

Discussing How To Restore The Early Church

Returning Intimacy and Power to the Father's Children

*"I tell you that if two of you on earth agree about anything you ask for,
it will be done for you by my Father in heaven.
For where two or three come together in my name, there am I with them."*
(Matthew 18:19,20)



SECTION 6 - LESSON 45

FELLOWSHIP IN HOMES — Extended Spiritual Family:

- *Fellowship in Homes As the Early Church*
- *Living Righteously Through Repentance and Confession*
 - *Upholding Communal Righteousness*
 - *Prayer As Spiritual Warfare*



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Section 6 Lesson 45

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Introduction

As we begin a new section on fellowship in homes, we'd like to share with you the *lesson of the serpentine belt*. Recently the mechanic who changed the oil on our minivan told me [Mike] I needed a new serpentine belt on my engine. I'd never changed that type of belt before but figured it was just like the old v-belts I'd replaced over the years.

If you've ever changed these older style v-belts which run around the outside of the pulleys on your engine, you may remember the routine: You loosened the brackets on your alternator so you could slacken the old belt to take it off. You ran the new belt around the outside of the pulleys. Then, applying pressure outward on the alternator to tighten the belt, you re-tightened the brackets. Simple enough, maybe 15 minutes tops.

So when it came time for me to install the new serpentine belt, I looked for the same brackets-and-pulley setup. None existed. After 3 hours of futile effort in a very tight place with gouges all over my

hands and arms, I went online.

There I discovered something new: serpentine belts use a *spring-loaded tensioner* on one of the pulleys. In three minutes I had the new belt on my van. You didn't have to unbolt anything. It was far simpler than I could have imagined.

I had been trapped by a wrong assumption—that v-belts and serpentine belts operate on the same basis. They don't. The flattened serpentine belt isn't confined to just going around the outside of the pulleys (thus its name). And, the tensioner modification enables the belt to operate more efficiently than the older v-belt.

There's a reason we're sharing this with you! The terms "home church", "fellowship in homes", "home groups", and "cells churches" may have an *entirely different meaning* for you than what our Hebraic forefathers understood.

Your assumptions may be locked into something that has little in common with the Hebraic-style fellowship in homes that we'll be writing about. We don't want you to assume that Hebraic family fellowship is *anything* like that with which you're already familiar!

It's important that you have **clarity of understanding** in the terms we'll be using. From the Hebraic perspective,



V-Belt



understanding means more than fact acquisition. It's a determination to *apply to your life* that which has penetrated your heart and mind.

Those within the Hebraic home fellowship family share a relational responsibility both to God and to one another that is far deeper than the casual approach of most home gatherings today. You'll be learning to **reprioritize your relationships** and to **realign your purposes for fellowship** according to the biblical pattern.

As you'll see: The Hebraic home fellowship supports both the individual and the family as extended spiritual family. For the vast majority of you, this one facet alone of relational responsibility will require significant change in your priorities!

What does it take for an extended spiritual family to support one another's *home* as the basic building block for spiritual development?

To answer this, each of you who are part of an extended spiritual family must **thoroughly discuss** with one another what you *think* you're reading. Each person brings a different interpretation and background into a group gathering. That's why **discussion** is so important: to clarify each person's understanding of purpose and intent for being in relationship as extended spiritual family.

As you come together to discuss, keep before you our Lord Jesus' promise: "*For where two or three have gathered together in My name, **there I am in their midst***" (Matthew 18:20). You're seeking *His* mind and presence and power!

A warning:

There are many cell group manuals and techniques being peddled in the Nicolaitan institutional system today.

These take a technical, systematic approach to *doing* home church.

Having a plan which someone else has developed makes people feel secure. These "by-the-numbers" techniques help men who lead these groups feel as though they're being successful in their "task". But that which pleases a man through accomplishment doesn't always delight God.

In the common vernacular, you'll need a paradigm shift. Just as the serpentine belt and its tensioner enables it to operate *far more effectively* than the older v-belt, your *absolute reliance* on the guidance and power of the Holy Spirit is critical if you're going to experience the **relational intimacy** and **spiritual power** of your forefathers in the faith.

The way of the Spirit is more circuitous than the direct, western "straight line" approach. You can't anticipate where He will lead you next:

The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit (John 3:8).

We shared in Lesson 39 how important it is that you seek **rhema** for your family. It's humbling for you to depend on God's specific word for your life! But that same humble dependence on the Holy Spirit is critical in your fellowship together as extended spiritual family.

Keep this point in mind: If you don't hunger for the Spirit's guidance in *your own home*, you won't thirst for His guidance as a fellowship of homes either. You'll stay horizontal, looking for man's techniques to guide your way.

There is *no one way* for you to restore all the varied facets of the Hebraic home fellowship. Because each extended spiritual family of individuals and families is composed of such variables as background, maturity, gifting, even gender, you must rely on the Spirit to guide you!

Why is your communal dependence on the Holy Spirit so crucial?

Your chief goal must be to ***honor and glorify Jesus*** in your fellowship family. HE is the Head of His “called-out ones”, and He is our reason for gathering in His Name.

[Jesus] is also head of the body, the church; and He is the beginning, the first-born from the dead; so that He Himself might come to have first place in everything (Colossians 1:18).

If you deny through unbelief or action your dependence on the Holy Spirit both individually and communally, you’ll discover that Jesus isn’t in your midst either. Paul warns with utmost sobriety, “*If anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, he does not belong to Christ*” (Romans 8:9).

So as you continue through these remaining Lessons, rely on the Spirit to confirm how He wants you to restore His life-changing work in your own fellowship.

In this Lesson and those to follow we’ll explore the varied facets that were part of the faith enactment of the early Church. We’ll also include anecdotes of our own applications and experiences, not for you to emulate but as examples of how He chose to work in our lives.

You need to trust that He’ll make clear to you how to apply His restoration truths to your own family and extended spiritual family.

Our anecdotes reveal His particular *rhema* for us and for our fellowship family. We depended on the **Holy Spirit** and the **Scriptures** to guide us. As we *discussed* the variables that became part of our faith practice and expression, we relied on what we called a “**witness in our spirit**” that our application was correct (Matthew 16:19; 18:18). There was *confirmation* by at least two or three among us that we were walking according to the Spirit’s will regarding a certain point.

As you discuss the truths we’re sharing in these lessons on fellowship in homes, you’ll discern from the Spirit that which He is earmarking at this point in time for you to apply. During the course of your journey together you’ll discover within yourself a profound *identity change*:

You’ll be a follower of Jesus first and foremost.

No longer will you label yourself a Baptist, Presbyterian, Catholic, or whatever. These designators only specify to which man-made creed you assent. They don’t describe a **way of life** in Christ.

A *follower of Jesus* actively pursues a life of love-based obedient trust, a life which increasingly looks like *Jesus* is living it. Each day you have to make decisions and choose priorities which reflect your identity in Him:

I follow Jesus!

May our Lord Jesus find you and those in your fellowship family lovingly choosing to *follow Him* each and every day until you see Him face-to-face—His goal for you!

FELLOWSHIP IN HOMES
Extended Spiritual Family:
Fellowship In Homes As the Early Church

“Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved” (Acts 2:46,47).

“Greet also the church that meets at their house. Greet my dear friend Epenetus, who was the first convert to Christ in the province of Asia”
 (Romans 16:5).

“The churches in the province of Asia send you greetings. Aquila and Priscilla greet you warmly in the Lord, and so does the church that meets at their house” (1 Corinthians 16:19).

“To Apphia our sister, to Archippus our fellow soldier and to the church that meets in your home” (Philemon 2).

“Give my greetings to the brothers at Laodicea, and to Nympha and the church in her house” (Colossians 4:15).

Paul was writing these particular letters to the *ekklesia* [ek-leh-SEE-uh], the “called-out ones” who met in one another’s homes as extended spiritual family. Long before the coming of Jesus the Hebraic stream of Judaism had shared close fellowship in each other’s homes.

For centuries God had been revealing His faith practices and nurturing relational commitment within this stream who followed in the trusting obedience

of their father, Abraham. All that was needed to cap their spiritual pilgrimage was the long-anticipated Messiah and the empowerment of the Holy Spirit.

Those among the Hebraic stream whose spiritual descendants would trust Jesus used their homes to encourage one another to serve and obey God. In fact,



ALL of the faith practices seen in the Newer Testament were already part of the faith enactment of our Hebraic forefathers.

Those who walked in love-grounded obedient trust in our Lord fulfilled four primary purposes as they gathered in homes as extended spiritual family:

1. To uphold communal righteousness.
2. To provide support in load-bearing relationships.
3. To prepare succeeding generations to follow Jesus.
4. To multiply through actively sharing the Gospel by word and deed.

Within these four broad purposes were several factors that distinguished a *Hebraic home fellowship*. Here are a few:

- They were primarily concerned with living a way of life that glorified our Father and reflected the work of the Spirit of Christ within.
- They earnestly trusted God for answered prayers, the kind that yielded powerful testimonies.
- They put into practice biblical author-

ity through wise elders.

- They experienced intergenerational connectedness as followers of all ages gathered together.
- Their gathering times, corporate as well as among a few, were both scheduled and spontaneous.
- They shared God's heart to bring the Good News of a New Covenant in Jesus to those yet to follow Him.

Realize that we're talking about **extended spiritual family**—individuals, couples and families who are loving, supportive, repentant, and totally committed to our Lord and to one another.

In the earliest Church, fellowship that was shared in homes wasn't merely an occasional scheduled meeting at someone's house. (We mention this because one pastor told us his congregation held once-a-month social potlucks in each other's homes, and that was what he thought we were writing about!)

But the sense and practice of extended spiritual family in the early Church wasn't a scheduled meeting with a pre-planned agenda. The devotion these families in Jesus shared encompassed a 24 hour-a-day, 7 day-a-week relational commitment to each other.

The home fellowship was their "**spiritual clan**". If you recall, the relational priorities in Israel were a progression:

- An individual belonged to a family;
- A family to a clan;
- A clan to a tribe;
- The twelve tribes comprised the nation of Israel.

A *clan* provided the all-important connection between the individual and family with the larger tribe and nation. At the clan level the individual and the family experienced **personal care**. At the

same time, the clan **represented the individuals and families** at the larger and less personal tribal and national level.

The "spiritual clan" among followers of Jesus is the fellowship of gathered homes—the extended spiritual family. This extended family of households who are committed to each other is the **primary support system** for each individual and family.

The spiritual clan provides **relational load-bearing** for those who abide under the eldering of those who are "shepherding the flock" of the extended spiritual family.

- Recognizing the wise leadership of their elder(s), the male heads of each household walk in collective responsibility to prepare the next generation to walk as righteous men and women (Hebrews 13:17).
- Widows and orphans come under the care of the elder(s) and the extended spiritual family when they have no other family to assist them (1 Timothy 5:16).

Paul reinforced this concept of **family interconnectedness** so that the dignity of those who were helped would be upheld:

*Give proper recognition to those widows who are really in need. But if a widow has **children or grandchildren**, these should learn first of all to **put their religion into practice** by caring for **their own family** and so repaying their **parents and grandparents**, for this is pleasing to God (1 Timothy 5:3,4).*

The elders made sure that each family took care of its own widows. Widows who had no families came under the

care of the home fellowship. The care which James commended through his call “to visit” involved *spending time* with these widows, not just delivering charitable goods on their doorstep (see James 1:27). The dignity of these women’s hearts needed to be respected. They were to be shown favor and mercy as though coming from the hand and heart of God.

In the U.S., Social Security makes many widows ***the impersonal responsibility of the government***. This system may provide a monthly stipend but it also supplants the interpersonal responsibility called for among those who are following Jesus. Numerous elderly widows remain isolated and homebound, with little inclination, encouragement or opportunity to fulfill their biblical responsibility to younger wives and mothers.

In the earliest Church as well as within tribal societies, individuals and families were linked by strong loyalty to their (spiritual) clan.

As in a clan, the fellowship family of homes is the primary means by which individuals and families experience *belonging*.

Within the relationships of the home fellowship, spiritual development within each home is supported.

Because Christendom has lost this essential relational priority which was enjoyed within the earliest Church, the concept of relational connectedness through an *extended spiritual family* is foreign to most.

Again this has been the result of the Hellenist influence which has so permeated western Christianity these past 1700 years. Imitating the ***pagan temple*** design with its pews and religious per-

formances, today’s religious buildings are little different than those in which the heathens formally gathered.

God purposed for His people to share each others’ lives ***in their homes*** to promote righteous living through obedient trust, answered prayer, mutual discussion of His Word for application, shared testimonies and exercise of spiritual gifts. All of this was nullified in favor of the confines of a “holy” institutionalized edifice.

Added to the Hellenist dualism that sets aside a “sacred place” to separate the spiritual dimension from the physical is the Roman organizational influence. Christendom has clung to the infestation of 4th century ***religious organization*** with its hierarchy of paid professional clergy who act as mediators between mankind and God.

Jesus tore in two the Temple curtain that separated man from the Presence of God! NO PLACE is any more sacred than another, nor is ANY PERSON.

The *family* concept of followers of Jesus is interwoven throughout the Gospels and letters. Each and every “saint”—a person made holy through Jesus—is a brother or sister of all the others who “*keep the will of My Father*” (Matthew 12:50)! Keep this important point in mind:

ALL of the teachings in Scripture about the Church, the *called-out ones*, are based on this Hebraic progression of *relational connectedness*.

Our Father, in His divine timing, is restoring the extended spiritual family of the home fellowship. In order to experience the fullness of what He desires, we need to go back to acquaint ourselves with ***why*** He stirred those in the Hebraic

stream to fellowship in one another's homes as spiritual family.

Keep in mind these two purposes for fellowship from page 4: to uphold **communal righteousness** and to provide the support of **load-bearing relationships** (the other two purposes flow from these). If we truly want to experience the relational intimacy and spiritual power as did the earliest followers of Jesus, we need to embrace the parameters and purposes of the fellowship God calls for.

They **shared with one another** as family because that was the pattern of the God-loving, commandment-keeping descendants of Abraham before the time of Christ. Just as their ancestor Abraham recognized that God was their only source of provision (see Genesis 14), these believers disregarded the values and treasures of this world:

And all those who had believed were together, and had all things in common; and they began selling their property and possessions, and were sharing them with all, as anyone might have need (Acts 2:44,45).

The early Hebraic home gatherings of spiritual family were characterized by **personal participation**. These men and women came together in fellowship prepared to speak from the bounty of that which the Spirit had been doing in their lives throughout the week.

What is our conclusion, brothers? Whenever you come together, let everyone be ready with a psalm or a teaching or a revelation, or ready to use his gift of tongues or give an interpretation; but let everything be for edification (1 Corinthians 14:26,CJB).

These were times of exuberant worship and testimony—a time to glorify the Father and for family in Jesus to be edified by one another.

Within a fellowship of homes was a wellspring of **support for marriages**. The earliest followers of Jesus knew that a couple couldn't make it on their own (as so many of today's couples struggle to do), nor did our Lord intend for them to. It was within their spiritual clan that older people could help younger couples work out their problems while they were still small (1 Timothy 3:2; Titus 2:3,4).

Our Hebraic forefathers in the faith treasured **children as gifts from God**. The home signified the spiritual training base for sons and daughters, the place where parents shouldered the responsibility for training up their children in the wisdom and will of the Lord. The extended spiritual family with its **intergenerational communal responsibility** supported each home as the primary building block for training the next generation.

Everyone in the fellowship of extended spiritual family shared responsibility to help parents raise godly generations to succeed them. And, those children were never considered to be of less value than adults. Hebraic followers of Jesus took seriously His command:

See that you never despise one of these little ones, for I tell you that their angels in heaven are continually seeing the face of My Father in heaven (Matthew 18:10, CJB).

Personal dignity was upheld as people genuinely cared for each other as brothers and sisters. This sense of intimacy and belonging is why Paul could so

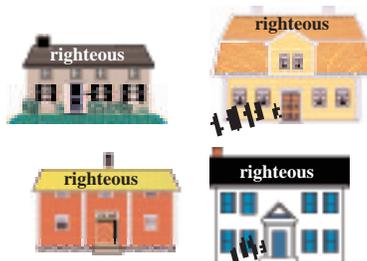
freely address fellow followers of Jesus in such endearing terms. The Apostle John also stresses these close-knit relationships in his epistle references to his **beloved children** and **dear friends**. The extended spiritual family provided *koinonia*, the fellowship and caring interaction that evidenced Jesus in their midst.

Remember this important progression:

The home fellowship represented an extension of the home, not a programmed activity of a larger congregation. In other words, family members in each home realized God’s call for personal repentance when they sinned. They took care of that in the home.

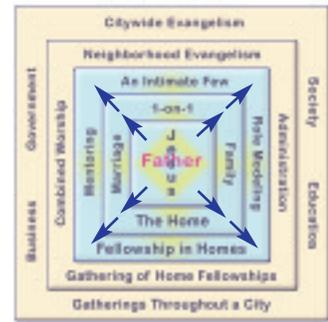
If someone in a home tried to hide out in his sin, he might find himself facing illness. At that point, as James commands, the family could call for the elders of their extended spiritual family or congregation of extended families to come to their home and pray that the individual might be healed and/or forgiven (James 5:14,15).

A Fellowship of Righteous Families



Families and individuals who upheld **communal righteousness** by living righteously and repenting when they sinned would gather together to share fellowship with those who were also committed to walking uprightly in their devotion to Jesus. (We’ll discuss this critical topic of communal righteousness in the next section.)

Note this progression outward from the center of the *Restoration Diagram*. In the earliest Church an evangelist or elder (Greek: *poi-*



men or Hebrew: *zaken*), might be the instigator to bring together in fellowship those who were committed to grow in Jesus and walk according to His Spirit and His Word.

Today, in the absence of an evangelist or elder, individuals and families who live uprightly in Spirit in their love for our Lord can pray for God to raise up others who live righteously in Jesus to come alongside them as extended spiritual family.

They can also share the Gospel of the Covenant with those they encounter who have yet to know Jesus as their Savior and Lord. Our Father may reveal Jesus to them so that they’ll repent and come into His Kingdom, and those with whom they already have friendship can disciple them within the spiritual family.

This was our situation several years ago:

We had moved to a new city and began to pray for our Lord to raise up others who purposed to live righteously according to His Word. After several months of earnest intercession, we came together with 4 other families in fellowship. This didn’t come about without a lot of discussion of the Hebraic foundations first! When we were all on the same page of conviction, we fellowshiped as extended spiritual family and broke bread together in His Name.

As an extended family, we also agreed that we would only grow through sharing the Gospel and having new converts join us. (We didn’t want to be the newest “show” in

town for people to drop in on and watch, nor be a drive-by repository for those who sloshed from fellowship to fellowship seeking to gratify themselves.) We helped other Christians who expressed a desire to join us to form fellowship family of their own. (We'll explore all of this in a later lesson.)

After 11 years of sharing the Hebraic foundations, we offer an observation based on experience:

Committed Hebraic home fellowships do not come about by dividing an existing congregation into smaller groups.

Efforts to restore the Hebraic home fellowship pattern of extended spiritual family have not and do not work in Nicolaitan congregations. The organizational hierarchy crave *control*, and most often resist letting go! They're fearful of the relational responsibility which those within a Hebraic home fellowship share with one another.

If you're inside a Nicolaitan, clergy-dependent congregation and are going through these Lessons, you're welcome to try to apply them. But, as so many before you have painfully discovered: You'll be driven out!

This is why we encourage people to go outside the religious establishment as Jesus did. Spend time deepening your love and trust in Jesus, and if you're married, draw together with your spouse in a covenant union of harmony that reflects His Spirit's work in you.

And so Jesus also suffered outside the city gate to make the people holy through His own blood. Let us, then, go to Him outside the camp, bearing the disgrace He bore. For here we do not have an enduring city, but we are looking for the city that is to come (Hebrews 13:12-14).

Another testimony from personal experience:

After our return from Israel we lived in the Atlanta area. A congregational leader asked us to help establish a cell group ministry among their people based on the Hebraic model. During the interview, however, we found that we couldn't communicate clearly with him.

He was looking for programs and activities to occupy and coordinate the congregation as they met in contrived "care groups." In effect, he wanted a "Christian program" that would guide and instruct those who attended the groups so that there would be *standardized, predictable outcomes*. Our emphasis on personal righteousness and load-bearing relationships that are built on an individual's trust in Jesus actually seemed intimidating to him.

Another leader once told us, "We can't have our people trusting Jesus the way you call for. That would cause *mayhem*! We need to *control* and *direct* the spiritual activities of the people in our congregation."

Do loving trust in our Lord Jesus and obedience to Him *really* produce mayhem? "*For God is not a God of disorder but of peace*" (1 Corinthians 14:33).

If you're ever going to experience the love, understanding and acceptance that God is restoring to His people, you must, by His grace, leave behind the *depersonalized* Hellenistic and Roman forms of institutionalism to which you may have grown accustomed.

Before you're fully walking in the increased personal responsibilities of a home fellowship that's been built on the early Church model of extended spiritual family, you may need several months of *thorough discussion* with those who will be family with you. Be patient with

each other! Remember, the kind of interpersonal discussion together that leads to applying God's Word brings Jesus into your midst (Matthew 18:20).

Be encouraged that the faith practices to which you mutually commit yourself will be halakhic applications which you establish for yourselves. As our Lord declared, these will be respected in heaven (Matthew 16:19; 18:18). Keep in mind that the only two times Jesus speaks about the *ekklesia*, His Church of called-out ones, He gives them halakhic authority to apply God's Word to their lives.

After discussion has taken place within a faith family in their home fellowship gathering, decisions are established by the *confirmation of two or three*. This is the biblical pattern of decision making:

Every matter may be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses... This is the third time I am coming to you. Every fact is to be confirmed by the testimony of two or three witnesses (Matthew 18:16; 2 Corinthians 13:1).

Decisions which may provoke a negative response if left up to discussion and confirmation can also be settled by *casting lots* (see Proverbs 16:33, 18:18; Acts 1:26). (Well discuss this more in a later lesson.)

If you desire to see your family belong to a Hebraic-style home fellowship as extended spiritual family, you're entering into a **seven-day-a-week commitment** with other followers of Jesus.

As an extension of your home, your home fellowship is your relational support to help you uphold personal and communal righteousness in your own home.

Remember, the goal of your pilgrimage with Jesus is to personally and communally reflect the character of Jesus, and to **bear lasting fruit** in Him. True ministry within a home fellowship finds load-bearing believers encouraging each other as they wholeheartedly trust God together.

Authentic spiritual family is one Christ-follower helping another to lovingly trust the Lord in all circumstances, and to fulfill the purposes He has prepared (Ephesians 2:10).

This kind of relational commitment means that you're prepared to accommodate "intrusion" into your life by your extended spiritual family. In Lesson 36 we shared how key the freedom to *intrude* is to relational intimacy.

Encompassed within your home and home fellowship is the right for those brothers and sisters to intrude into your plans and desires. (The parameters of that intrusion should be discussed early on!)

Your spouse and family should have the privilege of *immediate intrusion* when necessary. But those in the extended spiritual family of your home fellowship should also be able to intrude in time of need as well as schedule time with you.

Describe what you have learned to be the key elements of a Hebraic home fellowship.

What is your impression of what you've described? How do these facets differ from your own experience with "fellowship in homes"?

Is *discussion* a regular feature of your interaction with others, whether within your family or among those in the body of Christ? How do you feel about engaging in discussion with others as a means to come to decisions?

FELLOWSHIP IN HOMES
Extended Spiritual Family:
Living Righteously Through
Repentance and Confession

“Since we have these promises, dear friends, let us purify ourselves from everything that contaminates body and spirit, perfecting holiness out of reverence for God”
(2 Corinthians 7:1).

The Hebrew Scriptures clearly established that God could not be approached casually without provoking severe consequences. Even the high priest who represented the entire Jewish nation could enter the holy of holies only once a year after the sprinkling of sacrificial blood.

There are holy “entry guidelines” for the Kingdom of God as well, as Jesus shared in the parable of the wedding banquet (see Matthew 22:1-14). The invitation to the feast isn’t received with universal acclaim. Some outrightly resist the King’s offer; others even kill His mes-

sengers. Some accept His invitation but fail to prepare themselves to enter His presence:

*But when the king came in to see the guests, he noticed a man there who was **not wearing wedding clothes**. ‘Friend,’ he asked, ‘how did you get in here without wedding clothes?’ The man was speechless. Then the king told the attendants, ‘Tie him hand and foot, and **throw him outside, into the darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth**’ (Matthew 22:11-13).*

As you read the following invitation to draw near to our great High Priest, it may seem strange that the improperly clothed wedding guest was rejected and tossed into perdition:

*Therefore, let us **confidently approach the throne** from which God gives grace, so that we may **receive mercy and find grace** in our time of need (Hebrews 4:16, CJB).*

Standing alone, this verse could seem to indicate that believers may approach the throne even if filled with unrepentant sin and clothed in unrighteousness. The early Church, however, clearly understood such presumption to be false. The writer to the Hebrews emphasizes the necessary prerequisite of the shed blood of Jesus for redemption and cleansing:

*[Jesus] entered the Most Holy Place once for all **by His own blood**, having obtained eternal redemption... How much more, then, will the **blood of Christ**, Who through the eternal Spirit offered Himself unblemished to God, **cleanse our consciences** from acts that*

lead to death, so that we may serve the living God! (Hebrews 9:12,14).

It is *not* through any righteousness of our own that our prayers are heard by our Father. It is because of our humble reliance on the shed blood of Jesus to cover our sins that we receive forgiveness from Him as we confess and repent. The humble and contrite person who trembles at God's word and trusts Him with heart, soul, mind and strength is the one esteemed by God (see Isaiah 66:2).

Our God is holy, and there is nothing in Scripture that indicates He ever sets aside His holiness or His holy standards for mankind. Quite the contrary. He disciplines and chastises His people when they cross His holy boundaries so they will return to Him. Only through humble repentance and confession do we come back within His boundaries.

We shared the principles of righteous living when we discussed the home. Now we need to expand these principles to the fellowship of extended spiritual families within one another's homes:

- ***Personal and communal righteousness are the glue that enables true fellowship to take place.***
- ***Righteousness results in answered prayer.***
- ***Answered prayers produces glorious testimony to our Father.***

Let's get a clearer understanding of fellowship life among the earliest followers of Jesus. The book of Acts begins with a small band of disciples who were totally dependent on their God to hear their cries and to respond:

These all with one mind were continually devoting themselves to prayer, along with the women, and Mary the mother of Jesus, and with His brothers (Acts 1:14).

Think about what this passage reveals. It wasn't just the *act* of praying that was important to these believers. They were expectantly seeking their God for ***answered prayer!*** Prayer answered by the Father brought testimony of praise to Him, and got the early Church noticed!

Just look at what happened as result of prayer! After Peter and John were released from the Sanhedrin's capture (see Acts 4:24-31) they went directly to their fellow believers to ask together for God's power to proclaim His message with confidence: *"After they prayed, the place where they were meeting was shaken. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke the word of God boldly"* (v. 31).

When these people prayed, something happened! Miraculous answers to prayer abounded as they trusted wholeheartedly in the One to Whom they prayed. Peter's miraculous release from Herod's prison (see Acts 12) further confirmed to them that prayer moved God to respond. We need to ask ourselves today:

- ***"Why did God answer their prayers in such a miraculous fashion?"***
- ***"Is He still doing the same thing today?"***
- ***"If He is, how can I experience His powerful intervention as they did?"***

As we can see throughout both the Older and Newer Testaments, prayer was an integral part of the way of life of those who trusted their Lord. Prayer

demonstrated their utter dependence on God. Think how often Paul brought up the topic of prayer—not as a rote exercise but as intimate communion with the Lord Who hears! Here’s a sampling:

- “*Pray continually*” (1 Thessalonians 5:17);
- “*And pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests. With this in mind, be alert and always keep on praying for all the saints*” (Ephesians 6:18);
- “*With this in mind, we constantly pray for you, that our God may count you worthy of His calling, and that by His power He may fulfill every good purpose of yours and every act prompted by your faith*” (2 Thessalonians 1:11).

Paul wasn’t asking that mere words be lifted to God.

He was earnestly seeking the response of the Father in answer to those prayers.

“But seek first His kingdom and His righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well” (Matthew 6:33).

Because of their knowledge of God as He had revealed Himself in the Hebrew Bible, the early followers of Jesus clearly understood God’s conditions for answering the prayers of His people. They had no doubt that God differentiates between the repentant and unrepentant. The prophet had proclaimed that a time would come when those who walked in sin could no longer pretend they were acceptable before God:

So you will again distinguish between the righteous and the wicked, between

one who serves God and one who does not serve Him (Malachi 3:18).

It had been made clear that true fellowship with each other needed to flow out of the fellowship they enjoyed with the Father and His Son, Jesus. *All* testimony to God’s glory *first* flowed from a person’s “vertical” fellowship:

We proclaim to you what we have seen and heard, so that you also may have fellowship with us. And our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ (1 John 1:3).

So what does God, the Initiator of our relationship with Himself, require from us to establish and maintain fellowship with Him? As we discussed when we shared the *Gospel of the Covenant* in Lesson 27, this relationship of fellowship begins and is maintained through **repentance** and **confession**.

The book of James presents many Hebraic themes which were identified with the early Church: a trusting faith that produces godly, responsive action; concern for the poor and underprivileged which put feet to belief; humility that brings about grace versus haughtiness which rouses His opposition.

Typical of Newer Testament writers, James reaches back to Hebrew Scripture truth to apply it to followers of Jesus. Apperceiving Proverbs 15:29, “*The Lord is far from the wicked but He hears the prayer of the righteous*”, James declares, “*The effective prayer of a righteous man can accomplish much*” (James 5:16).

God, however, will not hear the prayers of the wicked, including the unrepentant who refuses to confess his sin and turn from it (see Malachi 1:9). Peter reiterates the futility of the unre-

pentant to expect that God will respond when they pray:

*For the eyes of the Lord are on the righteous and his ears are attentive to their prayer, but the face of the Lord is **against those who do evil** (1 Peter 3:12).*

God's prerequisite for restoring fellowship and a righteous standing with Him is confession. When we agree with our Lord that we have violated His ways and purpose to turn away from them, He showers His merciful cleansing upon us.

*If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just and will **forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness** (1 John 1:9).*

Have you really considered the awesome beauty of God's promise to you when you turn from sin and receive His purification? Your repentance and confession changes your entire status before Him. In place of being *out of fellowship* with God and the heavens as brass to your prayer, you're able to:

- **be forgiven,**
- **be cleansed of ALL unrighteousness,**
- **enjoy fellowship with your Lord,**
- **have your prayers answered.**

Repentance and confession bring about wondrous response from our Father's hand. James expounds on how powerful the prayers of a righteous (repentant) person are:

*Therefore **confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective. Elijah was a man just like us. He prayed earnestly that it would not rain, and it***

*did not rain on the land for three and a half years. **Again he prayed, and the heavens gave rain, and the earth produced its crops** (James 5:16-18).*

How gracious of God to let us know that Elijah was a commonplace person just like each of us. But look at the results righteousness can effect! You need to see the affect of righteousness for yourself so that His answers will overflow from you into torrents of grateful testimony.

You *learn* to stay righteous by applying God's Word to all aspects of your life. In that way you can recognize that which is unrighteous and avoid it, and discern that which is good and walk in it:

*Anyone who has to drink milk is still a baby, without experience **in applying the Word about righteousness. But solid food is for the mature, for those whose faculties have been trained by continuous exercise to distinguish good from evil** (Hebrews 5:13,14).*

If you want to walk in the righteousness that brings about our Father's answers to your prayers, practice this spiritual exercise as your way of life:

Knowing and applying God's Word is how you learn to distinguish good from evil.

Are you earnest in staying repentant before God? Would you consider yourself to be quick to repent? At this very moment is there any unconfessed sin in you?

Give several examples of how our Father has been answering your prayers. If you can't think of any, reconsider the question above: At this very moment is there any unconfessed sin in you?

FELLOWSHIP IN HOMES
Extended Spiritual Family:
Upholding Communal Righteousness

“Am I my brother’s keeper?”
(Genesis 4:9).

Many followers of Jesus today are unaware that most of the commands in the New Testament are written in the **plural** rather than the singular sense. The scriptural directives are intended for the **collective body**, not just the individual believer.

As we noted previously, the “your” in “*continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling*” (Philippians 2:12) is plural. Followers of Jesus are meant to press on *together* to help one another in their journey to salvation.

Because their **communal awareness** was such an engrained part of their Hebraic heritage, the early followers of Jesus were deeply concerned with more than just the need for individual righteousness. As a pulsating spiritual **body** they understood the reality of **corporate righteousness**. As brethren called-out in Jesus for service to their Lord, they were “**mishpachah**” [mishpuh-KAH], extended family responsible for one another.

Because the concept of extended family was so deeply rooted in their identity,

our Hebraic forefathers understood the importance of upholding **communal righteousness**.

The Hebrew Scriptures demonstrated that one person’s sin indeed brought consequences to others.

- God had prevented the *entire nation of Israel* from conquering the city of Ai because of the hidden sin of one man, Achan (see Joshua 7).
- In disobedience David numbered his troops, and thousands died of plague (1 Chronicles 21).
- Korah’s rebellion resulted in the death of his entire family (Numbers 16) as well as the families of the other instigators.

There was a collective responsibility when an individual sinned.

That God upheld this same standard of righteousness for the fledgling Church can be seen in His taking the lives of Ananias and Sapphira (see Acts 5:1-11). He exposed that couple’s hidden sin so that it would not hinder Him from answering the prayers of the other believers.

Anchor this truth for yourself and let it guide your fellowship with each other. We *are* responsible to confront our brother or sister so that they might repent. A little leaven of tolerated sin *does* leaven the whole batch of believers within a faith family (see 1 Corinthians 5:6)!

The unrepentance of one person hinders our Father from answering the prayers of everyone in the fellowship family. Sin is not the problem, unrepentance is.

The celebration of the Lord’s Supper is based on the Jewish Passover obser-

vance in which God required that *all leaven be removed* from the land. The removal of the leaven signified a state of holiness (righteousness). Anyone who failed to follow this command was to be cut off from their people. For those within a tribal community, being cut off was a literal or figurative death sentence.

The removal of leaven foreshadowed the repentance and confession that is required of followers of Jesus. His disciples could not celebrate Christ as their Passover sacrifice (see 1 Corinthians 5:7) unless all leaven, or *spiritual impurity*, had first been swept away.

Partaking of communion in the early Church was a serious commitment of shared covenant renewal. The early Hebraic believers recognized the holiness of heart preparation needed for the New Covenant “Passover”. They believed Jesus’s words, “***This is My body***”; “***This is My blood***”, because He said so.

A man ought to examine himself before he eats of the bread and drinks of the cup. Anyone who eats and drinks without recognizing the body of the Lord eats and drinks judgment on himself. That is why many among you are weak and sick, and a number of you have fallen asleep. But if we judged ourselves, we would not come under judgment”
(1 Corinthians 11:28-31).

Paul’s instruction on renewing the Covenant with our Father through partaking the “*body of the Lord*” (see 1 Corinthians 11:23-31) concludes with a severe warning. Many within the faith family in Corinth were neglecting to rid themselves of the leaven of unconfessed sin yet presuming to participate in this holy gathering.

The consequence of their audacity was illness even unto death for some. They were failing to realize that the blood of Jesus cleansed them *if* they repented and confessed their sin.

Some research on the early Church supports that the followers of Jesus got together in homes for the specific purpose of sharing communion. Their gathering encompassed a time of participation through exercising spiritual gifts, praising God in song, and teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom (see Colossians 3:16). It was an opportunity for repentance *before* taking part in communion.

Later, when the influence of Hellenism caused communion to take on a sacramental nature, participation was incorporated into the congregational gathering on the Sabbath. It became an impersonal ritual as an intermediary priest performed liturgical functions to “make holy” that which is already holy through Jesus.

Sins can be easily hidden in people who sit in pew proximity but have no relational responsibility toward one another. When people don’t depend on the righteousness of each other, their sins can remain unconfessed. Their prayer activity becomes form without power.

Both the personal and the communal *scrutiny* element of the early Church was thus lost. But when sins were confessed and righteousness prevailed, prayers were answered in a powerful way—“God-size” intervention.

The breaking of bread within the home context among brothers and sisters who were committed to one another was critical, not only to maintain strong relationships but also to preserve

righteousness. Home gatherings provided a medium for relational accountability and personal responsibility so that the Lord's instruction for dealing with a person who sinned could be followed.

Note that when Jesus tells a believer to confront his *brother*, it isn't someone he hardly knows, one among hundreds. The two have a relationship within a spiritual family, as do the others who bring forth the same message so that the man might repent. The brother is confronted because they *love him* and yearn to see his fellowship restored both with God and with his faith family.

*And if your brother sins [if you are aware that he is unrepentant in some matter], go and reprove him in private; if he listens to you, you have **won your brother** [he turns from his sin and rejoins you in true fellowship].*

*But if he does not listen to you, take **one or two more with you** [others in your faith family], so that by the mouth of two or three witnesses every fact may be confirmed.*

*And if he refuses to listen to them, **tell it to the church** [the called-out ones who are also his spiritual family]; and if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a **Gentile and a tax-gatherer** [until he repents] (Matthew 18:15-17).*

Jesus concludes his discourse on this matter by proclaiming that whatever steps of righteousness are taken in trying to help a brother who sins to repent, those efforts will be recognized in the heavenly realm (18:18). Then He adds,

*Again I say to you, that if **two of you agree on earth about anything that they may ask, it shall be done for them***

*by My Father who is in heaven. For where **two or three have gathered together in My name, there I am in their midst** (Matthew 18:19,20).*

Your goal in confronting a "family" member who hasn't repented is to restore him to loving fellowship as you uphold communal righteousness. Our Lord speaks only twice about communal responsibility concerning His *called-out ones*, the Church. This command is not optional.

A biblical home fellowship of extended spiritual family is a "**fellowship of righteous homes**". Followers of Jesus must be diligent to confront sin first in themselves, then in their family, and then in the extended spiritual family of their load-bearing brothers and sisters.

Through this process, individual and communal righteousness will be maintained so that loving fellowship with our Lord continues. In addition, the repentant will be restored to loving fellowship within the intimacy of their spiritual family.

Love is willing to confront. The exercise of Matthew 18:15-20 within a home fellowship is a crucial part of maintaining communal righteousness in your faith family.

Our Father is well aware of man's frail inability to walk in continual righteousness. Even King David, *a man after God's own heart*, was an adulterer and murderer. Paul, the valiant sufferer for his trust in Jesus, struggled with internal battles that turned into evil actions (see Romans 7:15-24). And even Peter gave way to sin by refusing to dine with Gentile brothers in Jesus (see Galatians 2:11,12).

It's wonderful when a person who sins responds to the Spirit's call to turn from sin in repentance and return to fellowship with God. But some need human intervention to confront them to their face.

In order to restore fellowship, the Lord sent the prophet Nathan to rebuke David. His heart broken and contrite before his God, the king repented and confessed his sin. His intimacy with God was restored.

Paul, grieved that Peter not only sinned in regard to the Galatian believers but also led his friend Barnabas astray, soundly rebuked the apostle (see Galatians 2:13-21) that he might repent and walk uprightly in that area of his life.

Our lives as extended spiritual family are interconnected through the Spirit. Because of that love relationship, we have a personal responsibility to God and to our brothers and sisters to try to restore them when they sin. We must also be willing to exclude them until they choose to repent and walk uprightly once again:

*Brothers, if someone is caught in a sin, you who are spiritual should **restore him gently**. But watch yourself, or you also may be tempted (Galatians 6:1).*

Warn a divisive person once, and then warn him a second time. After that, have **nothing to do with him* (Titus 3:10).*

*When you are assembled in the name of our Lord Jesus and I am with you in spirit, and the power of our Lord Jesus is present, **hand this man over to Satan, so that the sinful nature may be destroyed and his spirit saved on the day of the Lord** (1 Corinthians 5:4,5).*

Consider what we're being commanded in these passages:

- To be careful when you help someone so that you too won't be snared by his sin;
- To reprove a person of agitating views up to two times, then sever the relationship until he repents. If he were to stay in your midst without repenting, he could easily sway others into the same divisive attitude and hinder everyone's walk and prayers.
- The need to separate from evildoers in order to uphold communal righteousness is a biblical prerogative. In essence, Satan is our Lord's last act of mercy to try to rescue a person from his sin nature.

When an unrepentant brother or sister refuses to heed godly counsel, we must be willing to do as Paul did: allow Satan to chew on the person's sin nature so that he might repent and ultimately be welcomed at the Throne.

It may be difficult to believe that God would actually use Satan to perfect His people or drive them to Himself. The influence of Hellenist dualism within Christendom has convinced many that God in His purity has nothing to do with our evil Adversary.

Yet the Scriptures demonstrate that God used Satan to test Job (see Job 1:6-2:10) and to sift Peter (Luke 22:31). God also uses the enemy of our soul to destroy the sin nature in His people when all other human elements fail.

Help yourself avoid giving in to that old sin nature. Be swift to respond to the Spirit's call to confess your sins and turn from them for cleansing by our Lord.

For both your home and your home fellowship family, confession and repentance are key to maintaining ongoing prayer that brings Divine answers.

If you recall, to be “born again” from the early Church perspective means to enter into *Covenant union* with our holy God. Sin ruptures fellowship with Him, while confession agrees with our Lord that sin has indeed occurred.

The repentance our Father calls for grieves over the separation of intimacy with Him. This sorrow produces repentance that turns away from evil and turns to God for forgiveness and restoration of fellowship:

*I now rejoice, not that you were made sorrowful, but that you were **made sorrowful to the point of repentance**; for you were made sorrowful **according to the will of God**, in order that you might not suffer loss in anything through us. For the sorrow that is according to the will of God produces a **repentance without regret, leading to salvation**; but the sorrow of the world produces death (2 Corinthians 7:9-10).*

When you and your family enter into fellowship with other households, you’re making a commitment to each other. In effect, you’re determining in your heart: **“I purpose to be quick to repent and confess my sins. With the grace of God I will uphold righteousness in my life and home. I will do nothing to hinder your prayers from being answered by our Father.”**

Sin *per se* isn’t a problem, only when someone fails to repent and confess their sin. When your prayers go unanswered for a period of time, be alert that unrepentance may be the hindrance. An absence of testimonies to our Father’s faithfulness may indicate that someone in your fellowship, like Achan, is trying to hide their sin.

Or, you may find that our Lord allows sickness or death to come on someone who is hiding in unrepentance but pretending to be right before Him.

While at the retreat center Mike was approached by elders of a particular congregation because so many of the women were miscarrying. He questioned them about the level of tolerated sin within the congregation and the defilement of their communion gathering through unrepentant sin. The leaders prayed about this and confronted the congregation. The Spirit brought them to repentance and kept them repentant. The miscarriages ceased and many new babies were welcomed into their midst!

When we enter into fellowship with others, we determine to walk as our Lord would have us, in love-grounded obedient trust. When we stumble, we purpose to confess and repent. Answered prayer and testimony to our Father’s faithfulness is our assurance that our fellowship is upholding communal righteousness.

Only once did we ever run into difficulty because of unconfessed sin in our extended spiritual family. We haven’t had a pay check since November, 1982. We are very reliant on our Father to answer our prayers! About 10 years ago we were coming to the end of a month and didn’t have the money to pay our bills. We got on our knees and asked the Holy Spirit to convict us of any unconfessed sin. He didn’t reveal anything.

We approached our home fellowship family. One man was pierced as he recognized the impact of his unrepentance. He immediately confessed his sin. The next day checks came in our mail, enough to pay all our bills!

Do you understand the communal affects of sin and unrepentance on those with whom you're in fellowship together? Can you see how one person's unrepentance must be confronted by others in the fellowship? How has your concept of fellowship changed as you've read and discussed this material?

Have you ever confronted anyone about their sin? Yes or no? If yes, what occurred?

FELLOWSHIP IN HOMES Extended Spiritual Family: *Prayer Is Spiritual Warfare*

Since the first day that you set your mind to gain understanding and to humble yourself before your God, your words were heard, and I have come in response to them. But the prince of the Persian kingdom resisted me twenty-one days. Then Michael, one of the chief princes, came to help me, because I was detained there with the king of Persia.
(Daniel 10:12,13)

The example of Daniel from the Hebrew Bible made clear that *persevering prayer* and *trust in a loving LORD* were key to God's response. Demonic forces had opposed the ministering angel sent with God's answer (see Daniel 10; see Hebrews 1:14). But in trust, ***righteous Daniel***

prayed for twenty-one days. With the help of the arch-angel Michael, the heavenly messenger broke through to intervene.

Jesus voiced the parable of the persistent widow (see Luke 18:1-8) to encourage His followers to pray without ceasing as they trust in their Lord to answer: "*Now shall not God bring about justice for His elect, who cry to Him day and night, and will He delay long over them?*" (v. 7,NAS).

Prayer is spiritual warfare!

Satan is aware of the power of ***communal righteousness*** combined with ***prayer that perseveres until the answer is received.***

Keep in mind this warning if you want your own prayers answered:

If the devil can't hinder you and your fellowship family through *unconfessed sin*, he'll discourage you from praying by instilling *doubt* and *unbelief* that the Lord will ever answer.

This is why the relational responsibility of a righteous home fellowship is critical: to encourage each other to remain repentant, and to persist in prayer until our Father responds. An extended spiritual family that doesn't experience God-sized answers to their prayers may have already given way to Satan's scheme.

They also may be excusing sin in their midst because they're fearful to be accused of being "unloving". Yet from our Lord's perspective, there is *no middle ground*. Either you purpose to continue walking uprightly as God's Spirit-indwelled child and love your family in Jesus enough to want their prayers as well as yours to be answered.

Or, you practice unrighteousness

through your life choices, concern yourself only with you, and find the heavens are silent. But that unrighteousness can't be allowed to go on so that Satan's work takes place in your midst:

By this the children of God and the children of the devil are obvious: anyone who does not practice righteousness is not of God, nor the one who does not love his brother (1 John 3:10).

How do you feel about the realization that when you pray you are entering into spiritual warfare? Are you filled with any doubt that our Father will answer your prayers? Yes or no? If yes, list the prayers you have doubt about.

“In the same way, the Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit Himself intercedes for us with groans that words cannot express”
(Romans 8:26).

One last point concerning your communal prayer as fellowship family:
Make sure you are praying in accordance with our Father's will.

If you haven't discerned our Father's heart on the matter, you may not recognize when He answers. Sometimes discussion about what you as a faith family are praying is important. Quite often people who initially voice a prayer request haven't considered the *real* need.

Some of the deepest disappointments

the righteous face come because they're praying **answers** instead of **requests** and **petitions**! In other words, they're being so specific in what they think God *should do* that they box out His creativity and blind themselves to the unique way in which He chooses to intervene!

The testimony of a dear brother can help clarify the difference between **praying for needs** and **specifying answers**:

“I was anxious and worried because my car had broken down and I had no way to get to work. So I asked Mike and Sue to pray with me for another car. To my dismay, they refused! But then they explained that my real need was for *transportation*, so that's what they prayed for with me.

The next day I happened to mention my need to a co-worker, and his face lit up! He lived one exit up from my apartment complex and said he'd be glad to pick me up and drop me off. Those times during our daily 45-minute commute were incredible! I led him to Jesus, and we spent the drive time praying and singing and learning from the Bible on tape.

I started to feel a little guilty about inconveniencing him, but then his wife called me. She told me how delighted she and the kids were with the changes she was seeing in her husband. SHE didn't want the on-road fellowship to stop!

Our Lord answered my need in such a wonderful way that my earlier prayer about getting another car seems so shortsighted now.

Praying a need isn't a fatalistic “what-ever will be, will be” approach. Even the blind man who trustingly approached Jesus expressed his need: *“I want to see!”* He didn't presume to tell Jesus how to do it. He just trusted that however the Master chose to meet the need would be sufficient.

Our Father's provision surpasses all that we could think or ask. We just need the spiritual eyes to see the matter from His perspective and to wait on Him to reveal His response.

Do you pray specific answers rather than offering our Father your need? Describe how you pray.

Are you willing to offer up your “prayers, and petitions with thanksgiving” (Philippians 4:6) with a confident peace that you’re being heard? Do you have a hopeful expectation that His timing and intervention will far exceed your heart’s desire because it is suiting His purposes?

Recommended Further Reading

- September-October 2002 Newsletter: *Life Outside the Steeple*
- Hebraic Article: *The Unsteeped Church*
- Hebraic Article: *I Hate Nicolaitanism*
- Lifebyte 2: *Will He Find Faith?*
- Lifebyte 3: *Take The Pedals Off!*
- Lifebyte 7: *When Death Is Good*
- The entire series: *Going to the High Places*