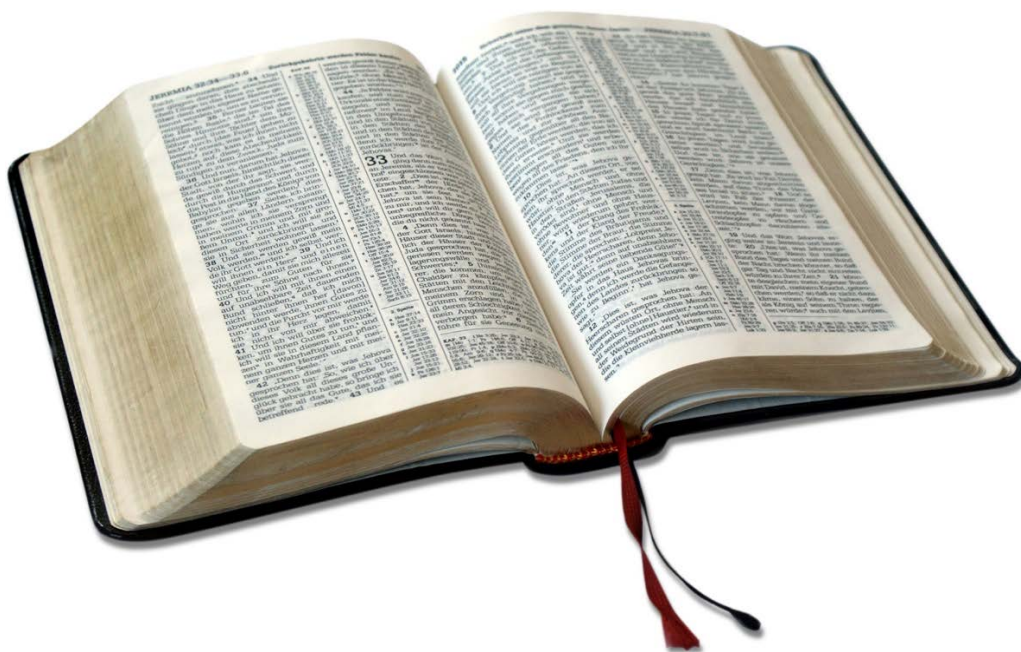


# TOWARD A STRONG SOUL



T. M. MOORE

A REVISION STUDY FROM  
THE FELLOWSHIP OF AILBE

*Toward a Strong Soul*

Toward a Strong Soul  
Strong Souls 26  
T. M. Moore  
Susie Moore, Editor and Finisher

Copyright, 2022 T. M. and Susie Moore  
The Fellowship of Ailbe

*Except as indicated, Scripture taken from the New King James Version. © Copyright 1982 by Thomas Nelson, Inc. Used by permission. All rights reserved.*

*Toward a Strong Soul*

Contents

Welcome to <i>Toward a Strong Soul</i>	4
1 Steadfast? Immovable?	5
2 Examine Yourselves!	7
3 The Mind of the Flesh	9
4 Heedless of Judgment	11
5 Despising Authority	13
6 Deceived	15
7 Give All Diligence	17
Questions for Reflection of Discussion	19

## Welcome to *Toward a Strong Soul*

We cannot emphasize enough the important of each believer paying careful attention to the work of nurturing their soul for strength and stability in Christ.

Unstable souls end up believing in Jesus for what they can get from Him, and they become susceptible to being led astray from true faith. All the apostles faced this situation, and they wrote in urgent terms to encourage believers to work for strong and stable souls, souls firmly anchored in the Word of God and the life of Christ.

There will always be those who use the Name of Jesus to promote themselves and cultivate a following of people who want to use Jesus for their own agenda. Such people are unstable in their souls, and in danger of being eternally lost.

We must guard against being led astray from seeking Christ and His Kingdom to seeking our own interests in Jesus' Name. And the way to do that is to give continuous, daily attention to making yours a stable soul.

*ReVision* studies are designed as brief introductions to the subject under consideration. We hope they will enlarge your worldview, help you to become more firmly rooted in Scripture, equip you to minister to others, and stimulate you to want to learn more about the Word of God and the Biblical worldview.

We're happy to provide this study at no charge. If you find these studies helpful, we hope you'll consider sending a gift to The Fellowship of Ailbe, to help us in making these resources available to others.

May the Lord bless your study of His Word.

T. M. Moore  
Principal

## 1 Steadfast? Immovable?

*Therefore, my beloved brethren, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that your labor is not in vain in the Lord.* 1 Corinthians 15.58

### *The hard work of faith*

We have been considering the nature of the soul, and how best to care for and nurture the soul for a strong inner life, so that we can serve the Lord faithfully with all our words and deeds. We must be always about the work of renewing our mind, cleansing our heart, and purifying our conscience, for nothing outward will have any staying power unless inwardly we are being transformed into the image of Jesus Christ.

Growing in Christlikeness in our souls is a matter of working out the gift of salvation God has given us, drawing on the wisdom of His Word and the power of His Spirit, to be conformed to Jesus Christ rather than to the ways of the world (Phil. 2.12, 13; 2 Cor. 3.12-18). We do not work *for* our salvation. We work *out* the gift of so great a salvation we have received as we grow in the grace and knowledge of the Lord, strengthening our soul and thereby renewing our bodies for serving the Lord.

This must be a matter of continuous attention. Paul's exhortation to the Corinthians is typical of what we encounter throughout the New Testament. The writer of Hebrews urged his readers to "run with endurance the race that is set before us" (Heb. 12.1). Peter charged the churches in Asia Minor to "be even more diligent to make your call and election sure" (2 Pet. 1.10). And our Lord Jesus warned the seven churches of Asia that only those who overcome in the face of adversity will know His full blessings (Rev. 2.7, 11, etc.). They who are "faithful unto death" will receive the crown of life for which they strive (Rev. 2.10).

We must always be working out our salvation toward a strong soul and a more Christlike way of life.

### *Three conditions*

These many exhortations to steadfastness highlight three conditions of the early Church that characterize the Christian movement in every era.

*First*, being a Christian is *hard work*, but work which, as we pursue it diligently, brings forth the fruit of righteousness, peace, and joy in the Holy Spirit (cf. Phil. 2.12, 13; Rom. 14.17, 18). Being a Christian is a full-time calling that involves us in a whole new way of life. Christians pursue a different *vision* of the world than their unsaved neighbors. They submit themselves to different *disciplines* as they pursue that vision. And those disciplines lead to a whole new set of *everyday outcomes* that bring glory to God and benefit to our neighbors. No one can justly call himself a Christian who does not live within the framework of the Kingdom vision, disciplines, and outcomes of love which Jesus and the apostles taught.

*Second*, the world is full of *many distractions and temptations* which can obstruct or divert believers as they pursue their calling to be steadfast and bear fruit. The world, the flesh, and the devil continuously assault us in a relentless warfare which, while spiritual, is nonetheless real and destructive. Paul reminds us that there is no such thing as a spiritual vacuum in life; every moment of time and every opportunity of life not seized and engaged for the cause of Christ and His Kingdom will be lost to the powers of evil and sin (Eph. 5.15-17). Christians must be constantly vigilant against the devil and his powers, and ready to resist him, lest their walk with the Lord be compromised and their fruitfulness turn to barrenness (1 Pet. 5.8, 9)

The *third* condition signaled by these many exhortations to steadfastness is simply that, within the Christian community are some who are *unstable of soul*, as Peter described them (2 Pet. 2.14) who, because they do not heed the exhortations to steadfastness, are vulnerable to being led astray and falling through temptation in to levels of sin from which they may never extricate themselves.

## *Toward a Strong Soul*

Who are these people with unstable souls? How can we recognize them? And what can we do to keep ourselves from succumbing to an unsteady soul? What can we do to ensure that we will always have *stable* souls, *strong* souls, which are growing into Jesus Christ and serving God for His glory?

### *Pretenders?*

Peter tells us that these unstable souls were people within the Christian community who had begun to know the goodness of the Lord by their profession of faith and participation in the Body of Christ (2 Pet. 1.13). They attended worship with other Christians, shared in the Christian lifestyle, at least to an extent, and considered themselves true believers in Jesus Christ.

But they were not. For all their outward protestations and participations, these people who did not take seriously the need to work out their salvation had merely *tasted* of the faith; they had not truly embraced the Lord.

As Peter notes, these unstable souls did not stand firm. They took no steps to make their calling and election sure, and to grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ. They were unwilling to contend for the truth against the lies of an age in flight from God. They did not discipline their minds to think like Jesus, nor their hearts to embrace God's Law, nor their consciences to judge with righteous judgment. Their overall laziness in pursuing Christian growth indicated to Peter that they were not true children of the Lord. Instead, like dogs returning to their vomit, they were pretenders, whose lack of true faith would one day be revealed for all to see (2 Pet. 2.22).

This is harsh language, I know; but Peter joins his voice to Paul, insisting that every believer in Jesus should expect to grow in the Lord, becoming strong and stable in their soul, and consistent in their walk, so that they and everyone can know that their profession of faith is not in vain, and their labors of good words and good works are just what we might expect from those who are being transformed increasingly into the image of Jesus Christ.

What then is involved in moving faithfully and consistently toward a strong soul?

### *For reflection*

1. Explain what Paul means by "steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord."
2. Is it possible to do this without a strong soul – a mind that's being renewed in the mind of Christ, a heart that is being cleansed from every sinful desire, and a conscience that is being purified from worldly ways? Explain.
3. What are the marks of someone who has an "unstable soul"? What is our duty in shoring-up our own souls, so that this does not describe us?

*Next steps – Preparation: Pray through your answers to the three questions above, and listen as the Spirit searches your soul to show you any areas where you might be unstable or tending that way.*

## 2 Examine Yourselves!

*Examine yourselves as to whether you are in the faith. Test yourselves. Do you not know yourselves, that Jesus Christ is in you?—unless indeed you are disqualified.* 2 Corinthians 13:5

### *No true Christians*

It should not surprise us to learn that there were, in the churches of the New Testament, a certain number of people, perhaps many, who did not really know the Lord Jesus. They professed to believe in Him, and in certain ways identified with His Presence and mission in the world.

They were faithful in church attendance and may have even given generously to their congregation's needs. Some of them may have been teachers, or even pastors. But they were people with unstable souls. Some were wolves in sheep's clothing, as Paul had warned and Peter explained, and they were leading many astray from true faith in Jesus Christ (Acts 20:29-31; 2 Pet. 2:18-22).

The apostle John had to deal with a situation in which certain church leaders broke off fellowship with their local body, drew some of the members away, and set up shop in a "church" of their own. John observed that people who separated from the Body of Christ and the teaching of the apostles with such ease, probably never were true members of Christ in the first place. Quite the contrary, their readiness to split up a local church showed that they were enemies of the Lord (1 Jn. 2:18, 19).

The writer of Hebrews warned that there were many who had "tasted" of the Lord, but never truly belonged to Him, and had never come to the knowledge of salvation (Heb. 6:4-9).

And even the Lord Jesus solemnly declared that some would show up before Him on judgment day, fully confident, because of all they had done, that He would receive them gladly, only to be turned away with the words, "I never knew you; depart from me..." (Matt. 7:23).

And all the while, these pretenders to faith persuaded themselves and others that they were true followers of Jesus, strong in soul, and loyal in life.

### *True colors*

The apostle Peter understood that, sooner or later, such false believers would show their true colors. Then they would be like dogs returning to their vomit – not really children of God by grace through faith, but mere pretenders, enjoying the good things of the Lord without truly having committed themselves to Him (2 Pet. 2:20-22). Having never become strong in their souls, they drifted easily from the Lord in the pursuit of mere self-interest.

Just as there were such people in the churches of the New Testament, so they have been present in every age of the Church. Charles Spurgeon, the great 19<sup>th</sup> century preacher, recognized the problem in his own day, and acknowledged that, not only churchgoers, but even pastors can be deceived into thinking they are true followers of Christ, when, in fact, the opposite is the case. Spurgeon wrote, "Thousands are congratulating themselves, and even blessing God, that they are devout worshippers, when at the same time they are living in an unregenerate Christless state, having the form of godliness, but denying the power thereof. He who presides over a system which aims at nothing higher than formalism, is far more a servant of the devil than a minister of God."

By "formalism" Spurgeon meant simply going through the motions of faith – going to church, singing, giving, participating in Christian activities, and all the rest. If our Christian faith is defined by nothing more than the external environment and activities in which we participate from time to time, then we may be

## *Toward a Strong Soul*

congratulating ourselves for being good Christians at the same time we are deceiving ourselves about the true nature of our nonexistent relationship with the Lord. Having no lasting effects to show from our profession of faith, it's quite possible we may have believed in vain.

### *False hopes?*

So Paul's admonition to examine ourselves is one each of us should heed. It suggests that there are certain things to look for which may be indicators of an unstable soul, false hope, and unfounded assurance of salvation.

And while Paul does not develop this idea any further at this point, Peter does. In 2 Peter 2 the apostle warned the churches in Asia Minor of false teachers who would draw away many unstable souls to themselves (v. 14), enticing these false believers by appealing to them in ways no true Christian would find alluring. As we consider these points of vulnerability over the next several installments, let us look inward, waiting on the Holy Spirit to search our own souls (Ps. 139.23, 24), and asking the Lord continually, "Is it I?"

Making sure that our faith is real, our souls stable, and our lives growing into conformity to Jesus Christ requires daily vigilance and attention. If we are not willing to do even this, to examine and improve our souls daily in the Lord, then we have reason to be concerned that our faith may be something other than *true* and *saving* faith in Jesus Christ.

Strong souls that lead us to true and fruitful faith require constant attention and nurture, lest they become corrupted by our unbelieving age and seared against true faith in Jesus.

### *For reflection*

1. What is your practice of examining the state of your soul? How can you know that yours is a stable soul?
2. How can you know when someone may be leading you astray into a false faith and vain hope?
3. How should believers help one another remain firm in the faith and work continuously at stabilizing their souls in the Lord?

*Next steps – Preparation: What would you suggest as a proper way of examining your soul each day?*



### 3 The Mind of the Flesh

*For when they speak great swelling words of emptiness, they allure through the lusts of the flesh, through lewdness, the ones who have actually escaped from those who live in error. While they promise them liberty, they themselves are slaves of corruption; for by whom a person is overcome, by him also he is brought into bondage. 2 Peter 2.18, 19*

#### *Look within*

The first place to look in examining ourselves and making sure we are true children of God and followers of Jesus Christ is within, in our mind, heart, and conscience, to discover the perspectives, desires, and priorities harboring there. We want to be people of strong souls, not those who, because our thoughts, affections, and priorities focus mainly on ourselves, can be easily led away from seeking Jesus.

How we *think* about life and the world, what we *desire* in life, and what constitute our *highest priorities*, will give a good indication of where our true and ultimate loyalties lie.

Jesus said that the true condition of our soul can be discovered by observing what we most desire (Matt. 6.19-21). The false teachers who were threatening the churches to which Peter wrote knew what they wanted – followers to stroke their egos and support their worldly lifestyles. And they knew exactly how to appeal to such people, what to hold out to them, and how to approach them to win these unstable souls to their side.

Innovation, enticement, even entertainment – whatever it took to divert people’s souls from seeking Christ and His Kingdom as their highest priority, these false teachers employed with great effects. They continue doing so in our day.

#### *Jesus for me!*

Let’s not make the mistake, when we read Peter referring to “lusts of the flesh,” of thinking only in terms of sexual license. Whatever our flesh lusts for constitutes a “lust of the flesh.” While sex can be included in this, so can other things – wealth, success, the esteem of others, mere temporal happiness, unremitting good health, a trouble-free lifestyle, and much more.

The false teachers of Peter’s day sensed that many people had associated themselves with the churches just because they thought they might get something out of Jesus for themselves, something to soothe, succor, or satisfy their flesh. Jesus encountered such people throughout His ministry (cf. Jn. 6), so it’s likely many continued seeking Him for their own selfish reasons, rather than for His Kingdom and glory.

Such people did not really know the Lord, even though they were members of local churches; rather, they were people just like the false teachers, unstable in their souls, and trying to get something from Jesus for themselves; and these wily and charismatic usurpers knew how to draw such people away from the true worship and service of the Lord, even as they used the language and forms of faith to build their own followings out of those who had little interest in strengthening their souls.

Such people – unstable souls, as Peter called them – do not truly have the mind of Christ (1 Cor. 2.16). They don’t think the way Jesus did – grounded in God’s Word (2 Tim. 3.15-17), set for serving others (Eph. 4.11, 12; 1 Pet. 4.10, 11), eager to make known the greater glory of God (1 Cor. 10.31; Hab. 2.14). They were ignorant of the true nature of the Gospel and the great teachings of the faith (2 Pet. 2.12,) and they made decisions more on the basis of whim and convenience, than on faith and sound reason.

Peter said they were like “natural brute beasts” (v. 12). They did not have a solid foundation of truth by which to direct their lives, so they lurched here and there for whatever appealed to whatever sensual pleasure they

most desired.

Their primary concern was not the glory of God and the progress of His Kingdom, but the advancement of their own fleshly interests.

*Dying to self*

And the false teachers knew how to attract them: “Follow me, and be free of worry, fear, or want!” they cried. “God is here to meet all your needs, and I can show you how to get from Him what you want!” “It’s all about grace, my friends; no need to exert yourself in any so-called disciplines, or to worry about anyone other than yourself.” Those whose souls are not strong can be easily misled by such half-truths.

The people these false teachers sought to win were right in having come to the church. But they had not truly come to the knowledge of Jesus Christ, and so the diversions and distractions of the world were still the primary motivators of their hearts and minds (2 Pet. 2.19, 20). They were unstable souls, and their unstable souls betrayed the unreliable character of their faith, and the unsaved nature of their lives.

Being a Christian is hard work (Phil. 2.12). It offers no guarantee of a trouble-free life; indeed, the Lord and the apostles promised that trials and suffering would be the norm for those who took up Jesus’ cross and followed Him daily (cf. Jn. 16.33). Plus, working out our salvation in fear and trembling means long hours in prayer, reading Scripture, meditation, study, and learning together with other Christians, worked out in a life of good works (Eph. 2.10). Being a Christian is first about *dying* to self, not gratifying its every want.

In short, unless we are willing *daily* to work at the renewing of our minds, to learn Christ in how we think about faith, life, ourselves, and the world, unless we commit to nurturing stable souls by such means, we profess faith in Jesus in vain, and therefore falsely.

They who have the mind of Christ and truly belong to Him do not follow Jesus to get from Him whatever they might want. They follow Him because they *know* Him, and they cannot do otherwise than take up His cross in service to others for God’s glory. If this is not your motive in following Jesus, it may be that you need some strengthening and stabilizing for your soul.

*For reflection*

1. Paul says we have the mind of Christ (1 Cor. 2.16). What does that mean? How does one who has the mind of Christ think about faith, life, himself, and the world?
2. Suggest some practical ways of examining the state of your thinking at any time.
3. Is your time in God’s Word of sufficient length and quality to ensure that you will continue stabilizing your soul by growing into the mind of Christ? Can you see any areas where you might improve in this?

*Next steps – Preparation: Pay attention to your thoughts during the day ahead. Be quick to thank the Lord for the good and wholesome thoughts He gives you, and to confess and repent of any that indicate instability in your thinking.*

## 4 Heedless of Judgment

*...the Lord knows how to deliver the godly out of temptations and to reserve the unjust under punishment for the day of judgment...* 2 Peter 2.9

### *Love of self*

We have seen that the fear of God is the primary affection to nurture within our heart. The fear of God, together with love for Him, engenders every positive affection that conduces to stabilizing and strengthening our soul for a life of fruitful endeavor in the Lord.

But it is very easy to lose sight of the fear of God when love for self takes priority of place in our hearts.

Peter was very concerned about the presence of false teachers within the churches of northern Asia Minor. These were not outsiders who denied Jesus Christ and were seeking to woo others from their faith in Him. They were people in local churches who appealed to members of those churches to follow *them* rather than the orthodox pastors and leaders of their congregations. They preyed on and reaped a harvest of “unstable souls”, as Peter called them, and appealed to these vulnerable believers with the same enticements that appealed to them.

As we saw in our previous installment, that meant turning the faith of Jesus Christ into a self-centered free-for-all, as they encouraged people to seek the desires of the flesh as their reason for following Jesus. These people, and all who went after them, were not true Christians; rather, they were “dogs”, Peter said, unstable in their souls, and not children of God, whose true colors were coming out in their rebellion against the Lord.

We want to make sure this doesn't happen to us.

### *No fear of God*

A second characteristic of these false teachers, which they must have used in appealing to the unstable souls who followed them, was their lack of fear of the Lord. Their view of God was that He existed to allow them to pursue whatever mattered to them. He was not a God of judgment or wrath; therefore, there was no reason to fear Him (2 Pet. 2.9-13). We do not fear the God of grace; all He asks is that we love Him, they insisted.

Love Him, and live as you please.

Nor did they see any reason to take His Word at face value. They were ignorant of large parts of the Word and so fell into blaspheming by teaching things that were not true – such as, that God wants you to be happy and to have all your material desires fulfilled, and that He is not a God to be feared. Or that God accepts you just as you are and doesn't require you to change. A hermeneutic of convenience took hold in these false teachers, which allowed them to make the Word of God say whatever they thought people wanted to hear.

This will always be the case where the fear of God is minimized, ignored, or denied. And those who do so are heedless of the judgment that awaits them in the Presence of the Lord.

### *Called to fear*

Peter used the example of Balaam to refer to the false teachers of his day, and, by implication, all who followed them. Balaam, you will recall, was willing to curse the people of Israel if he could make some money out of the deal (Num. 22-24). Even though God kept telling him to bless Israel, so that he refused to condemn them, Balaam kept holding out the hope that he might yet find some way to satisfy the desires of those who sought to employ him (2 Pet. 2.15, 16).

## *Toward a Strong Soul*

People who do this, Peter suggests, are mad with lust and choose their peculiar view of God to gratify their desires rather than glorify Him. In the same way, these false teachers and their followers were willing to separate from the churches established by the apostles to pursue their own selfish interests. They didn't fear the Lord, they were not sticklers for orthodoxy, and they knew how to appeal to people's self-interest. They split the churches of Christ apart, and saw Him only as a means to their fleshly ends.

### *Fear and love*

We don't hear much about the fear of the Lord these days. But Paul says that believers are called to pursue holiness "in the fear of God" (2 Cor. 7.1). You cannot have a strong and stable soul without the fear of the Lord being the *first* affection nurtured in your heart. It's hard to see how anyone could be a sincere follower of Jesus Christ without being devoted to growing in holiness, motivated by the fear of God.

The fear of God is just that – dread of His might and power, and of what He can do to keep His people on the path of godliness (cf. Heb. 12.1-11). The discipline of the Lord is not pleasant, and we should fear coming under it. We should fear it so much that, rather than yield to the desires of our flesh, we earnestly seek the Lord and His good and perfect will at all times.

Only those unstable in their soul care nothing for the fear of God. The true Christian knows that God loves us so much that He will not sit idly by as we turn aside to indulge our flesh in things contrary to the Word of God. The fear of God, coupled with our love for Him, keeps sincere believers on the path of holiness. We will stabilize and strengthen our souls to the extent that we nurture fear of God to keep in check our natural, self-serving inclinations.

### *For reflection*

1. Why do we say that the fear of God is the primary affection to nurture in our souls?
2. How does the fear of God help to keep in check our natural, self-serving inclinations?
3. Suggest some ways to nurture the fear of God as a daily discipline.

*Next steps – Demonstration: What will you do today to show God that you fear and love Him?*

## 5 Despising Authority

*...the Lord knows how to deliver the godly out of temptations and to reserve the unjust under punishment for the day of judgment, and especially those who walk according to the flesh in the lust of uncleanness and despise authority. 2 Peter 2.9, 10*

### *“Christianity as I see it”*

Throughout this study on the nature and nurture of the soul, we have stressed the importance of submitting to the authority of God’s Word. Both for understanding the soul, and for caring for and improving it as we should, the Word of God is the *last* word on how we must be transformed into the image of Jesus Christ. The Scriptures, and the Spirit of God speaking through them, tell us *what* to believe and *how to practice* our faith in daily words and deeds. We have no hope of nurturing a strong and stable soul apart from faithful, careful, and prayerful reading and study of God’s Word.

In the early Church, there were people who simply didn’t like being told what to believe. They wanted to be free to define the terms of Christian faith according to their own interests and passions. They didn’t want to have to fuss with such tedious things as “doctrine,” to submit to the disciplines of the life of faith, or to follow the leadership of any local church authorities. They resented those who acted like they had some kind of “calling from God” to be the chief teachers and shepherds of the flock. They wanted to live the Christian life the way they chose, and they didn’t want a lot of church leader-types looking askance at their preferred lifestyle.

In short, they despised all manner of authority, anyone in the church who seemed to think that he was in a better position than they were to decide what the proper understanding of Christian faith ought to be.

### *Experience above all*

The apostles were constantly having to deal with such people. False teachers often stressed personal experience over right doctrine and made a great show of their eloquence. They played mind games with words, made a sport of debunking established authorities, such as Paul and John, and taught people to follow their heart’s desires rather than the austere and self-denying lifestyle of the apostles. They reserved the right to pursue what we might call “Christianity as I see it”, and they were very effective at spotting unstable souls who seemed to be of a like spirit, and could be easily enticed to follow them rather than the apostles.

Peter said that God knows how to keep such unrighteous people under punishment until the day of judgment. He knew how to do so then, and He knows how to do this still.

In every age of Church history, there have been people who don’t like to be told what to believe or how to behave. They reject fixed statements of doctrine and standard guidelines for such things as how to worship, or what ethical behavior is befitting a follower of Christ. They chafe at discipline and feel like they should be free to just “follow the Spirit” as He leads them day by day. They insist that they should be allowed to interpret the Bible and the faith of Christ according to their own needs, and they have worn their pretended autonomy as a red badge of courage against recognized leaders of the Church.

The only authority such people recognize is whatever lets them be Christians on their own terms. These are people of unstable souls. As long as they continue in this attitude, they will never realize the strong soul that is necessary for becoming more like Jesus.

### *Fighting the deadly corrosive*

Augustine wrote that this desire for autonomy is a “deadly corrosive” to the human soul, fighting against the kind of stability that leads to maturity in Christ and fruitfulness in ministry. Throughout the ages, the Church has been built on the authority of Christ’s Word, as the apostles understood that Word, and entrusted it to

*Toward a Strong Soul*

the saints in every generation. A grand tradition of authoritative interpretation of Scripture has been built up over 2,000 years to guide us in understanding God's Word and living the Christian life in our day. We neglect, or, worse, reject that tradition to our own peril.

Those church leaders today who make light of doctrine, minimize the achievements of previous generations of the followers of Christ, and insist that the faith needs to be redefined with every new generation are simply carrying on the legacy of the false teachers and unstable souls Peter warned against so long ago. Those who find their teaching appealing, because of the sense of freedom they feel in defining the faith on their own terms, will not realize the strength of soul needed for following Jesus as a disciple.

*Under authority?*

If their message of such false teachers appeals to you, so that you think the authority of Scripture is something you can take or leave as you choose; the teaching of the Church is not something to which you must pay heed; or the great traditions of our faith should be replaced by the fleeting forms and fancies of our pop culture age, then you must face up to the very real possibility that you are allowing instability into your soul, anchored as it is to nothing more than the spirit of the age and your own changeable whims.

Examine yourself! To which authority have you submitted your soul – mind, heart, and conscience? Is it God speaking in His Word, calling you to pursue holiness and be His witness? Or is it you, and your favorite false teacher, guiding you to define the terms of faith for yourself, and to seek Jesus only for what you think you need Him for? And giving you a false sense of security about the eternal disposition of your soul?

Get the answer to this wrong, and you will continue to destabilize your soul, to the detriment of your faith, and perhaps even to your eternal condemnation. Strong and stable souls are built on the foundation of God's Word, and the glory and image of Jesus revealed there.

*For reflection*

1. What does it mean to submit to the authority of the Scripture and the Holy Spirit?
2. Why do we say that we should look to the Church from all ages to help us in understanding the Bible?
3. How can we know, from moment to moment, whether we are living under the authority of God or under the authority of self?

*Next steps – Preparation: How can you use your time of prayer to help make sure you live under the authority of God?*

## 6 Deceived

They are *spots and blemishes, carousing in their own deceptions while they feast with you, having eyes full of adultery and that cannot cease from sin, enticing unstable souls.* 2 Peter 2.13, 14

### *Sincere...but wrong*

Many Christians today want to believe that the key to genuine faith lies in being *sincere*. “I really, really believe this is what God wants me to do.” “I know this isn’t right, but I sincerely believe God will forgive me.”

It never seems to occur to such people that, unless they’re thinking, feeling, valuing, and living under the authority of God, speaking in His Word, they may be ever so sincere, but they may be sincerely *wrong*.

Peter did not question the *sincerity* of the false teachers who were drawing away unstable souls into selfishness, sin, and the judgment of God. Indeed, they were very sincere. They believed that they knew better than the apostles what the Christian faith should be like, and they urged all who shared in their sense of freedom from authority and liberation from constraints to follow where they led.

But though they were sincere, they were also *deceived*. They were ignorant of the truth of God (2 Pet. 2.12), motivated by personal gain (2 Pet. 2.14, 15), and following their own whims rather than the commandment of God (2 Pet. 2.21). The unstable souls who looked to them may have been just as sincere, but they were also just as deceived and wrong.

How does this happen? How do well-meaning people simply go astray from the path of truth and begin holding to false beliefs and taking up corrupt practices? Remember, these people were attending church, hearing the preaching of the Word week after week, hobnobbing with other Christians, and much else that looked like the life of faith. Yet they began to be attracted to false and blasphemous teaching (vv. 12, 13), which encouraged them to think that they could believe in Jesus and yet follow a course of self-serving and sinful ways.

And they perhaps even boasted, right along with their false teachers, that their understanding of the Christian faith allowed them to have the best of both worlds, so to speak (v. 18).

### *No grounding*

It’s easy to see how this happens. People hang around church, make some new friends, but don’t take up the disciplines of the Christian life with any regularity. They were told that all they had to do was believe in Jesus, and that’s all they’ve done, and all they ever plan to do. They don’t make reading and study of Scripture a daily practice, and prayer is not much of a priority in their everyday lives. They like the idea of being Christians, and the promise that they’ll go to heaven when they die; but they don’t listen very carefully to the message of self-denial and sacrificial living for Jesus. That’s fine for some people, they suppose, but for them it’s enough to go to church and wait for the Lord to receive them in heaven. They don’t think they have to work out their salvation since they’ve already received it as a gift. They’re convinced God would only want them to be happy and loving, and they’re sure they know best how to do that. Jesus, they insist, wants us to be sincere in what we believe, even if what we believe doesn’t always match up with what the Scriptures teach.

And, quite possibly, that’s the message they hear every week in their church – that Jesus is just all right with them, and He only wants what’s best for their lives.

So it should not surprise us that they begin to believe, since Jesus has forgiven them and loves them just as they are, they should follow their instincts rather than sound reason (v. 12) and get as much as they can out of

### *Toward a Strong Soul*

their faith in Jesus. When someone comes along and tells them “Jesus wants to you be happy! Jesus wants you to be wealthy! Jesus accepts you just as you are. Jesus will not deny you whatever you desire, as long as you continue to trust in Him!” that sounds like a message they can embrace.

Soon, they’re listening more to *those* voices than that of the Spirit of God, speaking in His Word. They’re hanging around with others who find this message of “Jesus for me” appealing. They’re beginning to enjoy some of their new “freedom” to indulge – or at least allowing others to indulge – the desires of their flesh. And they’re reading every aspect of their faith through the lens of what’s in it for me.

Though sincere in their convictions, they are unstable in their souls, and deceived as to their faith.

#### *In danger?*

But this is not the way to glorify God. This is the way of deception. This is the way of the unstable soul. And if you’re listening to such voices rather than to those teaching the historic faith of Jesus Christ, then you may well be an unstable soul, who is in danger of being one day discovered not to be a servant of Jesus at all, but a servant merely of your own lusts.

Better to devote ourselves each day to renewing the mind, cleansing the heart, and purifying the conscience according to the teaching of Scripture, than lending our ears to those who want only to tickle and please them for whatever lusts of the flesh they are indulging in the Name of the Lord. No amount of sincerity or wishful thinking will substitute for following in the path of obedience to God which Jesus walked before us (1 Jn. 2:1-6).

Strong souls don’t just happen. They must be nurtured, guarded, developed, and submitted to God and His Word. They are deceived and in danger of judgment who counsel otherwise.

#### *For reflection*

1. What might be some indications that you were beginning to follow the way of deception rather than of truth?
2. Why is being sincere simply not enough when it comes to following Jesus?
3. How would you begin to help someone with an unstable soul to begin stabilizing their soul as the Lord intends?

*Next steps – Demonstration: Begin paying more attention to stabilizing your own soul – mind, heart, and conscience. What are some steps you can take both to keep a close watch on your soul and to work for its increasing stabilization?*



## 7 Give All Diligence

*Therefore, brethren, be even more diligent to make your call and election sure, for if you do these things you will never stumble; for so an entrance will be supplied to you abundantly into the everlasting kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.*<sup>2</sup> Peter 1.10, 11

*Working out, not for*

We noted earlier in this conclusion of our study of a strong soul, that being a Christian is hard work. Peter said that, if we didn't want to end up as unstable souls who may not be real believers, we need to "be even more diligent" to shore up our salvation.

This means working hard to understand and nurture our soul – heart, mind, and conscience – according to the patterns and practices God has revealed in His Word. We dare not neglect this daily work or grow weary in it. Too much is at stake for us and others if we fail to work at strengthening and stabilizing our soul for growing into Christ Jesus.

Being assured of salvation is not just a matter of having prayed a sinner's prayer, or even of going to church. We're not truly saved because we sincerely think we are. Peter said there is a way to make sure that "entrance will be supplied to you abundantly into the eternal kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ." But we're going to have to be diligent in nailing this down.

Understand that Peter is not talking about *earning* your salvation; we are saved entirely by grace through faith. Rather, what he wants is for us to *make our salvation sure* – both to us and to any who may observe us. He is saying just what Paul did when he called us to "work out" the salvation we have freely received (Phi. 2.12). The only way to avoid becoming a weak and unstable soul, easily enticed by false teachers, is to work hard daily at strengthening your soul, giving even more diligence to making your calling and election sure.

*A lived reality*

But what does this involve?

Peter tells us in the first chapter of his second epistle. If we have truly entered the promised salvation of God and have removed ourselves from the lusts of the world, then, Peter says, we must give "all diligence" (v. 5) to build on that faith those things which can *assure us and others* that we really belong to the Lord. What are these?

Well, here's how Peter put it in 2 Peter 1.5-7: "But also for this very reason, giving all diligence, add to your faith virtue, to virtue knowledge, to knowledge self-control, to self-control perseverance, to perseverance godliness, to godliness brotherly kindness, and to brotherly kindness love." These are the kinds of *evidence* of faith that a strong and stable soul can bring to light in our lives (Heb. 11.1).

In other words, working with the Holy Spirit of God, according to the teaching of God's Word and the example of Christ and the apostles, we must work out into *lived reality* the gift of salvation we have embraced through faith. The life that is growing in our soul, as we work to strengthen it in the grace and knowledge of the Lord, will come to expression in words and deeds reflecting the reality of Jesus Christ in us.

And Peter adds a promise (v. 8): "For if these things are yours and abound, *you will be* neither barren nor unfruitful in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ."

Now, presumably, if we are ineffective and unfruitful in our daily life with the Lord, we are more like those *unstable* souls who are ripe to be plucked for heresy and false teaching. But if we begin to acquire these

### *Toward a Strong Soul*

qualities – virtue, knowledge, self-control, perseverance, godliness, brotherly kindness, and love – and if we are *increasing* continually in them, then our relationship with Christ will prove to be genuine, our soul will be *strong* and *stable*, and we will be fruitful and effective disciples of the Lord.

Working out our salvation like this is a daily calling and duty that begins with attending to the renewing of the mind, cleansing the heart, and purifying the conscience in Jesus Christ – daily attending to the business of building strength and stability into our soul, following the guidance we have considered throughout the course of this study.

#### *Nearsighted and blind?*

Peter continues (v. 9): “For he who lacks these things is shortsighted, even to blindness, and has forgotten that he was cleansed from his old sins.” Failing to acquire these virtues as the fruit of faith, and to increase in them, does not automatically mean that we have not been cleansed of our sins. It *does* mean, however, that we’re not being good stewards of our calling, and we cannot be *sure* that a place in God’s eternal Kingdom awaits us.

By *insisting* on this – that our faith must be confirmed day by day in transformed lives – Peter is doing nothing more than Paul, James, the writer of Hebrews, and the Lord Jesus Himself taught. *Mere* faith, *merely* believing or claiming to believe in Jesus Christ is no guarantee of salvation, no evidence of a strong and stable soul. Apart from the life of faith leading to virtue and love, we can have *no assurance* that we truly belong to Jesus and are citizens of His eternal Kingdom.

We must give all diligence to work out our salvation in daily reality, nurturing, strengthening, and stabilizing our soul, so that words and deeds of salvation and life issue from us as the manifestation of Jesus Christ. Whoever neglects this important aspect of what it means to follow Jesus is on a path to become an unstable soul, susceptible to false teaching, and, perhaps, destined to prove that he has only ever “tasted” of the Lord and does not belong to Jesus Christ at all.

Don’t let this happen to you. Know the mind of Christ. Grow in the heart of God. Fortify your conscience with the values and priorities of the Lord, so that it reads God’s Word for the strengthening of your soul. Then live for Jesus the life of Jesus, unto the praise and glory of Jesus in everything you say and do.

A strong soul will make you a strong follower and a strong witness for our Lord. Give all diligence to make your soul strong in the Lord.

#### *For reflection*

1. What does it mean for you to “be even more diligent” to nurture your soul in the image of Jesus Christ?
2. What obstacles or impediments stand in the way or stabilizing your soul? How can you overcome these?
3. How can you plan your daily activities so that you add to your outward life the things Peter commends?

*Next steps – Demonstration: How will it be evident to you and others today that you are being supplied an abundant entrance to the Kingdom of God?*

*Toward a Strong Soul*

*For reflection or discussion*

1. What does it mean to become unstable in one's soul? How does that happen?
2. What disciplines are available to us throughout the day to help in stabilizing our soul for growth into the image of Jesus Christ?
3. What temptations, dangers, or threats can lure us off the path of fearing and loving God, and increasing in holiness? How can we resist these?
4. How can Christians help one another to work out their salvation in fear and trembling, and to avoid becoming unstable souls?
5. What's the most important lesson you've learned about stabilizing your soul from these studies? How are you implementing that lesson in your life?

*For prayer:*

## The Fellowship of Ailbe

The Fellowship of Ailbe is a spiritual fellowship in the Celtic Christian tradition. Our goal is to promote revival, renewal, and awakening, following the teaching of Scripture and the example and heritage of our forebears in the faith.

The Fellowship of Ailbe offers many opportunities for training, prayer, personal growth, and ministry. Visit our website at [www.ailbe.org](http://www.ailbe.org) to learn more.

We hope you found this study helpful. If so, please consider making a gift to The Fellowship. You can contribute to our ministry by using the contribute button at the website, or by sending your gift to The Fellowship of Ailbe, 360 Zephyr Road, Williston, VT 05495.

Thank you.