourselves in service to others, giving them what they need as we see and have opportunity—not as James says ("Be warmed and filled") but actually doing something to fulfill the need.

When we serve others in godly love, as he says in verse 19, it confirms our status as children of God. That is what He does. Both God and Jesus Christ give and give and give. When we start doing the same thing through service, we show that we are their children in the faith.

This next verse needs not much explanation, but remember what was going on the lives of these Hebrews. They were just about to go through a terrible crisis when the Romans were about to surround Jerusalem, and things were going to get bad in that city. They were approaching a time of judgment when the city and the temple would be destroyed. Many of the people would be taken into slavery. They were facing a mini-Day of the Lord then. Therefore, Paul says this to them, as he is closing his epistle:

Hebrew 13:16 But do not forget to do good and to share, for with such sacrifices God is well pleased.

Even in such a crisis, as things are getting bad, we should not forget to help others. God loves to see us put ourselves aside to serve others and give them a hand up when they have need.

We were in I Peter 4:7, "But the end of all things is at hand," and Paul continues this same idea:

I Peter 4:8-10 And above all things have fervent love for one another, for "love will cover a multitude of sins." Be hospitable to one another without grumbling. As each one has received a gift, minister it [serve it] to one another, as good stewards of the manifold grace of God.

Again, Peter gives us advice on what to do as the end approaches. As with prayer, we need to ratchet up our love for one another as the times get worse, to band together for mutual support, both physically and spiritually. This includes helping those in need and using our individual gifts to help the whole, because God has put those gifts as it pleased Him into the body to be used for the body. In so doing, with God's help, we will

Back to Basics by Richard T. Ritenbaugh (<http://www.cgg.org>)

have the wherewithal to endure to the end.

There you have it. Those are my four basic elements of Christianity that we need to emphasize as the crisis at the end approaches and during the crisis, too:

1. BELIEVE GOOD'S WORD
2. PRAY WITHOUT CEASING
3. FOLLOW CHRIST
4. SERVE OTHERS

Matthew 7:24-25 "Therefore whoever hears these sayings of Mine, and does them, I will liken him to a wise man who built his house on the rock: And the rain descended, the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house; and it did not fall, for it was founded on the rock."

Making these elements our top priorities will see us through the worst of troubles.