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BEING IN THE KINGDOM OF GOD AND IN THE FALLEN WORLD

As children of God and disciples of Christ, it is important that we gain insight and develop deep convictions concerning the kingdom of God so that we can contribute wholesomely and effectively to the building of His kingdom.

In this message, we will continue with important aspects of the kingdom of God and appreciate how, as citizens of heaven, we can live our lives meaningfully in this fallen world.

We will see that the kingdom of God has a present and a future dimension and is vitally related to the Lord Jesus Christ and His church. We will reflect on the enduring significance of the kingdom of God and consider how we can fulfil our legitimate responsibilities on earth where the spirit of the world is pervasive.

The kingdom of God: Present or future?

There are differing views concerning whether the kingdom of God is of the future or of the present. We will not go into the details of the different views and the arguments put forward. Instead, we will concentrate on the biblical position.

A present reality

Some believers associate the kingdom of God with the future. However, the Scriptures teaches that the kingdom of God is not just of the future, but is a present reality.

In reply to the question of the Pharisees regarding when the kingdom of God was coming, the Lord Jesus declared, "For behold, the kingdom of God is in your midst" (Luke 17:20-21).

In Matthew 12:28, the Lord Jesus says: "But if I cast out demons by the Spirit of God, then the kingdom of God has come upon you." During His ministry on earth, the Lord Jesus did cast out demons by the Spirit of God. So the kingdom of God has "come upon" us. The coming of the kingdom of God is closely associated with the life and ministry of the Lord Jesus, which includes casting out demons and performing miracles. These testify to the realities of the kingdom of God.

Other passages also point to the kingdom of God being a present reality. In John 3:3-5, the Lord Jesus told Nicodemus that a person has to be "born again" or "born of the Spirit" to enter the kingdom of God. The words of the Lord Jesus indicate that the kingdom of God is a present reality, for we can be "born again" and enter the kingdom of God during our lifetime on earth. This takes place when we believe in the Lord Jesus Christ and receive Him into our hearts (John 1:12-13).

A future dimension

The Scriptures also teaches that there is a future dimension to the kingdom of God. This comes through clearly when we read Ephesians 5:5 together with 1 Peter 1:3-4. Ephesians 5:5 warns that no immoral or impure person "has an inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and God" and 1 Peter 1:3-4 assures us that this inheritance "which is imperishable and undefiled and will not fade away" is "reserved in heaven" for those born again to the living hope.

1 Peter 1:3-4

3 Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who according to His great mercy has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead,
4 to obtain an inheritance which is imperishable and undefiled and will not fade away, reserved in heaven for you,

All true believers, born again to this living hope, can look forward to the future, to eternity, where much more is in store for those who love God.

In John 14, the Lord Jesus told His disciples that He would be preparing a place in His Father's house for them that they may be with Him in eternity. He also told them that He would come again and receive them to Himself.

John 14:1-3

1 "Do not let your heart be troubled; believe in God, believe also in Me.
2 "In My Father's house are many dwelling places; if it were not so, I would have told you; for I go to prepare a place for you.
3 "If I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and receive you to Myself, that where I am, there you may be also.

Thus, we see that there is both a present and a future dimension to the kingdom of God. While it is true that the kingdom of God is already here, the full and wondrous manifestation of the glory of Christ and His kingdom is yet to be.

Relationship between the kingdom of God, the person and work of the Lord Jesus, and the church

The kingdom of God, the person and work of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the church are key issues pertaining to the fulfilment of God's purposes, and there is a close relationship between them. We will now consider this vital relationship.

By His death on the cross, the Lord Jesus bore our sins and the punishment due to us. Through repentance and faith in Him, our sins are forgiven and we are reconciled to God. We are born of the Spirit and we enter God's kingdom. We become God's children, spiritually joined to the risen Christ and baptised into the body of Christ, the church. And to the church Christ entrusts the responsibility of advancing God's kingdom.

Paul teaches in Colossians 1:13 that all true believers have been rescued from the domain of darkness and transferred to the kingdom of His beloved Son. He also teaches us in 1 Corinthians 12:13 that "by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body". In Ephesians 1:22-23, he tells us that "one body" is the body of Christ, the church, and that Christ is the Head of the church.

Ephesians 1:22-23

22 And He put all things in subjection under His feet, and gave Him as head over all things to the church,

23 which is His body, the fullness of Him who fills all in all.

All true believers are part of the church. The church is not a building, but a spiritual body, the body of Christ. If we have indeed been born of the Spirit, we would have been baptised by the Spirit into the body of Christ, and we would have become a part of the church, of which Christ is the Head.

The Lord Jesus seeks to build His kingdom, and has entrusted to the church the immense privilege and responsibility of advancing His kingdom under His headship. Just as the Lord Jesus Himself preached the kingdom of God during His earthly ministry, He also gives instructions to His disciples to proclaim it.

The Lord Jesus teaches His disciples to pray to the Father: "Our Father who is in heaven, hallowed be Your name. Your kingdom come. Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven" (Matt. 6:9,10). Teaching His disciples to pray in this manner reveals the deep concern in His heart for the advancement of God's kingdom and for God's name to be honoured and for His will to be done. He is seeking to transmit this primary concern in His heart to His disciples. A major aspect of this part of the pattern prayer is the growth of the church both in number and quality. This would mean more and more people entering God's kingdom, and those who are in His kingdom becoming increasingly submitted to Him. There will be an increasing manifestation of God's power and glory, and the retreat of the powers of darkness. This should be the earnest longing and prayer of God's people and what we should be committed to.

But how does the Lord want us to contribute to the advancement of His kingdom? What are the means by which He desires us to accomplish this objective? What are the spiritual principles that should guide us in our contribution?

Contributing to the advancement of God's kingdom

Let us look at some passages in the Scriptures to understand how the Lord wants His disciples to advance His kingdom.

During His ministry on earth, the Lord Jesus sent out the twelve apostles with the instruction to "proclaim the kingdom of God" (Luke 9:2). Likewise, when He sent out the seventy, He instructed them to proclaim: "The kingdom of God has come near to you" (Luke 10:9).

In what is commonly known as "The Great Commission", He instructed His disciples: "Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I commanded you..." (Matt. 28:19-20).

Before His ascension, He told His disciples: "... you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be My witnesses both in Jerusalem, and in Judea and Samaria, and even to the remotest part of the earth" (Acts 1:8).

In obedience to the Lord's instruction, the believers who "had been scattered went about preaching the word". For example, Philip was in Samaria "proclaiming Christ" (Acts 8:4-5). He preached "the good news about the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ..." and those who believed were baptised (Acts 8:12).

"Preaching the word", "proclaiming Christ" and preaching the "good news of the kingdom" refer to the same thing—preaching the good news of what God has done and provided for us in and through the Lord Jesus Christ. It involves helping non-believers enter the kingdom of God.

However, the Lord's instruction to make disciples of all nations is not limited to helping non-believers enter the kingdom of God. It also includes teaching believers to observe all that He has commanded (Matt. 28:20). This point is crucial because believers can grow only if they know the Lord's teachings and obey them.

The heart of the message to be proclaimed is the Lord Jesus—what He has done, how He bore our sins and how, through Him, we can enter God's kingdom and grow spiritually. The Cross opens the way for all to have a meaningful part in God's kingdom. Not only can we have our sins forgiven, we can also have fullness of life in Christ. In Him, we have the potential to rise to the highest level of moral and spiritual development and stature, and we can enter into the deepest fellowship with God and with one another.

When the apostle Paul preached "Christ crucified" and wrote that he "determined to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and Him crucified" (1 Cor. 1:23; 2:2), he was emphasising the centrality of Christ in God's purposes. The risen Christ and

what was accomplished at the Cross are crucial for our moral and spiritual development in His kingdom.

Importance of healthy church life

As Christ has entrusted the advancement of His kingdom to the church, it is imperative that the life of the church be healthy. The church must function effectively, be properly built up and submitted to the lordship of Christ.

In Ephesians 4:11-16, Paul tells us the importance of unity in the body of Christ and how the church can be meaningfully and effectively built up.

Ephesians 4:11-16

11 And He gave some as apostles, and some as prophets, and some as evangelists, and some as pastors and teachers,

12 for the equipping of the saints for the work of service, to the building up of the body of Christ;

13 until we all attain to the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a mature man, to the measure of the stature which belongs to the fullness of Christ.

14 As a result, we are no longer to be children, tossed here and there by waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by the trickery of men, by craftiness in deceitful scheming;

15 but speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in all aspects into Him who is the head, even Christ,

16 from whom the whole body, being fitted and held together by what every joint supplies, according to the proper working of each individual part, causes the growth of the body for the building up of itself in love.

The building up of the body of Christ has two major aspects. One concerns the quality of the lives of believers; the other concerns the number of believers.

Too often, believers think of "The Great Commission" only in terms of evangelism, that is, adding numbers to the kingdom. While this is important, growing in quality and unto maturity is just as important, if not more so. Paul stresses this when he says in verse 13: "until we all attain to the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a mature man, to the measure of the stature which belongs to the fullness of Christ".

Believers need to grow to be a "mature man". If we are unstable and our lives lack spiritual quality, we will not be in a position to properly serve the Lord. Instead, we will be easily "tossed here and there" like children (v. 14). When the lives of believers grow in quality, *that in itself* constitutes advancement of God's kingdom. It is also the basis for the increase in numbers.

Verse 15 emphasises that we are to grow up in all aspects *into Him*. To develop wholesomely in every aspect, we need to know the Lord Jesus Christ intimately. We need to abide in Him and He in us.

Every member of the body of Christ is important to Him, and each member should be functioning properly. Paul elaborates on this truth in 1 Corinthians 12 to 14. It is this proper functioning of each individual part that "causes the growth of the body for the building up of itself in love" (Eph. 4:16). This growth encompasses both spiritual quality and increase in numbers.

Healthy church life can take place only when the church is submitted to the lordship of Christ, when it subjects itself to the authority of God and His revelation in the Scriptures, and when it is being empowered by the Holy Spirit.

Christ, the church and the fulfilment of God's eternal purpose

Let us consider a passage in Ephesians that clearly shows the vital role of the church in the fulfilment of God's eternal purpose.

Ephesians 3:8-11

8 To me, the very least of all saints, this grace was given, to preach to the Gentiles the unfathomable riches of Christ,

9 and to bring to light what is the administration of the mystery which for ages has been hidden in God who created all things;

10 so that the manifold wisdom of God might now be made known through the church to the rulers and the authorities in the heavenly places.

11 This was in accordance with the eternal purpose which He carried out in Christ Jesus our Lord,

Verses 10 and 11 reveal that it is in accordance with God's eternal purpose for His manifold wisdom to be made known *through the church* to the rulers and the authorities in the heavenly places.

We can see from these verses that the church plays a major part in the fulfilment of God's eternal purpose. However, it is only when church life is worked out in the way the Lord desires that the wisdom of God in its many different facets will be manifested.

Furthermore, verse 11 reveals that God's eternal purpose is carried out *in the Lord Jesus*. It is carried out through His death, resurrection, ascension and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit and worked out in the body of Christ under His lordship. Thus it is vital that church life be healthy.

"I will build My church"

The Lord Jesus says: "I will build My church; and the gates of Hades will not overpower it" (Matt. 16:18). The Lord Jesus Himself will build His church, which is the spiritual body of believers with Christ as Head. He will do so through His people, and He will enable them. He will not leave them to struggle on their own. The church has a central role in the advancement of God's kingdom, and He will ensure that the church will never be destroyed.

As we seek to serve the Lord, *our ultimate goal must be the building of the church of the Lord Jesus Christ and the advancement of God's kingdom*, not the advancement of a particular group or organisation. We should not harbour any personal ambition or seek to further our personal interests or that of anyone else, or do anything contrary to the ultimate goal.

The culmination

The Lord Jesus proclaimed and taught the kingdom of God when He was on earth and since then, He has been building it up. And the building of God's kingdom will culminate in the kingdom being handed over to God the Father. The apostle Paul reveals this in 1 Corinthians 15:24-28 where he speaks of the things that will happen after the Lord Jesus comes again:

1 Corinthians 15:24-28

24 then comes the end, when He hands over the kingdom to the God and Father, when He has abolished all rule and all authority and power.

25 For He must reign until He has put all His enemies under His feet.

26 The last enemy that will be abolished is death.

27 For He has put all things in subjection under His feet. But when He says, "All things are put in subjection," it is evident that He is excepted who put all things in subjection to Him.

28 When all things are subjected to Him, then the Son Himself also will be subjected to the One who subjected all things to Him, so that God may be all in all.

Advancing the spiritual kingdom by spiritual means

It is crucial for us to recognise that God's kingdom is a *spiritual* kingdom. It is the kingdom of God. *It cannot, therefore, be served or advanced by worldly wisdom, fleshly energy or natural talents.*

The apostle Paul was a capable, learned and talented person, but he did not rely on his natural capabilities to advance God's kingdom. He testified to the church at Corinth that he did not use human wisdom or persuasiveness in his ministry. Instead, he served with the enabling of the Holy Spirit, and his ministry centred on the Lord Jesus Christ and what was accomplished at the Cross.

1 Corinthians 2:1-5

1 And when I came to you, brethren, I did not come with superiority of speech or of wisdom, proclaiming to you the testimony of God.

2 For I determined to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and Him crucified.

3 I was with you in weakness and in fear and in much trembling,

4 and my message and my preaching were not in persuasive words of wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power,

5 so that your faith would not rest on the wisdom of men, but on the power of God.

We may be naturally very talented and capable. But these natural talents and capabilities in themselves cannot contribute to God's kingdom. There may be apparent results, but there will never be true spiritual advancement. Whatever is natural, of the flesh and of the world, cannot contribute to the spiritual kingdom of God. It will instead hinder its advancement and bring about all kinds of complications. *The spiritual kingdom of God can only be advanced by spiritual means, according to the guidance and ways of God and in the power of the Holy Spirit.* This is clear from the instruction of the Lord Jesus to His disciples to wait in Jerusalem until the Holy Spirit came upon them (Luke 24:49). We must therefore be careful how we seek to serve God.

In Christian service, there is often a mixture: a certain degree of love for the Lord and dependence on Him and at the same time the presence of fleshly motivation like self-exaltation and pride, and the dependence on natural wisdom and the ways of the world. Let us, with the Lord's help, decisively put to death the ways of the flesh and learn more and more to *worship and serve God in all purity of heart and total dependence on Him.*

We shall now reflect on the enduring significance of the kingdom of God and its implications.

The kingdom of God: An enduring reality

The kingdom of God is incorporeal, not of the physical or material world, but of the spiritual realm. It is invisible; we cannot see it with our physical eyes. It is intangible; we cannot touch it.

As human beings, we tend to be more conscious of what we can see, touch, taste, hear or smell. We are easily affected by our physical senses and are often preoccupied with them. The kingdom of God, however, does not have such features that our five physical senses can detect. Yet it exists, and is an enduring reality.

It is like many important things in life that we cannot touch and see, but which are nevertheless very real, for example, love and quality of relationships. Character too

is an extremely important aspect of life that we cannot touch or see at the physical level.

The kingdom of God is not only real, it will endure and is what really matters. In contrast, all that is of this fallen world and which is not of God will be destroyed. 2 Peter 3:10-13 declares that the earth and the works in it will be burned up.

This is a fundamental truth that we must constantly bear in mind: Only what is of the kingdom of God will endure in the age to come and to eternity.

As we live on earth, we must constantly reflect on the truths and implications of the passage in Hebrews 12:22-29.

Hebrews 12:22-29

22 But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to myriads of angels,

23 to the general assembly and church of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven, and to God, the Judge of all, and to the spirits of the righteous made perfect,

24 and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood, which speaks better than the blood of Abel.

25 See to it that you do not refuse Him who is speaking. For if those did not escape when they refused him who warned them on earth, much less will we escape who turn away from Him who warns from heaven.

26 And His voice shook the earth then, but now He has promised, saying, "Yet once more I will shake not only the earth, but also the heaven."

27 This expression, "Yet once more," denotes the removing of those things which can be shaken, as of created things, so that those things which cannot be shaken may remain.

28 Therefore, since we receive a kingdom which cannot be shaken, let us show gratitude, by which we may offer to God an acceptable service with reverence and awe;

29 for our God is a consuming fire.

The "Mount Zion" in verse 22 does not refer to the physical Mount Zion in Israel. The writer is referring to the spiritual kingdom of God. In verses 22 and 23, he says that believers have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the *living God*, the *heavenly Jerusalem*, and to myriads of *angels*, to the general assembly and church of the firstborn who are enrolled in *heaven*, and to *God*. The writer is in effect saying, "You have come to the kingdom of God."

"You have come" can be translated as "you have drawn near" or "you have arrived at". Have we just drawn near to "Mount Zion" because it is still in the future or have we actually arrived at "Mount Zion", a present reality? It seems meaningful to

incorporate both aspects here, as both are relevant. We have seen earlier that the kingdom of God is a present reality; we have not only drawn near to it, but have arrived at or entered it. It also has a future dimension that we can look forward to.

Verses 26 and 27 are clear on this point that while all other created things will be shaken or will perish, what is of the kingdom of God will abide forever. Here, the writer to the Hebrews declares that the Lord will "shake not only the earth but also the heaven" (v. 26), and those things which can be shaken will be removed, while those things which cannot be shaken will remain (v. 27).

Verse 28 assures us that "we receive a kingdom which cannot be shaken". If we are born of the Spirit, we have a part in this unshakeable, eternal kingdom.

While encouraging us with this truth, the writer to the Hebrews also exhorts us to show gratitude and "offer to God an acceptable service with reverence and awe; for our God is a consuming fire" (vs. 28-29).

Let us therefore serve in a manner acceptable to the holy God, truly contributing to the unshakeable, abiding kingdom of God. What is of the flesh will not abide, neither will it contribute to the eternal kingdom of God.

Concentrating on God's kingdom and its advancement

As the kingdom of God is an enduring reality, God's children must concentrate on His kingdom and the things of His kingdom rather than on the things of this world.

The spirit of "Your kingdom come" expressed in the pattern prayer the Lord Jesus teaches us must be the consuming passion of our hearts during our time on earth.

It is helpful for us to constantly check ourselves to see if our lives are consistent with this spirit. Because we are living in a fallen world, it is easy for us to deviate from such a posture and be absorbed in the visible and temporal things of the world and be entangled by them.

In 1 Corinthians 7, the apostle Paul expresses beautifully the spirit with which we should live our lives on earth. We will concentrate on verses 29-31.

1 Corinthians 7:29-31

29 But this I say, brethren, the time has been shortened, so that from now on those who have wives should be as though they had none;

30 and those who weep, as though they did not weep; and those who rejoice, as though they did not rejoice; and those who buy, as though they did not possess;

31 and those who use the world, as though they did not make full use of it; for the form of this world is passing away.

When the apostle Paul says: “those who have wives should be as though they had none” (v. 29), he is not encouraging us to neglect our responsibilities in marriage or to ignore our spouses. Rather, he is addressing the importance of maintaining “undistracted devotion to the Lord” (v. 35). He refers to various areas that can become a distraction. An example is marriage, where the husband or wife may be preoccupied with trying to please his or her spouse.

Likewise, in referring to weeping, rejoicing, and buying, he is not saying that there is no place for such emotions and activities. He is stressing the importance of living by the spirit of “those who buy, as though they did not possess; and those who use the world, as though they did not make full use of it” (vs. 30-31).

As we live in this world, there are inevitably various things we have to be involved in. For instance, there is a proper place for buying things in this world and for using them. Yet, we should not be taken up with the issue of possessions. This is the meaning of Paul’s words, “those who buy, as though they did not possess” (v. 30).

Similarly, when Paul says: “use the world as though they did not make full use of it”, he does not mean that we do not make good use of the things we have. What he means is that we should not be preoccupied with the material things, our worldly possessions, and the visible and temporal realm, and as a result fail to maintain a healthy spirit of concentration on the kingdom of God.

All that we do in this world ought to be done from the perspective of God's kingdom and its advancement. This includes our approach to life, our involvement in the affairs of this life, and our use of the things of this world.

Are we able to maintain the freedom in spirit to concentrate on our walk with God and be sensitive and submitted to what He requires of us, even while we are involved in various legitimate activities and responsibilities in this world?

In verse 35, Paul explains his intentions in giving the various exhortations. He writes, “This I say for your own benefit; not to put a restraint upon you, but to promote what is appropriate and to secure undistracted devotion to the Lord.”

His intention is not to deprive or restrain us. Rather, it is for our benefit—to promote what is seemly, good and appropriate, what is pleasing to the Lord. He wants to help us live without distraction and be fully devoted to the Lord. He wants to help us ensure that we concentrate on God and His kingdom because God and His kingdom are what truly matter. If we understand this, we should appreciate that though the path of true discipleship may at times appear to be one of deprivation, in reality it is not. From the perspective of God's kingdom, from the eternal perspective, it is a life of true abundance, fruitfulness and fulfillment.

The apostle John directs us to the true perspective of life in 1 John 2:17: “The world is passing away, and also its lusts; but the one who does the will of God lives

forever.” He also warns us against loving the world (v. 15). In verse 16, he says: “For all that is in the world, the lust of the flesh and the lust of the eyes and the boastful pride of life, is not from the Father, but is from the world.” This is what we must be wary of and keep away from. We must instead turn our attention to doing the will of God because those who do so will abide forever.

This principle of having a right perspective in life must pervade our being and dominate our thoughts so that we constantly live with the spirit of “Your kingdom come”. We need to nurture this spirit to an ever-increasing depth of quality, purity, meaning and consistency. We may be gripped by this truth when we first hear it, but as we go on in life, we may lose sight of it. It is very easy, in the midst of everyday life, to fail to maintain this perspective and approach.

How much does God’s kingdom mean to us? Is it as valuable to us as the pearl of great value is to the merchant, or the treasure in the field is to the finder, that he sold all he had in order to buy it (Matt. 13:44-46)? This is the kind of attitude the Lord wants us to have. It should be all that matters to us.

Legitimate responsibilities in this world

Although we must concentrate on God’s kingdom and not be distracted by or be absorbed in the things of this world, we must also recognise that we are living in this world, in this present age. We are not living in heaven yet. Therefore, it is important for us to have a wholesome understanding of how we should live in the kingdom of God and in the fallen world at the same time.

When believers read Galatians 1:4, that the Lord Jesus “gave Himself for our sins so that He might rescue us from this present evil age, according to the will of our God and Father”, some may wonder whether God desires us to leave this present world because the world is evil. This is not the teaching of the Scriptures and not what Paul is communicating here. Rather, Paul is teaching the truth that the death of the Lord Jesus Christ on the cross not only provides the way for our sins to be forgiven, but also delivers us and enables us to live a life of freedom from sin. Even though we were previously living in sin and under bondage to the evil one, we need not be gripped by sin or remain in bondage any longer.

Note that Paul says, “that He might rescue us”. This tells us that we are not automatically delivered because of Christ’s death. The path of freedom is offered, we *can* be delivered, but we need to cooperate with the Lord.

Sanctified in the truth

The Lord Jesus wants us to live well for Him in this present evil age. This is made clear to us in His prayer to God the Father recorded in John 17:

John 17:15-18

15 "I do not ask You to take them out of the world, but to keep them from the evil one.

16 "They are not of the world, even as I am not of the world.

17 "Sanctify them in the truth; Your word is truth.

18 "As You sent Me into the world, I also have sent them into the world.

We see that it is not the Lord's intention that we be taken out of this world. He said pointedly that He has sent us into the world. We are to live in this world, but not in the same manner as the people of the world.

In verse 16, the Lord says: "They are not of the world, even as I am not of the world." Even though the Lord Jesus lived in this world, He was not of the world. Similarly, as God's children, we are also not of this world. Therefore, we must not be identified with the spirit and trend of the world.

But how can we be in this world and yet not live like the people of the world? The Lord Jesus provides the answer in verse 17. He asks God the Father to "sanctify them in the truth; Your word is truth". To be sanctified in the truth means knowing and walking in truth, according to God's guidance and His revelation in the Scriptures. We need to be sanctified in the truth so that we can live an overcoming life. Although this is not easy, we have the assurance of God's help. The Lord Jesus has asked the Father to keep us from the destructive influence of the evil one (v. 15).

Having entered the kingdom of God, we are citizens of heaven (Phil. 3:20). But we are still living on earth. We must be mindful of both of these aspects: we are citizens of heaven but we also live for a brief period of time on earth, with a purpose and a mission. We have a heavenly vision, a spiritual purpose and mission, but we also have legitimate earthly responsibilities to fulfil. And the way we live on earth and fulfil our earthly responsibilities must be based on the values, perspective, approach and priorities of God's kingdom.

We are "the salt of the earth" and "the light of the world", the Lord Jesus tells us in Matthew 5:13-16. How can we be true to our calling? We can do so by conducting ourselves properly and responsibly in the home, in the workplace and society, and at the same time maintaining the values and perspective that befit those who belong to God's kingdom. When we live in this way, we will be able to testify effectively, by our lives and our words, to the truth and to God's kingdom.

We should not live like worldly people, as if all that matters is this world and the visible realm. As God's children, we should live differently—with a heavenly vision. Such a life testifies to the people of the world that what they are so absorbed in are, in reality, unimportant, and can actually be harmful.

This is how the apostle Paul encourages us to live in Philippians 2:15—by proving ourselves to be “blameless and innocent, children of God above reproach in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation, among whom you appear as lights in the world”. Although it is not easy, we should strive to live in this way, shining as lights in this dark and fallen world, testifying to the truth.

May not be easy to know what is legitimate and appropriate

It can be difficult to know where to draw the line between what is legitimate and appropriate, and what is undesirable. For example, in the work context, there is a proper place for upgrading our skills, improving our capabilities and increasing our performance efficiency. There is also a proper place for promotion and advancement in our careers. So when do these become worldly and out of place for the believer? How do we distinguish between fulfilling our responsibilities well and being worldly?

We are subjected to many worldly influences in our place of work and what is “worldly” can very easily creep into our lives and mould our attitudes and affect our motivation. It is easy to get caught up with the things of the world. In many instances, our initial aspirations to perform responsibly in our work and be a good testimony for the Lord gradually become contaminated with an unhealthy desire for worldly recognition, status and success. We may rationalise our being absorbed in our work and career as normal and the responsible thing to do, when in reality our motivation has become tainted by worldly ambitions and considerations.

The critical issue has to do with the realities within our hearts. Are our hearts and minds preoccupied with God and His kingdom, or have we become distracted? Are our hearts attracted by the things of the world? Are we being drawn into the world? It is not easy to maintain the correct posture of purity of heart while living on this earth. Hence, it is helpful for us to ponder how we can live in this fallen world and yet not be negatively influenced by the world.

Avoiding the extremes; keeping a healthy balance

As we seek to live as God’s children on this earth, we have to avoid two extremes. One is the preoccupation with the affairs of this life; the other is living as if we are only in the kingdom of God.

Some Christians are very taken up with the affairs of this life. They are preoccupied with succeeding in their careers, building a thriving business, providing material comfort for themselves and their family, and keeping up with their neighbours. In the pursuit of these things, they neglect their faith and the nurturing of their relationship with the Lord. They live as though life on earth is all that matters. Little attention is given to the issues of eternity.

In 2 Timothy 2:4, the apostle Paul states: “No soldier in active service entangles himself in the affairs of everyday life, so that he may please the one who enlisted him as a soldier.” Here, Paul warns us against being entangled, absorbed and

preoccupied with the affairs of this life such that we are no longer living in a manner consistent with being citizens of heaven. Instead of pleasing the Lord who has called us into His kingdom, we develop, as the apostle James puts it, "friendship with the world" (James 4:4). Instead of being salt and light influencing the world with positive values, we are being influenced by the values and perspective of the world.

At the other end of the extreme, there are Christians who live as if they are only in the kingdom of God. They are careless about their earthly responsibilities. They are irresponsible, unmotivated and sloppy in the workplace. They neglect family relationships, their physical well-being as well as that of their loved ones. They devote all their time and energy on "Christian activities", thinking that as citizens of heaven, this is how they will please God.

But we are not yet in heaven and we must not live as if we are. We are still living in this fallen world. We need to eat, sleep, take care of our health and also learn to understand and interact with people in various contexts. We must not neglect legitimate earthly responsibilities, including providing for the family and fulfilling our responsibilities in the workplace.

There are things we engage in while living in this world which are not necessary if we are already in heaven. For example, we need to have some awareness of what is happening in the world so that we can be more effective in serving God and in fulfilling our responsibilities on earth. However, what knowledge we should acquire and how much of it will vary for different people. What is appropriate for one is not necessarily helpful for another. If we try to understand too many things or things not appropriate for us, we may not only be wasting our time, but we may become distracted and our faith adversely affected.

This can also apply to other aspects like acquiring skills and developing our capabilities and talents. What and how much is appropriate for us would depend on God's calling for our lives, our responsibilities in God's kingdom, our responsibilities in society, the nature of our work, what we can cope with, and what would be helpful. It would also depend on the stage of our development. In essence, we need to prayerfully consider what is God's will for us.

Therefore, though we are citizens of heaven, we still need to live responsibly in this world, exercising wise stewardship of the time, energy and resources the Lord has entrusted to us. And we need to do so with a deep consciousness of the spiritual and eternal dimensions, in accordance with biblical values and priorities. This heavenly vision must never dim. Otherwise our faith will slowly but surely be weakened, and we will begin to think and act more and more like the people of the world.

The life of Daniel is a good illustration of how one can keep a healthy balance between living responsibly in this world and living wholly for the Lord. In his youth, Daniel was brought into exile in Babylon, a pagan land. But he was determined to be faithful to the Lord and not to defile himself (Dan. 1:8). Although he entered the

king's personal service, and subsequently held a high position, he did not allow the world's glory or the values of a pagan land to draw his heart away from God. His enemies could not find any ground to accuse him because he was "faithful, and no negligence or corruption was to be found in him" (Dan. 6:1-4). Despite the weight of the earthly responsibilities he had to fulfil, and the strong and pervasive worldly influences he was subjected to, Daniel maintained a faithful walk with God and kept his heart pure. God was with him and highly esteemed him (Dan. 10:11, 19). His life of faithfulness to God was a powerful testimony in the pagan land.

The importance of being vigilant in the fallen world

With its many enticing temptations, the attractions of this fallen world can be very strong indeed. What is of the world can grip us to the point where we find them irresistible. Many who take to cigarettes, alcohol, drugs or gambling soon find themselves addicted. Even when they realise their damaging effects and want to abstain from them, they may feel powerless to do so. Likewise, we can become addicted to the pursuit of material wealth, recognition and approval from men, and various forms of worldly pleasures. Even watching television programmes and videos, and playing computer games and surfing the Internet, can become an addiction.

Let us look at some verses on this subject.

Titus 2:11-12

11 For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all men,
12 instructing us to deny ungodliness and worldly desires and to live sensibly, righteously and godly in the present age,

Verse 12 warns us about ungodliness and worldly desires and contrasts them with living "sensibly, righteously and godly in this present age". God has saved us, and He expects us to deny worldly desires and live righteously in this present evil age. This is an important implication of being saved.

The apostle James explains to us that helping those in distress is an example of the meaningful things God wants us to be involved in while on earth. However, in all that we are involved in, we must exercise care to keep ourselves unstained by the world.

James 1:27

Pure and undefiled religion in the sight of our God and Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world.

Keeping ourselves unstained by the world is a very important principle to live by because of the many temptations and pitfalls in this world. Behind all these is the evil one at work, seeking to lure us, tempt us and bring us into bondage.

As we have seen in 2 Timothy 2:4, Paul tells us that we are soldiers of the Lord, and He is the one who has enlisted us. So we must concentrate on being faithful and pleasing to Him. There is certainly a place for minding the affairs of everyday life; but as we do so, we must be careful not to become entangled in them. Let us keep our focus on God and His kingdom.

I wish now to highlight an important area of truth that we need to pay attention to while living in this fallen world—the presence of the spirit of the world and its adverse effects on us.

The spirit of the world and its negative influence¹

God has given us His Holy Spirit to guide, empower and help us in the things of God and to influence us in a positive direction. But there is the presence of a negative spiritual dimension in the fallen world that draws us in the opposite direction, contrary to the ways of God. I am using the expression “the spirit of the world” to refer to this negative spiritual presence. It is manifested in practically all areas of life and has a damaging influence on our spirit, dulling our spiritual appetite and distorting our values and perspective. Understanding its pervasive presence and powerful influence can help us to be more alert to it and to know how we can overcome its negative influence.

It can be present in the work environment, for example, in the spirit and attitude with which people work, in the way they pursue their ambitions and fight for promotion, the way they project themselves, and in “office politicking”. It is also present in the world of business, the world of politics, the world of art, literature, music, movies and fashion as well as in human relationships and even in sports and games!

However, not all that goes on in these areas are negative. Man is created in the image of God and, though fallen, still has the conscience within him. Besides, the Spirit of God seeks to encourage man to do what is right and to refrain from evil, and man is still able, with God's help, to respond positively to Him.

How does this negative spiritual dimension come about?

This reality that I am trying to communicate is complex. It has developed over the ages and can be attributed to several factors:

- We are living in a fallen world. The context that we are now in is very different from that of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden.

¹ For a fuller consideration on the subject of “the spirit of the world”, please refer to AR219 posted on the website www.godandtruth.com.

- The presence and working of the evil one and the evil spirits in this fallen world. They operate actively in various areas of life in this world to draw men away from God.
- The negative spirit of man as a consequence of wrongful desires in his heart and his succumbing to the influences of the evil spirits.

The presence of both the evil spirits at work and the negative spirit of man contribute to the negative spiritual dimension in the fallen world. This negative spiritual dimension projects a negative moral and spiritual influence and promotes the assimilation of values and perspective contrary to God's kingdom. It is a spirit diametrically opposed to the spirit of God's kingdom. We can term as "worldly" the direction of its influence and the values and perspective it promotes.

The apostle Paul tells us that when man walks according to the ways of the fallen world (the course of this world), he is in fact walking according to the will of the evil one (according to the prince of the power of the air). It is succumbing to the spirit at work in his heart. This results in sinful, fleshly living, contrary to the ways of God's kingdom and the will of God.

Ephesians 2:1-3

- 1 And you were dead in your trespasses and sins,
- 2 in which you formerly walked according to the course of this world, according to the prince of the power of the air, of the spirit that is now working in the sons of disobedience.
- 3 Among them we too all formerly lived in the lusts of our flesh, indulging the desires of the flesh and of the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, even as the rest.

The spirit of the world is very pervasive. This is because "the whole world lies in the power of the evil one" (1 John 5:19). The spirit of the world may manifest itself in obvious and blatant forms: flagrant materialism, obsession with making money, unscrupulous dealings for selfish gains, corruption, sexual immorality, cruelty, arrogance and utter disregard for the welfare and feelings of others. It is also manifested in the worldly concepts of success, which have, as their main features, an intense preoccupation with wealth, possessions, worldly status and pleasures. We often see these negative features prominently reflected in the mass media and literature of all cultures and in the history of all civilisations. We read of conflicts, struggles, intrigues and unscrupulous behaviour because of greed and the pursuit of self-centred desires for material wealth, status, power and recognition. Often, worldly pleasure and sexual immorality feature in them as well.

The spirit of the world may also be manifested in less obvious or less obtrusive forms. We may then fail to see the dangers of our involvement in these things,

thinking that they are normal and acceptable. We shall now consider briefly some of these areas.

Songs and music

Many Christians are not conscious that the spirit of the world can be manifested and communicated through songs and music and can affect our spirit negatively, at times severely. This may take place through the worldly spirit of the composer, the singer and the musician. The spirit of the world can influence the content and spirit of the song, the lyrics, the way the song is sung and how the music is played.

Some music, such as modern rock music, is raw and jarring and can have serious negative effects on us. But songs that appear innocuous or harmless can also affect us adversely if the spirit of the singer, or the way he sings it, is negative.

Apparel and fashion

The spirit of the world greatly influences apparel and fashion. Many clothe themselves extravagantly or indecently to "show off" or to attract attention.

There is a place for beauty, but we must beware of vanity and spending too much time, energy and money on these temporal things.

What we read and watch

Often, what appear in newspapers, books, magazines and movies, and on television programmes and Internet websites have contents that are negative or perverse. They can influence us, affect our spirit, and move us in the negative direction. Although some degree of awareness of what is happening in the world can be helpful, and some degree of exposure to the mass media and the reading of books are appropriate, we must prayerfully evaluate what is truly helpful and needful in our context.

Adverse effects of the spirit of the world

The effects of the spirit of the world on a person can be very obvious and almost immediate or they can be insidious and gradual. Sometimes the less obvious forms are even more dangerous. Its destructive influence can quietly grow and before we realise it, we have come so firmly under its grip that we find it difficult to extricate ourselves. Let us consider some negative effects that we may experience if we come under its influence.

1. Compromising our values and perspective in life

Under the influence of the spirit of the world, our values and perspective will become increasingly compromised. They will be less and less in line with those of God's kingdom.

At one time, the kingdom of God and eternal issues may have been real and precious to us. Now, our convictions on these areas dim, and these precious issues become blurred, distant and unreal. Increasingly, worldly values, perspective and ways begin to feature in our life. We begin to compromise on important areas that we once stood firm on.

While some Christians in such a situation may sense that something is amiss, others may not even know that they are deviating from the right path as their spirits are not as discerning as before, and they may regard the way they live as acceptable or progressing with the times. They are deceived and are in a precarious state.

2. Loss of our spiritual appetite, spiritual receptivity and perception of spiritual reality

This can take place in different areas of our lives. We increasingly lose our spiritual appetite and hunger for the things of God. The desire to read the Scriptures begins to wane. Even if we still read the Scriptures, we find it less refreshing, less enriching or even tasteless.

Our time of prayer will also be adversely affected. There is little desire to pray. Our personal worship of God loses its freshness and becomes perfunctory and we are less receptive to what God wants to say to us.

Our fellowship with God, instead of growing in quality, loses its vitality. We find it difficult to maintain a prayerful spirit and a consciousness of Him in our daily life. God and His ways begin to feature less and less in our consideration of things.

When we are growing well, we would have a sense of consciousness of God that is very much a part of us, like the act of breathing. But when the spirit of the world begins to affect us, this sense of consciousness of God can diminish substantially, and it would require great effort on our part to bring it back.

Our outworking in church life will likewise be adversely affected. Our receptivity, attitude and spiritual appetite during corporate worship, prayer meetings or fellowship with believers will no longer be the same. Having less desire to worship God and to have fellowship with Christians, we find ourselves withdrawing from the community of believers and the outworking of church life. Our attitude towards our brethren would also change. While we may have appreciated their life and friendship in the past, we become critical of them now, finding fault with them and even branding them hypocrites.

3. Weakening of our spiritual strength, stability and ability to persevere

The spirit of the world can diminish our spiritual strength, affect our stability and weaken our resolve to persevere in the faith.

Even when we can recognise what is right, we are now unable to live by it where we once could. Like a leaking vessel, we find our spiritual strength seeping away. We are less able to fight the good fight of faith and live an overcoming life. Instead, we become more and more vulnerable to the wiles of the evil one.

For instance, we may find ourselves increasingly drawn to certain kinds of music or songs or to conversations that are not helpful. Office talk about fashion, worldly ambitions, material wealth and possessions, which at one time we were disinclined towards, now appeals to us, shaping our ambitions and attitude and perspective in life for the worse.

4. Increasing superficiality in our faith

When the spirit of the world affects us, we can become increasingly superficial in our faith and in our walk with God. Our faith tends to become a mere conformance to outward forms. We go through the motions at meetings and worship services. We may be at the worship service, but our hearts are far away. We are less attentive than we once were. This may also be the case when we spend time with the Lord in prayer or in the reading of the Scriptures. There is diminishing spiritual reality in our life and conduct.

5. Greater freedom for the evil one to work

When we allow ourselves to come under the influence of the spirit of the world, we are, in effect, giving in to the evil one who is at work in our lives. This opens the way for him to work in us with greater freedom. At the same time, this will make it more difficult for the Lord to work in our lives because we are less receptive and responsive to Him.

The evil one will not merely have greater freedom in the areas we have allowed him to influence us. Since we are an organic being, if one aspect of our being is adversely affected in a significant way, other areas of our lives would become more vulnerable as well. The negative effects of the world will penetrate into more and more areas of our lives and the grip the evil one has on us will become tighter and tighter.

6. Operation of the principle of spiritual death

As Christians, we should grow in our experience of the life of God. But if we allow ourselves to come under the influence of the spirit of the world, instead of experiencing the life of God, we will experience spiritual death.

This death is a process; it is the gradual corruption and degeneration of our being. The more we have been under the world's negative influence, the more we are moving in the direction of death. Our spirit, mind and character become increasingly worldly. The apostle Paul teaches us this principle in Galatians 6:7-8:

Galatians 6:7-8

7 Do not be deceived, God is not mocked; for whatever a man sows, this he will also reap.

8 For the one who sows to his own flesh will from the flesh reap corruption, but the one who sows to the Spirit will from the Spirit reap eternal life.

The spirit of the world feeds the flesh. It promotes the desire to make money, gain status, and fulfil other worldly ambitions. It entices us to indulge in various forms of pleasures such as in worldly fashion, songs and music. If we sow to the flesh and allow these to grow in our lives, we will reap corruption and death. *Let us therefore sow to the Spirit, that we may reap eternal life.*

Concluding remarks

While we ought to fulfil our legitimate responsibilities as we live in this world, we must do so prayerfully, in fellowship with the Lord and always concentrating on the enduring kingdom of God. Only then can we fulfil His will for us to be His faithful witnesses on earth.

Let us not underestimate the negative influence the spirit of the world can have on us, and thus treat this matter lightly. The Scriptures warns us strongly of the effect the world can have on Christians. Let us take care that we may not be like the ones on whom seed was sown among the thorns, "who have heard the word, but the worries of the world, and the deceitfulness of riches, and the desires for other things enter in and choke the word, and it becomes unfruitful" (Mark 4:18-19).

Demas was a co-worker of the apostle Paul for a period of time. But because of his love for the present world, he deserted Paul (2 Tim. 4:10). As children of God living in a fallen world, let us be watchful and vigilant. Let us be faithful ambassadors for Christ, influencing the world positively as salt of the earth and light of the world.

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