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House to House Heart to Heart

VOLUME 24 NUMBER 9

"I QUIT CHURCH AFTER
A BAD EXPERIENCE.
WHY SHOULD I
GO BACK?"

ALLEN WEBSTER

Lately, the church's back door has been busier than its front door. Many have left, saying, "I don't go anymore. I just got too busy." Or, "I've had it with organized religion." Or, "I had a bad experience. I may never go back."

Has a bad experience sent you out the back door?

Understandably, some are reluctant to re-engage. They want to protect themselves from further harm. Some feel cheated, like they wasted their time in church so far. Christians hear things like, "I know I need to go back, but I'm afraid of what people will say." And, "I would like to start going to church, but I have never been before, and I am afraid I will do something wrong and embarrass myself."

May we offer some encouragement? God's love is unwavering; His wisdom, unsurpassable (Romans 11:33). Jesus desires you in heaven more than you can comprehend (John 14:2). The Spirit's pen is ready to record your name (Philippians 4:3). When you get ready to try again, here are a few things to consider.

A RETURNING PRODIGAL GETS A CELEBRATION (LUKE 15).

It is hard to explain how much you mean to God. Not only will He know of your decision, He will announce it to His angels. "There is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents" (Luke 15:10). Not only will He delight in your return, He will run to meet you (15:20).

BEFORE YOU GO BACK, LOOK BACK.

It is important to determine what happened when you left church, so you can avoid a second episode. People are prone to the same mistakes. Our personalities and previous habits influence choices.

Was a church leader the problem? Some people have experienced horrible treatment from religious leaders—sexual abuse, cultic manipulation, and financial embezzlement. Truly rotten church leaders are rare, but they are out there—especially where false doctrine goes against human nature (e.g., forbidding to marry) or caters to it (loose ethics) (1 Timothy 4:3; Jude 1:4–19).



PLAN OF SALVATION

Divine Love, John 3:16
God's Grace, Ephesians 2:8
Christ's Blood, Romans 5:9
The Holy Spirit's Gospel, Romans 1:16
Sinner's Faith, Acts 16:31
Sinner's Repentance, Luke 13:3
Sinner's Confession, Romans 10:10
Sinner's Baptism, 1 Peter 3:21
Christian's Love, Matthew 22:37
Christian's Work, James 2:24
Christian's Hope, Romans 8:24
Christian's Endurance, Revelation 2:10

Such moral failures are unacceptable and must not be ignored. Although love covers a multitude of sins (1 Peter 4:8), it does not sweep sin under the rug. It has tough conversations and demands penitence and accountability.

Jesus said, "Whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in Me to stumble, it would be better for him if a millstone were hung around his neck, and he were thrown into the sea" (Mark 9:42). Impenitent leaders face a worse fate than drowning at the Judgment (Matthew 25:41). Repentance is possible for anyone (1 Timothy 1:15), but this does not remove all earthly consequences.

Going back to the same church may not be an option. When considering a new church, it is important to get to know its elders, deacons, and preachers. Consider this checklist. Godly leaders . . .

1. demonstrate the fruit of the Spirit (Galatians 5:22–23).
2. are not arrogant or self-absorbed (Proverbs 16:5; Philippians 2:4–6).
3. seek accountability and submit to the eldership (Hebrews 13:17; cf. Jude 1:8).
4. demonstrate the behavior they expect of others (1 Corinthians 11:1).
5. see each member as equally valuable and equal to the leader (Romans 12:3–16).

6. are fair and show no favoritism (1 Timothy 5:21; Proverbs 16:8).
7. do not have frequent angry outbursts (Ephesians 4:31).
8. teach the same truths to everyone (1 Corinthians 4:17).
9. do not lie (Ephesians 4:25).
10. do not marginalize immature people but develop them (Ephesians 4:11–13).
11. are peacemakers and not manipulators (Proverbs 16:7; James 3:17–18).
12. show transparency but respect confidences (Proverbs 20:19).
13. allow others to disagree while maintaining mutual respect (1 Thessalonians 5:21; Titus 2:7; 1 Peter 3:15).
14. surround themselves with more than "yes people" (Proverbs 16:13; 15:22).
15. communicate clearly and often (Psalm 37:30; Ephesians 4:15).¹

Were church members to blame? Some "Christians" are less than they should be, and a few are downright ungodly. No excuse is made for them—only a demand for repentance (Revelation 2:5, 16, 21–22; 3:3, 19). Churches should not overlook gossip, slander, pride and anger nor rationalize bigotry, sexual sin, greed, dishonesty, division, or drunkenness (Proverbs 20:1; 23:29–34; Ephesians 5:18). God "resists the proud but gives grace to the humble" (James 4:6). Paul wrote, "Let no corrupt word proceed out of your mouth" (Ephesians 4:29). God speaks harshly of those who promote division (Titus 3:10).

It might help to look at this another way, though. The church exists because people are sinners (Romans 3:23–26; Ephesians 3:9–11). "The church is not a museum for saints but a hospital for sinners."² Church is discipleship school. It takes us from where we are and helps get us to where we need to be. It can be messy. God is developing His imperfect people at the same time they are building His church. He could have done His work another way but chose to use us. What is bothering us, then, just might also amaze us. We have front row seats to God working His transformation.

Was the church really at fault? When a person leaves, sometimes it is not the church's fault. Some never give the church a fair opportunity to explain or correct a

problem. Some remain unconverted, loving sin and wanting to live unholy lives. Some, misunderstanding the church, go to be entertained or coddled. With an entitlement mentality rather than a servant's heart, at any time they are only a few weeks away from leaving the church. Congregational exit interviews can show a me-first attitude such as, "I was out two weeks, and no one called," or, "I told my preacher to visit my neighbor and he never did."

Give your experience an honest evaluation. Many times, the church was at fault. If not, go back with different expectations.

FIND YOUR WAY BACK BY PUTTING YOUR FEET IN JESUS' PRINTS (1 PETER 2:21–22).

No matter what bad thing happened, Jesus did not do it, but He knows what mistreatment feels like.

When on trial for his faith, Paul told Timothy everyone had abandoned him—except One: "The Lord stood with me and strengthened me" (2 Timothy 4:17). God will never abandon us (Hebrews 13:5–6). To leave the church because a member offended us is like divorcing a spouse because we do not like our boss. When we put faith in Jesus, we are never disappointed (Psalm 31:1; Mark 7:37). Jesus is never to blame; and He is the reason we go in the first place.

A bad church experience can be hard to overcome, but it is unhealthy to live in the spiritual past (Philippians 3:13). If we were treated unlovingly, we should love anyway (John 13:35). Jesus did (1 Peter 2:23; 3:9). If we were "slapped on the cheek," we should turn the other (Matthew 5:39). Jesus did (Luke 23:34). Without love, life is bland and empty (1 Corinthians 13:1–3).

Love holds no grudge. "Do not let the sun go down on your wrath" (Ephesians 4:26). Guard your heart diligently, for it is the source of all of life (Proverbs 4:23). What is in it spills out of the mouth (Matthew 12:34). If seeds of irritation and annoyance are not plucked, they can become a bitter root that grows and defiles (Hebrews 12:15). So, when betrayed by someone, do good for him or her.

Love prays for, and does good to, enemies (Matthew 5:44; Luke 6:27). Biblical love is not an emotion; it is a decision. It seeks another's best, so we can even love those we do not like. Christ suffered, the Holy for the unholy (Romans 5:6–8). He died, the Sinless for the sinful (1 Peter 2:22–24). Praying for those who hurt us is hard, but it brings God's blessing.

Love pursues holiness even if others do not (1 Peter 1:16). Holiness is simply truth internalized and practiced.

Love perseveres (1 Corinthians 13:7–8). Do not let Satan win this battle. He wants to “steal, kill, and destroy” (John 10:10). He wants you to hate, quit, and be bitter. Fight the good fight. Do not give up. Trust that love prevails. In the end, love abides (1 Corinthians 13:13).

DO NOT EXPECT TO FIND A PERFECT CHURCH, BUT DO NOT SETTLE FOR FALSE TEACHING.

False doctrine is soul poison (Colossians 2:8, 18; 1 Timothy 6:20; 2 Timothy 3:5; 2 Peter 3:16–17). “Take heed that no one deceives you” (Matthew 24:4; Ephesians 4:14). How?

Research. It is worth the effort to try again, but before a first visit, look at the church's website. Read posts and articles.

Listen to sermons and podcasts. Look at activities and events. Look for sound doctrine (2 Timothy 1:13).

Converse. On the first visit, arrive early and talk with members. Meet your child's teacher. Tour the facilities and pick up literature. Ask for a plan of work describing programs, activities, and events.

Observe. How do people interact with each other? How is the service conducted? Is worship scriptural and heart-felt? (John 4:24). Did the Sunday service consist of preaching, praying, singing, giving, and the Lord's Supper? This is the New Testament pattern (Acts 2:42; 1 Corinthians 16:2; Ephesians 5:19). Was a piano used? Did women lead any part of the service? Did a choir or soloist sing to the congregation? These are without scriptural authority (Colossians 3:16–17; 1 Timothy 2:8–11).

Listen. Did the preacher give an understandable, Bible-based, Scripture-filled sermon? Do not judge his preaching by how likable he is, but by how his sermon lines up with Scripture. “Test all things; hold fast what is good” (1 Thessalonians 5:21). We should not believe every teacher, but test them, whether they are of God (1 John 4:1; Acts 17:11).

If one goes to church looking for God and gospel but has difficulty finding them, it makes sense to go elsewhere.

A WEARY PILGRIM FINDS A HAVEN OF HOSPITALITY (ACTS 28:11–16).

Christians know what the discouraged need to hear: “Don't give up; don't abandon the church; Jesus still loves you” (Hebrews 10:25). Christians love like Christ (John 13:34). As He would never harshly scold a returning prodigal, neither do they.

As Paul the prisoner journeyed to Rome, Christians from Rome came out several miles to meet him at Appii Forum and the Three Inns, two ancient rest stops. “When Paul saw them, he thanked God and took courage” (Acts 28:15). Like them, today's Christians leave their comfort zones and meet others during their difficult times.

The church stands ready to welcome you, take you in, nourish your faith, and give you a spiritual home. Let us begin to make up for the pain in your past.

We will meet you at the front door on Sunday.

Endnotes:

¹ Adapted from thomrainer.com/2014/10/fourteen-symptoms-toxic-church-leaders/

² Generally attributed to Augustine.





Family Vacation

Who can ever forget Winston Churchill's immortal words, "We shall fight on the beaches, we shall fight on the landing grounds, we shall fight in the fields and in the streets, we shall fight in the hills." It sounds exactly like our family vacation.

—Robert Orben



Quick Wit

Father: "Son, when Lincoln was your age, he was earning his own living."

Son: "Yes, Father, and when he was your age, he was president of the United States."

For more material on the home and family, fathers and mothers, husbands and wives, grandparents, and family finances, go to www.housetohouse.com.



The *Difference* Family Makes

"My son, do not forget my law, but let your heart keep my commands; for length of days and long life and peace they will add to you" (Proverbs 3:1–2).

An article in the *Journal of the American Medical Association* revealed the result of an enormous research project (90,000 participants) about high-risk behavior by teens. The study concluded that the most effective way to protect young people from unhealthy or dangerous behaviors is for parents to be involved in their lives.

Dr. Robert W. Blum, a coauthor of the report, says, "It is a very clear message that you as a parent have to stay involved. You can't buy into the myth that you are no longer relevant in your children's lives."

"Kids repeatedly told us that small messages are important," he says. "The messages are given by a note on the refrigerator

that says, 'Good luck on your test today.' The messages are given by a hug. The messages are given by saying, 'How was your date last night?' The message is parents showing concern, showing that what goes on in the child's life matters."

Dr. Blum says these daily connections are as effective in single-parent families as they are in two-parent families. In focus groups, many of the teens told researchers that these little messages often meant more than family activities such as going out together.

"These words which I command you today shall be in your heart. You shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, when you walk by the way, when you lie down, and when you rise up."

DEUTERONOMY 6:6–7

Lucky Guy

On her golden wedding anniversary, my grandmother revealed the secret of her happy marriage. "On my wedding day, I decided to choose ten of my husband's faults which, for the sake of our marriage, I would overlook," she explained. A guest asked her to name some of the faults. "To tell the truth," she replied, "I never did get around to listing them. But whenever my husband did something that made me hopping mad, I would say to myself, 'Lucky for him that's one of the ten.'"

"Love suffers long and is kind"

I CORINTHIANS 13:4.



You Can Prove ANYTHING by the Bible



Have you ever heard, “You can prove anything by the Bible”?

This is only true if someone misuses the Bible and misapplies its teachings. The Bible is unified; it harmonizes. It brings unity, not confusion (Ephesians 4:1–6; 1 Corinthians 14:33, 40).

How is the Word of God misused?

The Word of God can be perverted by removing a passage from its setting and giving it a meaning never intended by the Holy Spirit. For example, this is done when 1 John 3:9 is used in an attempt to prove that a child of God cannot fall from grace because he cannot sin. This passage actually teaches that the child of God does not continue in the old life of sin he lived prior to his conversion, since the seed (the Word of God, Luke 8:11) abides in his heart.

The Word of God is perverted when a misconception is placed on a text.

This is done when “rock” in Matthew 16:18 is made to apply to the apostle Peter. “Rock” refers to the great truth Peter confessed, that Christ is the Son of God (see 1 Corinthians 3:11).

The Word of God is perverted when it is changed to suit the times. This is often done in moral issues (divorce, homosexuality, abortion, modesty). God’s Word flows from God’s nature and thus, like God (Malachi 3:6), the Word of God changes not (Luke 21:33). God has given different covenants at different times (Hebrews 8), but the Law of Christ has never changed since it was completed nearly two thousand years ago (Galatians 1:6–9).

The Word of God can be perverted by misusing passages to justify evil prac-

tices. For example, this is done when 1 Timothy 5:23 is used to justify social drinking. This text is dealing with using wine as a medicine.

The Word of God is perverted when figures of speech are literalized. For example, some try to argue that the “cup” of Matthew 26:27 is made to refer to the container rather than to the content.

The Word of God is perverted when it is misquoted. In the Porter-Tingley Debate years ago, Glenn V. Tingley took the word “not” out of 1 Peter 3:21 and made the text teach the opposite of what the Lord intended.

Let us all sincerely study the Bible and carefully follow its teachings.

—Wendell Winkler

Cut out this section and mail it to the address on the front.



Bible Quiz

VOLUME 24:9

Send us your answers to receive a free Bible bookmark! We'll grade and return your questions and enclose the bookmark "Chapter to Chapter – Hebrews and James" as a way of saying thanks for spending time in the Word (quantities may be limited).

Name: _____
Address: _____
City/State: _____
Phone: _____

Questions are taken from the New King James Version.

Answers to Previous Quizzes

V. 24:7 Moses and Egypt: 1. They had become more and mightier than the Egyptians (Exodus 1:9–10) 2. 7 (Genesis 41:30) 3. Pharaoh's daughter (Exodus 2:10) 4. He was beating a Hebrew brother (Exodus 2:11–12) 5. Midian (Exodus 2:15) 6. Zipporah (Exodus 2:21) 7. Draw not near; take his sandals off his feet (Exodus 3:5) 8. He was slow of speech and slow of tongue (Exodus 4:10) 9. Aaron (Exodus 4:14–16) 10. A serpent (Exodus 7:10) 11. Put lamb's blood on the lintel and doorposts and stay inside (Exodus 12:22) 12. False (Exodus 8:22–23; 9:26; 10:23) 13. A pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night (Exodus 13:21) 14. The Red Sea (Exodus 14:21–22, 29; 15:22) 15. Water became blood (Exodus 7:20) 16. Land of Rameses (Genesis 47:11) 17. Levi (Exodus 2:1–10) 18. Egypt (Hosea 7:16).

V. 24:8 Starts with the Letter "Z" 1. Zacchaeus (Luke 19:2–4) 2. Zacharias (Luke 1:13) 3. Zadok (2 Samuel 8:15–17) 4. Zamzummim (Deuteronomy 2:20) 5. Zarephath (1 Kings 17:9) 6. Zaretan (Joshua 3:16) 7. "Zeal for Your house has eaten Me up." (John 2:17) 8. Zealot (Luke 6:15) 9. Zebedee (Matthew 4:21) 10. Zebulun (Numbers 2:7) 11. Zechariah (Ezra 5:1) 12. Zedekiah (1 Kings 22:11) 13. Zelophehad (Numbers 27:1–11) 14. Zeresh (Esther 5:10–14) 15. Zerubbabel (Ezra 3:8) 16. Zion (2 Samuel 5:7) 17. Ziba (2 Samuel 16:1)

Jesus' Crucifixion and Resurrection

Directions: Find answers in the following passages: Psalm 22:7–22; Matthew 27:33–35, 38–42, 45, 51–54, 57, 62–66; 28:5–6; 28:1, 9; 16–17; Mark 16:1, 9; Luke 23:38; 24:11. Questions are taken from the New King James Version.

- Where was Jesus crucified? _____
- What did they offer Jesus to drink as He was crucified? _____
- Who predicted that they would divide up His clothes by casting lots? _____
- In what languages was the inscription written that was placed above Jesus on the cross? _____
- How many other people were crucified with Jesus? _____
- "If He is the King of Israel, let Him now come _____ from the cross, and we will _____ Him." _____
- How many hours of darkness were there while Jesus was on the cross? _____
- After Jesus died, what supernatural events took place? _____
- How did the people watching respond to the events at His death? _____
- Which Psalm gives a first-person account of the crucifixion? _____
- Who owned the tomb where Jesus was buried? _____
- Because Jesus had said He would rise again, Pilate set a watch over the tomb at the request of whom? _____
- Why did Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of James come to the tomb when the Sabbath was past? _____
- Who told Mary that Jesus was not in the tomb, but He had risen? _____
- To whom did Jesus first appear after His resurrection? _____
- As the women went to tell Jesus' disciples that Jesus had risen, who did they meet on the way? _____
- What was the disciples' response when they were told that Jesus had risen? _____

MILLIONS

ARE READING THE SAME BOOK AT THE SAME TIME

The Bible is on more nightstands, on more coffee tables, on more library shelves, and in more smartphones than any other book. It is the book that millions turn to each day for instruction and wisdom.

It is sought as a book of comfort during times of stress and uncertainty. This fact was clearly shown by a forty-percent

increase in Bible sales, at some retailers, in the week following the September 11, 2001, attacks on the U.S.

God has given us His Word to lead, guide, and comfort us in our daily work and walk with Him. But though the average American Christian family has nine Bibles in their home, they are only helpful when read.

So be a daily Bible reader, if you are not already. "Always be ready to give a defense to everyone who asks you a reason for the hope that is in you, with meekness and fear" (1 Peter 3:15).

The next time you are reading from God's Word remember, too, that millions are doing the same thing. They are seeking the truth. —Dick Brant

"Blessed is he who reads"

REVELATION 1:3

Cut out this section and mail it to the address on the front.

Recommended Resource



The Gospel Broadcasting Network is unique in the world of religious TV—commercial free, and they never ask for money! Sponsored by the churches of Christ, GBN is available on many cable systems, as well as through their smartphone apps, the Roku device, and at gbntv.org.

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New Tracts!

- ☐ Responsibilities of Elders
- ☐ The Safe Channel
- ☐ Where Was God When Disaster Struck
- ☐ Picking God's Pocket



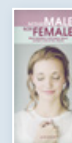
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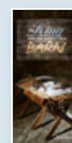
☐ Don't Lose Your Bible In Church



☐ God's Design for the Family



☐ Neither Male nor Female



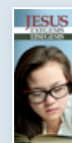
☐ The King Who Was Born in a Barn



☐ Should Churches of Christ Fellowship Denominations?



☐ Boot Camp for Christian Soldiers



☐ Jesus Exegesis

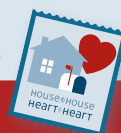


☐ What Does God Expect from Me, Anyway?



☐ Beware the Dangers of False Teachers

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NO TEXT WITHOUT CONTEXT—RIGHTLY DIVIDING

Bible study requires proper interpretation. Proper interpretation requires observing context and “rightly dividing the word” (2 Timothy 2:15).



AGE CONTEXT

(Hebrews 1:1–2)
From which age is the text?



PATRIARCHAL AGE

Creation to Sinai
Adam, Noah, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob



MOSAIC AGE

Sinai to the Cross
Moses, Joshua, David, Isaiah, Jesus



CHRISTIAN AGE

Pentecost to Judgment
Peter, Paul, John, Luke



HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Ask five questions to determine the historical context.



Who is speaking?



To whom?



From where?



When?



Why?



TEXTUAL CONTEXT

Look at the text around the verse.



What is happening in the preceding and following paragraphs?



In the chapter of the book?



In the entire book?



SCRIPTURAL CONTEXT

Look at the whole of Scripture and determine everything the Bible has to say on that topic.

Why So Restrictive?

Here are some modern examples of unnecessary restrictions and infringements on believers.

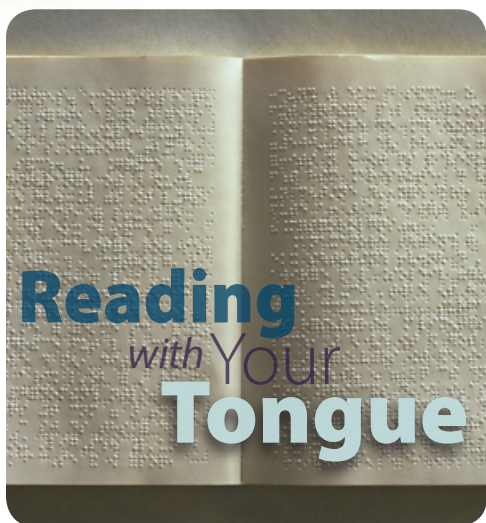
- Who says a congregation cannot select and ordain its own elders/pastors/bishops to oversee and feed the local congregation? (Acts 14:23; Titus 1:5).
- Who says a local congregation cannot do its work without connection to a superstructure organization (headquarters, diocese, or board)? (Philippians 1:1).
- Who says congregational singing is to become secondary to solos, choirs, instruments, and professional musicians? Why can the whole church not participate in worshipping God? (Ephesians 5:19; Colossians 3:16).
- Who says that a preacher has to be “called” and graduate from a seminary to preach God’s Word to a church? Is he necessarily better than one who studies diligently himself? (Acts 8:4).
- Who says the unsaved become saved by prayer? (John 9:31).
- Who says the priesthood of believers cannot partake of the Lord’s supper except monthly, quarterly, semiannually, or annually? Why deny members the weekly communion of the early church? (Acts 20:7).
- Who says modern-day departures from the biblical pattern of the home have improved morality in our nation? (Matthew 19:3–9).
- Who says we should subject sheep to doctrines of human origin? Why not give them sound doctrine that pleases God and helps them grow? (2 John 1:9; Acts 2:42). Why lead members to worship in vain by corrupting God’s pattern? (Matthew 15:9).
- Who says we should divide members by teaching conflicting doctrines that differ from the New Testament? (1 Corinthians 1:10; John 17:20–21).
- Who says not everybody can be saved and go to heaven? Who says one is required to have a miraculous religious experience to be saved? (John 14:1–2).

Why require more than the Scriptures? Let us all unite in simply obeying God’s Word. —adapted from Steven Higginbotham, Knoxville, Tennessee

“They bind heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on men’s shoulders.”

MATTHEW 23:4

Thoughts from the HEART



In his book, *The Wonder of the Word of God*, Robert L. Sumner tells of a man in Kansas City who was severely injured in an explosion.

The man's face was badly disfigured, and he lost his eyesight as well as both hands. He was just a new Christian, and one of his greatest disappointments was that he could no longer read the Bible. Then he heard about a lady in England who read braille with her lips. Hoping to do the same, he sent for some books of the Bible in braille.

Much to his dismay, however, he discovered that the nerve endings in his lips had been destroyed by the explosion. One day, as he brought one of the braille pages to his lips, his tongue happened to touch a few of the raised characters and he could feel them. Like a flash he thought, *I can read the Bible using my tongue*. At the time Robert Sumner wrote his book, the man had read through the entire Bible four times.

This reminds us that when we really want to know the will of God, we can find a way. Now is a great time to start a pursuit of the knowledge of God. —*Observations made from Robert Sumner's book "The Wonder of the Word of God."*

"Delight yourself also in the Lord, and He shall give you the desires of your heart."

PSALM 37:4



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9/19

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poster showing
the history of the
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