

Our Future—Now and Beyond

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Well, for this final service of the Feast of Tabernacles and Last Great Day for the year 2002, I do have a special message. Because I wanted to pick something as a final note that hopefully would inspire all of us to focus on our responsibilities in the times in which we live—in the place we are, the place to which God has brought us. When we look ahead to our future, we know there will be serious trials, persecution and tribulation sooner or later. Many of you are already facing certain very serious trials in your lives. Many of you are having to summon every ounce of energy possible in order to keep going—crying out for the very mercy and intervention of God to help you make it through. And, yet, brethren, those trials are only just the beginning of the things that are ahead. And so I do want to take the time to provide a snapshot of our future now—in the immediacy—and beyond, to help us prepare ourselves to harden those minds in the rigidity of God's Law and to focus on those things which are most important and which are absolutely critical in fulfilling the obligation for which we were created—being born into the very Family of God.

Our calling as true Christians involves a very difficult road, and especially since we are now living in the very end times leading up to the return of Jesus Christ. We don't know how far off that is, but I can tell you that it is nearer at hand than it has ever been before. And the circumstances that exist in this world tell us more than ever before that we are finally in the times which make it possible to see the very fulfillment of many of these long-range prophecies. It is a time when wars are being waged by coalition governments—nations banding together. There are dividing lines now according to race, according to religion, according to the drive toward globalism—all of these things that we didn't really see manifested nearly as much twenty, thirty, forty, fifty years ago, and yet, now are more extant than ever before. How long is it going to be before we see some of the dramatic events that Christ promised would occur before His Second Coming? We don't know, and we

avoid engaging in speculation. But we know that this is the end time and it is very likely, brethren, that many of you are going to live to see the very fulfillment of these prophecies that are spoken in the book of Revelation and in Matthew chapter twenty-four. We are going to read some of those this afternoon.

But let's begin by noting that the way of a true Christian is never easy in any time. By virtue of the fact that you have been called to follow the real Christ, it automatically sets you apart and makes you strange, weird and peculiar to the rest of the world. Now, a false concept of Jesus Christ is that you can have total acceptance among a very large "Christian" community worldwide. And, yet, Jesus Christ said, "If you are going to follow me, you are not going to be accepted by the world at all and, in fact, you are going to be hated." Matthew seven and verse thirteen. Matthew 7 and verse 13 sets the stage for telling us how difficult is the road for a true Christian. Matthew 7 and beginning in verse 13:

Enter ye in at the strait gate: for wide is the gate, and broad is the way, that leadeth to destruction, and many there be which go in thereat: Because strait is the gate, and narrow is the way, which leadeth unto life, and few there be that find it.

And I used this scripture during the spring Holy Days this past year—during the Days of Unleavened Bread—to talk about the difficulty of the road that we are walking. Yet to emphasize the proper translation for this, it should read: "Because narrow is the gate and troublous is the way." That's really what it means in the Greek. The word translated "strait" should be narrow and the word "narrow" should be translated "troublous", which captures the real essence of what Jesus Christ was saying. "Because narrow is the gate, and troublous is the way, which leads unto life, and few there be that find it." It is a troublous way. If you have made that commitment to be a Christian and you have laid down your old self, symbolically, through the ordinance of baptism—you have buried that old self—and you have come out of that water, and through the laying on of hands have received the down payment of the Holy Spirit and have begun to walk in a new way, not justifying the former self, the natural, carnal nature that exists in all of us, but instead have crucified that self so that you now allow Jesus Christ to live and dwell in your heart and mind to begin manifesting the very fruits of His orientation. If that is the choice you have made and you are now committed, having put your hand to the plow and are walking that road, you have asked for a

very troublous assignment. And you have tackled, and set yourself on the road, of the most difficult task any human being can accomplish. I don't know how I can make that point more clearly or strongly. The way of a Christian is not easy. It is the most difficult task that a human being will ever tackle. "Narrow is the gate, and troublous is the way, which leads unto life, and few there be that find it."

John fifteen and verse eighteen. John 15 and beginning in verse 18: "If the world hate you . . ." Now, we don't hear a lot of citations of this passage from the so-called "Christian" churches of this world who think instead about trying to expand the global "Christian" community—to find acceptance, one of another. And, yet, the reality of those who are truly going to follow the Christ is that they are going to find themselves few indeed. Just look at the very ministry of Jesus Christ when He walked on this earth in the flesh. And although He had thousands who thronged to Him, how many of them were truly convinced that He was the Messiah; that He was the very Son of God; that He really was bringing to them the words of life? How many were willing to make a commitment to turn from their own carnal ways—their own wisdom—and instead to walk in a totally different path? How many was He successful in converting? The thousands who thronged to see Him—to see the miracles performed—deserted Him before it was all said and done. And the reality is, brethren, there were only one hundred twenty faithful disciples that were left. Three-and-one-half years of ministry and one hundred and twenty people for all of that work, and all of that effort, and all of those marvelous miracles and signs that He performed. One hundred and twenty. Now, how do you view Him and His ministry? Was He a success, or was He a failure? Well, by the human standards of judging by numbers, I guess we would have to say that Jesus Christ was an absolute failure—if that is all the response He could muster at the end of the day. One hundred and twenty. Why is that? Because what Jesus Christ was requiring in order to have to walk after Him, to follow Him, was very difficult—difficult for human beings—because it goes against everything that we want to do and want to believe by nature. It's opposed to our natural orientation of mind—it's hard to overcome; it's hard to suppress the natural feelings, those things that well up in us and drive us in different directions; it's hard to subdue those things and walk in a different way.

And so those few who truly take up that responsibility and act on it are going to find themselves the outcasts of the world. They are not going to be the majority, they are going to be the small minority in this world. And they are not going to be appreciated and valued for their philosophies and their ideologies. Jesus Christ said they are going to be hated.

If the world hate you, ye know that it hated me before it hated you. If ye were of the world, the world would love his own.

Oh, yes, if you agree with the philosophies and the ideologies that are espoused by most people in this world, they accept you as their own—you just fit right in. But if you take a different posture, and your doctrine—your beliefs and your religion—is different, then you are viewed with suspicion. You are actually viewed as a dangerous individual. And even more so, brethren, as we face the time when people in this country and others are becoming more suspicious of those who are different. Because when they are afraid for their own personal safety, the first thing human beings do is to begin to single out those who they think are different and dangerous. It is a paranoia that human beings don't like to admit, yet invariably it will happen. It is already happening. When our country and others are faced with acts of terror, human beings will eventually do anything they have to do in order to feel safe, and we are seeing it happen with the recent changes in our laws that are already infringing upon our national freedoms. And the philosophy is always, "The ends justify the means." And many will admit that they are willing to give up their civil liberties for the sake of feeling safe in their own homes—protecting their families and their children against those who seek to destroy and to kill. And so the ends justify the means. In order to feel safe, we are willing to take away the liberties that this nation was supposedly founded upon.

The other thing that people are willing to give up is religious freedom. When they believe that religious freedom becomes a threat to their safety, they will abandon it in a heartbeat. We've only seen just the very beginning of that kind of thinking. But you just let one more major terrorist event happen in this country like what happened a year ago on September 11th, and you will see it begin wholesale.

If the world hate you, ye know that it hated me before it hated you. If ye were of the world, the world would love his own: but because ye are not of the world, but I have chosen you out of the world, therefore the world hateth you.

It doesn't say that the world is going to appreciate the true and the faithful Christian. Jesus Christ said the world is going to hate you if you are a true Christian. Now, if you are a so-called "Christian" and you are willing to compromise and fit in with the ideologies of this world, then you can be safe in that regard. But you will not be a real Christian, because you can't have it both ways.

Remember the word that I said unto you, The servant is not greater than his lord. If they have persecuted me, they will also persecute you.

Did they persecute Christ, or did they not? They not only persecuted Him, but they killed Him—they martyred Him. They hated Him. Why? Because He did not agree with their ideology and—most importantly— He did not allow room for any other belief system than that which He was preaching. The Jews of the day, among whom He taught, were very eager to allow anyone to stand up in the synagogues and preach their own variety of "truth." They weren't trying to be exclusive in thought at all. No, they had all kinds of factions that taught different slants on the Bible—those Old Testament books, and also from their own oral law. So they were very willing to give an opportunity for somebody else to stand up and preach something new. It wasn't that they were afraid, nor even recoiled against a different ideology. They were very willing to accept Jesus Christ and His brand of religion as long as He was also willing to make room for theirs and not be an exclusivist. And if Jesus Christ had been willing to say, "Well, now, this is how I see it. This is what my followers are going to do, but I also believe that your ideas are just as valid—that there are multiple ways to God; there is more than one way to have access to the throne of God; He accepts us all doing the best that we can with what we know." Now, if Christ had been willing to say that, they would have loved Him; they would have accepted Him and His ideology as one new sect of many sects of Jewish thought. But why did they single Christ out for hatred and eventual martyrdom? It is because Christ said, "I am going to tell you the Truth. I am a representative," He said, "of the Father and I'm telling you what God says is right and *here* is the Truth and there is no other way that is true except what I am telling you." He is saying, "What you are teaching is wrong. I'm telling you what is true. You are required to abandon your own ideologies and accept what I am telling you and follow after *that* if you want to have a relationship with God. And if you don't accept that, you will have no relationship with the Father." That is, in essence, what Jesus Christ said.

Because He was exclusive and He allowed no opportunity for inclusion of their brand of religion, they hated Him. And so they killed Him. And that is the orientation that each one of us is born with in the flesh, my dear brethren. And it is certainly the orientation of mind by which all of the peoples and nations of the earth are operating today, which is why Jesus Christ said, "If they persecute me, they are going to do the same thing to you. If they hated me, you can bet that you are not going to escape it either."

Jesus Christ was the first—He was the forerunner, the first of the firstfruits—and what He experienced and what He went through is the situation with which we are all going to find ourselves confronted before it's over.

Remember the word that I said unto you, The servant is not greater than his lord. If they have persecuted me, they will also persecute you; if they have kept my saying, they will keep yours also. But all these things will they do unto you for my name's sake, because they know not him that sent me.

Oh, yes, they are very well-meaning. They believe with their heart of hearts that they know God and that they are serving God and doing His will. And they don't realize that they are deceived. That's what deception is all about—thinking we are right when we are not; believing we understand the Truth; believing we have a relationship with God when we are actually separated from Him. That's the whole context of deception.

But Christ brought a Way and He was hated for that Way, and He said, "If they didn't like me and they didn't tolerate me, they are not going to tolerate you either." Jesus Christ was perfect—He committed no sin. He was the fullness of the manifestation of love, but that love is never a compromise of the principles of God. So He *refused* to compromise and He said, "*This* is the way it is." And in spite of the fact that He was perfect—He was guilty of no sin, no infraction of God's Law at all—they hated Him and they killed Him. Now, what chance do you and I have? Because we are not perfect like Jesus Christ was perfect. We don't have a *full* measure of the Holy Spirit controlling our minds and hearts. We are fighting those natural, carnal minds, and we are making mistakes, and we have weaknesses. We have to battle every single day. Now, if Jesus Christ, who was perfect and sinless, could not avoid hatred, persecution and martyrdom, what do you think is going to happen to us—these weak vessels who love the Truth but sometimes have trouble obeying it? Do you think you and I are going to get an easier ride in the time that we have left? Not a chance.

John seventeen and verse fourteen. John chapter 17 and beginning in verse 14: "I have given them thy word." Yes, Christ brought precisely the message that the Father had given Him to speak, and He said, "I am not speaking my own words, I am speaking only that which the Father gave to me." Christ was the

perfect ambassador—He spoke in the very name of His Father, not of His own accord.

I have given them thy word; and the world hath hated them, because they are not of the world, even as I am not of the world.

So those disciples that God called out and that Jesus Christ worked with and taught that Truth, they automatically became marks for hatred by virtue of that exclusive doctrine that they received and valued.

I pray not that thou shouldest take them out of the world, but that thou shouldest keep them from the evil [appropriately translated "the evil one"]. They are not of the world, even as I am not of the world. Sanctify them through thy truth: thy word is truth.

"Thy Word is Truth." And yet, today, how many people will tell you that we can't know the Truth; no one knows the Truth; we just do the best that we can. Some, even who were formerly a part of God's church in these last days and had access to that very revelation, have denied that they ever knew the Truth, and they take the posture—which is really a cop out—that, "Well, we can't really know for sure what the Truth is. We all just kind of have to do the best we can. But when Jesus Christ comes back, *then* He's going to kind of clear everything up and tell us what the Truth is, and we'll say, 'Oh, boy, I should have thought of that one, sorry I didn't, but no harm, no foul. You know, I was wrong in that, but I wasn't really being held responsible for it.' So Christ will sort it all out, and He will kind of just give us all a free ride right into the Kingdom, no matter what we've been teaching and practicing. It doesn't really matter. Christ is not holding us accountable." I wish I could believe that were true, brethren. I wish I could honestly, confidently go to bed at night and hold that orientation of mind, thinking that I have the luxury, and the allowance of God, of deciding what Truth is from my own rational study, and that God is going to accept that, and that He is also going to accept your concept of Truth, and somebody else's concept of Truth, and we are all going to define Truth in different ways, and yet, we are all going to be there at the same time, and God is going to say, "Well, that's okay. Y'all were a little off in this way, that way, or the other way, but no big deal." You know what the problem is with that? The Truth *is* the personification of Jesus Christ, as the Word made flesh, and Jesus Christ said He *revealed* Himself to those who were called, which means that if you are one who received Christ, you received *Truth*. You actually received and

you possessed it and you held it in your knowledge and your understanding. And you, then, also thereby became accountable for that Way of Life—to hold on to it, and not corrupt it, and not change it. Verse 15:

I pray not that thou shouldest take them out of the world, but that thou shouldest keep them from the evil [one]. They are not of the world, even as I am not of the world. Sanctify them through thy truth: thy word is truth.

Now, if we are sanctified through the Truth, how is that we don't *know* the Truth? *Are we or are we not* sanctified as the very people of God? If we are, it's because we have the Truth—we possess it, we know it. Not to any glory of ourselves. We didn't figure it out; we didn't come up with it according to our own human rationalization; we were given it as a priceless gift and made responsible for it as a pearl of great price. So we don't take credit for having it. We thank God with all that is within us that He revealed that Way to us and gave us this opportunity to live it. But if you are the people of God and if you are true Christians, it is because you were sanctified through *The Truth*—you have the Truth and there is no counterfeit that He will accept. He will not accept any definition of Truth except that which is the personification of His Holy Son.

As thou hast sent me into the world, even so have I also sent them into the world. And for their sakes I sanctify myself, that they also might be sanctified *through the truth* [emphasis added].

That's how we become a Christian—sanctification through possession of His Truth.

Neither pray I for these alone, but for them also which shall believe on me through their word.

So these are the particular disciples that Jesus Christ worked with for three-and-one-half years during His ministry, and He taught them personally. Now, what do you think He taught them? He taught them the Truth. This was God made flesh, and He gave them the message—the instruction—that came directly from the Father, and He taught these men personally what was the Truth. And He said, "Now I am going to commission you and you are going to go out and you are going to teach it to others. And you are going to raise up churches in my

name, by my authority, and Truth is going to reside within the Body of those assemblies." The same Truth that God gave and taught to His disciples, they were to teach in kind as authorized ambassadors of that very Son. "Neither pray I for these alone, but for them also which shall believe on me through their word." So those disciples were going to be commissioned and they were going to preach the very same message, and others were going to respond to that Way of Life and act upon it.

"That they all may be one . . ." It doesn't say that we all believe something different but that we are tolerant of one another's religious ideologies. That's not what oneness is. I gave an entire series in the last year on the topic of "The Unity of the Spirit," and I went through in detail to show you what real unity is. And the standard of evaluation is the relationship between the Father and the Son. Now, how unified do we think God the Father and His Son Jesus Christ really are? Do they both kind of have their separate ideas? Do they kind of go their different ways on religious philosophy but they kind of agree to tolerate one another? Is that what love is? Is that the unity that we believe exists within the God Family? I don't think so. In fact, I know that's not true. No, the Father and the Son agree in totality and they *both* know what the Truth is. It is *singular*, and they both *stand* in perfect unity behind that Way of Life. And that relationship in the God Family was used to exemplify what we are to have within the Church, and also that same unity with God and His Son.

Neither pray I for these alone, but for them also which shall believe on me through their word; *That they all may be one*, as thou, Father, art in me, and I in thee . . . [emphasis added]

You see, *there* is your direct example of what oneness really is. It is not "oneness" as defined by the world. It is not subject to debate or personal interpretation. Christ defined it Himself: "*AS* thou, Father, art in me, and I in thee." That's the oneness we are talking about.

". . . that they also may be one in us: that the world may believe that thou hast sent me." The day is coming when the world *is* going to know who you are. They are going to come to recognize that you *did* have the Truth—that God called a few out of this world and gave them that priceless Way of Life. They are going to come to understand.

First Peter two and verse six. 1 Peter chapter 2 and beginning in verse 6:

Wherefore also it is contained in the scripture, Behold, I lay in Sion a chief corner stone, elect, precious: and he that believeth on him shall not be confounded. Unto you therefore which believe he is precious: but unto them which be disobedient, the stone which the builders disallowed, the same is made the head of the corner . . .

Yes, everyone else who thought they were "Christian", who thought they were serving Christ, who thought they were representing Christ, actually disallowed the very cornerstone of the Church which was the real Christ. They didn't recognize the real Christ; they didn't see Him as the real Christ. The Jews would not have crucified Jesus if they thought He was the Christ. They would have revered Him; they would have accepted Him, if they had thought that He truly was the Christ. They didn't think they were crucifying Christ; they didn't think they were killing the Messiah; they thought they were killing some religious extremist who was bringing some weird, exclusive doctrine that was dangerous to the nation. That's what they thought they were doing. They thought they were acting for the absolute good of the Jewish nation and of Israel. They didn't know they were rejecting the cornerstone—killing God's very Son. And Christ said, "If you are going to be faithful to that one and only Christ, they are going to do the same to you. They are not going to recognize you for who you are either. They are not going to like what you believe, and eventually they are going to consider it so dangerous that you are *going to* come under persecution and tribulation." That's just a fact. If we live long enough in this age, brethren, that's what we have to look forward to in the future.

Unto you therefore which believe he is precious: but unto them which be disobedient, the stone which the builders disallowed, the same is made the head of the corner, And a stone of stumbling, and a rock of offence, even to them which stumble at the word, being disobedient: whereunto also they were appointed.

Yes, and so it is appointed that before Jesus Christ returns, there is going to be great tribulation, and there is going to be martyrdom of many of God's faithful people by those who think they are doing God service and don't realize that they are actually acting in the very hands of the enemy to destroy the very work of God.

Well, God's purpose and His plan are not going to be thwarted, and it is not going to be undermined. God is going to allow these things to occur for a reason. Continuing in verse 9: "But ye are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, an holy nation, a peculiar people . . ." And, yes, you certainly are. If you really believe the Christ who revealed Himself through a chosen servant in this age, who had the same message that was given in every other age that God has worked with man, then you too are going to be peculiar. You are going to be weird; you are going to be strange; and you are not going to be accepted for your ideology among the nations of this earth.

. . . that ye should shew forth the praises of him who hath called you out of darkness into his marvelous light: Which in time past were not a people, but are now the people of God: which had not obtained mercy, but now have obtained mercy. Dearly beloved, I beseech you as strangers and pilgrims . . .

When you sign up to be a Christian—which wasn't something you volunteered for, and neither did I; you were called—and you accepted that call and you stepped out and put your hand to the plow, you accepted a commission to become a stranger and a pilgrim. "I beseech you as strangers and pilgrims, abstain from fleshly lusts, which war against the soul." The world is going to tell you, "Indulge all of those natural inclinations of the flesh." The humanists of the world are going to tell you, "That's part of what we are by nature and we should give in to it." God said quite the opposite. He said, "I gave you a carnal mind—an orientation of mind—which leads to death. And before it leads to death, it leads to misery, and heartache, and sorrow, and every bad thing. And if you just learn to accept my handbook—the rule book—and these laws that govern humanity and give you the opportunity to really have happiness and peace and success, if you can just do that, *then* you can have every good thing that I want to give you." But it is going to require subduing the natural mind—the inclinations that we all have by nature—and instead to look to a different orientation of mind that we receive from Jesus Christ.

Dearly beloved, I beseech you as strangers and pilgrims, abstain from fleshly lusts, which war against the soul; Having your conversation honest among the Gentiles.

That means that we are still responsible for setting a good example among all of these people in the world who don't understand the Truth as yet. They are not going to understand you; they are not going to agree with your doctrine; they are going to think that you are strange and that you are weird, but we have an obligation as true Christians to use and manifest the very Spirit of God's mind and, therefore, to be a witness for that Way of Life—no matter what kind of persecution or difficulty we face.

"Having your conversation honest among the Gentiles: that, whereas they speak against you as evildoers . . ." And they certainly will. Now, we have all actually received a certain amount of acceptance and appreciation from a number of people in the world over the years. Why? Because they like the fruit of the operation of Christ in your life—when they find you to be honest, and forthright, and full of mercy, and patience, and longsuffering. People like dealing with individuals like that because it is to their advantage. You see, when you show that you truly are living after the Way of Christ, it is to their benefit and to their advantage.

I remember all of the years growing up in God's church and going to the Feast of Tabernacles, when we had those huge Feast sites with sometimes 16,000 people keeping the Feast at particular sites—whether it was Big Sandy, Texas; Squaw Valley, California, or some of the other major sites around the United States—and we had an incredibly good reputation in those communities. Now, these communities were used to large conventions coming into town, and they knew what to expect because they knew what people were like—who came to church conventions or any other kind of business convention. So they knew what to expect, and they were incredibly surprised to find that all of these thousands of people that descended upon a particular site would—for the most part—act with respect and regard for the merchants of accommodations and restaurants in the way that they conducted and handled themselves. And they were always surprised—pleasantly surprised—and were, then, eager to serve us and have us come. They knew there was something different about us. They liked how it affected them. Now, if they knew the basis of our beliefs—our doctrines—they would say, "Oh, well, that's strange. That's weird." They wouldn't like it at all and they certainly wouldn't adopt it for themselves, but they sure liked the fruits that were manifested by the people of God.

The problem is, as times get more difficult, those who do not accept the world's ideology, and who are different, are going to be viewed as dangerous. "Different" is "dangerous" when people are afraid for their lives. When they look around and find anybody who is not like them enough—and doesn't agree with them in philosophy enough—that person is going to come under suspicion of being dangerous to their own personal security and that of their families.

And I don't know that there's ever been a time when we have seen how that might actually come to pass more so than in the last twelve months. I think it was hard for us to imagine how anybody as benevolent, as innocuous, as peace loving as we are, might eventually come to the world's attention as being a dangerous threat. And though we are exclusivists in thought, we don't hate the people of the world. We know that they are God's people. He is going to call them at the time of His choosing and give them *their* chance to understand the Truth and to respond to it. But for right now, they are not called, and we are. And, therefore, *we* have the obligation to act upon that Way of Life and to not compromise it. But if we are Christ's, then we, too, are exclusive even as Christ was exclusive in thought—allowing no acceptance for any other belief or doctrine. And it is not because we want to be mean; it is not because we are trying to set ourselves up as being something better, it is because we simply understand that we received the priceless gift, and God said, "Hold on to it, don't let anybody take it away from you. Don't compromise it in any way." And if we are going to be faithful stewards of that Way of Life, that is precisely what we are going to do. We stand firm and hold on to that Way of Life, not because we are trying to set ourselves apart or to point our fingers at everyone else, it is because we value what we have received, and we are not going to turn loose of it. The world is going to count that as being exclusivist and dangerous. And that is the road that lies before us.

Having your conversation honest among the Gentiles: that, whereas they speak against you as evildoers [and if it hasn't happened already, you are going to find that it will happen], they may by your good works, which they shall behold, glorify God . . .

When—today, right now? No. The day is coming when the nations of the world are going to sit up and take notice, and they are going to look back, and they are going to say, "Wow, that was a phenomenal example that we saw in those that we knew—with whom God was working at the time." But, brethren, that is not going to happen right away. It is not going to happen until *they* are called and have that opportunity to receive the Truth.

. . . whereas they speak against you as evildoers, they may by your good works, which they shall behold, glorify God in the day of visitation.

What is the day of visitation? The day that Jesus Christ comes back and visits this earth as a conquering King to take possession of this earth. And He is going to rule with a rod of iron, and He is going to establish *His* government on this earth, and it is His unalterable Truth which is going to be the only Way practiced. There is going to be no amalgamation of religious thought; there will not be all of these other churches on every corner with their own take on "truth"; there will be *one* Truth taught in a perfect theocracy—the government of God which is both civil and religious; there will be no more separation of church and state; the civil authority—the King—is also going to be the religious authority, the High Priest. Jesus Christ is the King of Kings *and* the Lord of Lords, referring to both His office as the civil magistrate over the earth, as well as His religious vestment as High Priest. It is going to be a combined theocracy—religious and civil law. There is going to be no religion taught or allowed on this earth except that which Christ brings. It's going to be an exclusive religion on this earth.

So, as Christ warned, if you are called in any age to be a Christian, you are in for a tough road. But, brethren, if you were called to be a Christian in the last days leading up to the return of Christ, you have been called to a doubly tough road. And I hate to make it that much harder, but we need to come to understand the gravity of where we stand and what we are facing—and what we are going to face in the near future.

Matthew twenty-four, now, and verse three. Matthew chapter 24 and beginning in verse 3:

And as he sat upon the mount of Olives, the disciples came unto him privately, saying, Tell us, when shall these things be? and what shall be the sign of thy coming, and of the end of the world [or the consummation of the age]?

They wanted to know: "All of these things that you are talking about, that are going to come to pass, when is this really going to occur? And what is it going to be like, leading up to the time when you come back as that conquering King?" And so now, Christ is going to give them a prophecy and He is going to tell them all of the characteristics that are going to exist in those last days. Verse 4: "And Jesus answered and said unto them, Take heed that no man deceive you."

So the very first thing out of His mouth in response to a question about circumstances that would prevail in leading up to His Second Coming is that deception would be rampant. And that means, brethren, that there are going to be all kinds of people out there who are convicted of a certain ideology—or religion or principle—and they are going to be absolutely convinced that they are right, but they are going to be dead wrong. Deception. "Take heed that no man deceive you. For many shall come in my name, saying, I am Christ." They are not saying that they—the human beings—are Christ. We are not going to be seeing a whole bunch of people standing up and saying, "I am Jesus Christ, come and follow me." No, they are going to be teaching that they are *legitimate representatives* of Jesus Christ; they are going to be using the name of Christ; they are going to be saying that they have been given a special, revealed message from Christ, and trying to convince the peoples of the world to come and follow them. "For many shall come in my name, saying, I am Christ; and shall *deceive* many." Why? Because they are not true representatives of Christ at all—they are imposters, they are speaking presumptuously.

You know, if God is not going to allow Satan to defeat His purpose and to destroy His work, and if, as we know—as we believe—there are going to be faithful ministers up until the very end who are speaking legitimately by the name of Jesus Christ, by the authority of His Holy Spirit, and if Satan is not going to be allowed to destroy that work, how is it that Satan will try to get around that? How is he still going to try and win when God is not going to allow him to defeat the message going out by faithful servants? Well, if he can't destroy it—if it's hands off (by God's authority, He won't allow Satan to do it)—do you know what is the next best thing? Surround that faithful ministry with all kinds of counterfeits. Don't let God's Truth stand as one tree in the middle of an open prairie, because all eyes will become focused on that one tree. And if it's the Truth—if it's the work of God—and it is standing there by itself, it can have a monumental impact in drawing people to it. So what does Satan do? He surrounds that faithful ministry, which is like a tree, with all kinds of other trees—hundreds and thousands of other trees—until the work of God is hidden in a forest, so that people can't pick it out, they can't identify it very easily. Because the work of God now appears to be just one among hundreds and thousands of works that are going on in the name of Jesus Christ. They are all using Christ's name, yet they all have different beliefs and doctrines. But they all seem to be the same, so they are all part and parcel in the minds of people. No wonder human beings come so easily to believe that

there is no real Truth—that we all just kind of have to pick the one that seems to suit us the most. It is the ploy that Satan uses to try and hide and to diminish the effectiveness of what God is doing. Well, he is not going to accomplish it. God is allowing those counterfeits to exist for a reason. If God didn't want them there, He wouldn't allow Satan to do it. He has allowed it for a reason.

For many shall come in my name, saying, I am Christ; and shall deceive many. And ye shall hear of wars and rumours of wars: see that ye be not troubled: for all these things must come to pass, but the end is not yet.

We're hearing of wars and rumors of wars now. We've got a huge rumor of a war that is on the horizon. I don't know how it is going to come about. It's probably going to happen—time will tell. But if this isn't one now, there will be another one on the horizon later. When are these things really going to manifest themselves? When is the domino going to fall that begins to set off the chain of events that will lead to some of the monumental events that are prophesied to occur before the return of Christ? I don't know, brethren, and neither does anybody else. We, all of us, are commissioned to watch—not to interpret; not to presume; not to set dates, but to watch. God has given us the general climate that is going to exist in the last days, so we understand the general events and circumstances that are going to prevail at the time those things take place. But we are not to be presumptuous in trying to put names and dates and identities upon the fulfillment. No, we are simply to watch and be ready to make the right decisions, by faith, when these events begin to take place.

For nation shall rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom: and there shall be famines, and pestilences, and earthquakes, in divers places. All these are the beginning of sorrows [It's not the end, it's just the beginning of monumental, terrifying things to come]. Then . . .

Then, you see, these wars start—pestilence. What pestilence? What about anthrax? What about all of these other manmade—or contrived—bio-terror acts which might be a major source of public panic? How readily are people going to give up their freedoms when they feel threatened by something like bio-terrorism? People will give over their freedom in a heartbeat just to feel safe and protected.

When all of these things begin to make people feel unsafe and they become afraid for their lives, and for their children's lives, then what happens next? Verse nine: "Then shall they deliver you up to be afflicted . . ." Why? Because you are not going to buy into the same philosophies that they use as their guiding principles. You are going to be different and, therefore, because you are exclusive in your thought, you are going to be considered dangerous. Anybody who believes that they have the Truth—that they know the Truth and allow no other interpretation—that is considered hate thought. Exclusive ideology is a form of hatred to these men. It's in writing. The major organizations of this world—of this Babylonian system—are already espousing the idea that any religious group that will not be tolerant of other ideas is guilty of hate. And even if you have never been dangerous; even though you have never taken up arms; even if you have shown only fruits of peace and love toward your neighbor—even though you don't condone their lifestyles or their ideologies—even if you have always been peaceful, your "hate speech," your "hate doctrine" is going to be interpreted as that which holds the potential for violence. And even though you haven't been violent up to now, when people are afraid for their lives, they are going to look at you as the potential repositories of violent behavior. And then they are going to feel justified in taking no chances.

Can you see, brethren, how it might come sooner rather than later, even though we are so small and insignificant on the world scene? We are nobody, and yet, Satan knows precisely who we are, and he can arrange circumstances in these last days to bring us to the fore so that one day we actually may be among those in the headlines—hated and despised even as much as some of these terrorists whose pictures are flashed on our nightly news. It seems hard to believe, doesn't it? But this is what these prophecies that Jesus Christ spoke have talked about for two thousand years. And we live in the very time when it is going to come to pass.

"Then shall they deliver you up to be afflicted, and shall kill you: and ye shall be hated of all nations . . ." Why? Because you trust in Jesus Christ and follow Him and no one else. " . . . for my name's sake. And then . . ." Now, what is the result of this kind of persecution of those who hold those tenets and beliefs? Unfortunately, too many who do not have their feet really grounded, are going to be thrown off track—they are not going to be able to take the pressure, they are going to fold under that kind of persecution in order to protect themselves; to have safety for themselves and their families in the flesh. In order to avoid

jail—incarceration, detainment—they are going to sell out. "And then shall many be offended . . ." That means many of those who know better—who have been given the opportunity to know the Truth—are going to allow the pressure to get to them and they are going to sell out. They are going to become offended at Jesus Christ and His Truth and are going to be willing to compromise it for the sake of safety.

"And then shall many be offended, and shall betray one another . . ." In the heat of emotional distress, not being grounded and rooted in faith and confidence in God for their security and their safety, some, in order to save themselves, are not only going to disavow this exclusive doctrine of Jesus Christ, they are even going to point out others who hold it in order to divert attention from themselves. They will say, "Yes, I used to be a part of that group. I did believe that, but I had no idea they were as dangerous as they are. I'm not a part of them anymore, but I'll give you a list of the people who still are." Do you think, brethren, that you and I might not be capable of that if we were put under enough pressure? If we are not being led by God's Holy Spirit, and if we are not diligent in doing what we should right now in preparing ourselves, you or I could easily be one of those. And if you think you couldn't, then you probably are one who is more likely than the rest to fall.

And then shall many be offended, and shall betray one another, and shall hate one another. And many false prophets shall rise, and shall deceive many. And because iniquity shall abound . . .

That's lawlessness. That's breaking God's Law. That means compromising the Truth for the sake of fitting in with the world—pulling attention away from ourselves so that we are not on the hot seat for our religious beliefs, our exclusive philosophy. "And because iniquity shall abound, the love of many shall wax cold." The love of God's Truth—the love of the real Christ. That love is going to get harder to find because there will be fewer in those days who can take the pressure and stand up to it.

Have I painted a pretty clear picture of what you have bought into on this road to becoming a good Christian—a real Christian? We need to understand the reality of what it is we have signed up for because that is precisely what we have ahead of us if we live long enough. But there is nothing, my dear brethren, that we cannot accomplish if we will trust God implicitly. In spite of how black and how

bleak I have painted that picture—using the very words of Jesus Christ to show us what is ahead—Jesus Christ did not call us to fail. And He has determined to do a work—through His faithful servants and through that faithful remnant—which is going to stand this world on its head.

But don't think that the only outcome will be a place of safety. Yes, some are promised to be protected in a place of safety, but there are also others who are promised martyrdom. Look at the example of Stephen. Stephen held fast and was absolutely faithful, but what was His outcome? Did God protect Him? No, He allowed Him to be stoned to death by those who were zealous to do "God's work." They were deceived—they didn't know any better. The one who became the Apostle Paul—whose name was Saul at the time—stood by and held their coats while the others threw stones at the servant of God and martyred Stephen. It's one of those things that apparently still bothered Paul years later as he continued to apologize for the role that he played in the martyrdom of God's servants. And so, if you are going to hold faithful, prepare for the fact that God may require the same of you that He required of Stephen—that He required of His own Son with His crucifixion. That example of Stephen—of being willing to die and maintain his belief, his faith, to the bitter end, without compromise—had exactly the opposite effect than those who killed him thought it would have. Because, instead of demoralizing the church—instead of reducing its power and its influence—people looked at the way Stephen handled himself in the face of that trial, that persecution, and that stoning, and they marveled at his example. And it actually was more of a witness to God's Way—it actually backfired on those who killed him.

I highly suspect that's precisely what is going to happen in these days as well. Daniel eleven says that the people of God, those "who do know their God", are going to do exploits. How? Don't count on it being because God is going to give some of us powers to call fire down from heaven, or to heal. Some of that may very likely happen. But what I think is more likely, brethren, is that the exploits that are going to be done by the faithful people of God, are going to be done by just simply holding fast to the Truth and refusing to compromise it, regardless of the threat to ourselves and to our families. And we are going to say, "I don't care what you are threatening to do to me; I don't care if you are threatening to put me in jail; I don't care if you are threatening to torture me; I don't care if you are threatening to kill me, I will not compromise that Way that I know came from Jesus Christ. It is a pearl of great price to me. It is the most valuable thing that I possess, and I am

willing to give up everything in order to hold it. So go ahead and do what you are going to do." How many of us are ready to stand tall with that orientation? I don't pretend to say that I am. I think probably, like you, I need as much time as we have left in order to continue to dig and prepare to have that kind of faith and confidence. "The just shall live by faith." Not by advance knowledge, but by real confidence in God no matter what threat is put before us.

The key requirement for success is faith and, brethren, if we have that faith, no matter what God is going to demand of us—even death in the times ahead—we have an opportunity to be just like Stephen who showed forth the manifestation of the Spirit, like Jesus Christ did, when he said, "Forgive them, they know not what they do." Total peace of mind—confidence—even while they were being slaughtered. That is what we need to be able to accomplish. And if we spend our time wisely, now, as we leave this glorious Feast of Tabernacles and Last Great Day, and set about the task of putting on that kind of faith—drawing close to God, giving ourselves to the crucifixion of the self and the putting on of the mind of Jesus Christ—then whenever these things begin to happen, we can stand.

They are going to come suddenly—they are going to take us by surprise. You are not going to have warning. You and I are going to have those tests of faith, and they are going to come upon us so suddenly that if we have not prepared, we may be of those who sell out. No matter what we have accomplished up until now, it's all going to be for naught if we lose it in the eleventh hour. No matter how tough it is, no matter how bleak and troublous that road appears to be, at the end of it—for those who are successful—is the most glorious reward that any human being could ever hope to receive: birth into the very Family of God—ruling with Jesus Christ as Kings and Priests for the edification of all of those in the Millennium and in that second resurrection we talked about this morning, those who are going to come up and have their chance for salvation. Do you want to be a part of it? Do you really want that more than anything else in this world? Brethren, if we want it, we can have it. All we have to do is apply ourselves as true Christians.

The future is going to be very troublous. Ultimately, though, the real future is going to be glorious—that which we have been picturing, now, for these last days: the glorious reward that God intends to give to those who love it.

May all of you hold fast and be of those who will hold those offices and be called glorious and faithful servants—holding fast to the very end—and receive that incredible reward that God seeks to give to all of us.