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Acts 11:22, 23

“Continue with the Lord”

Jerry Arnold

Let's pray. "Father in Heaven, we are now about to open Your word. We are asking Heavenly Father that You would draw especially close to us. Please pour out Your Holy Spirit upon us. We pray that You will send angels to fill this auditorium with a sense and presence and a feeling of Heaven. We pray Heavenly Father that You would speak to the very needs that we have. That each one of us will hear the very, very words You want us to hear. We'll experience the very emotions You want us to experience. We are asking Heavenly Father that supernaturally, powerfully, miraculously You will inform, inspire and change our hearts for eternity. We pray Heavenly Father that what happens here will change our lives. We ask this in Jesus' name, Amen."

Tracy Miller woke up early in the morning in April 2006. She could hear the shuffling of little feet and she recognized that it was her three year old daughter Alexis. Alexis was up early, earlier than usual. And so she got out of bed, picked Alexis up, took her back to her bed and tucked her in, and Alexis stayed there. Tracy was facing a busy day that day. Her parents were coming in. They would be having them for several days. There were groceries to get, some cleaning still to do. And so she decided well though it's early in the morning, earlier than she would normally get up, she would just stay up. She would take a shower. So as she walked pass the bed where her husband Michael was sleeping, she said I'm going to go on and take a shower. He didn't hear that, he was sleeping. But he did hear what took place next.

He heard a large thud. He called out, "Tracy!" no response, "Tracy!" no response. He jumped out of bed and he ran to the bathroom, and there he saw his wife collapsed on the floor. He said, "Tracy, Tracy what's wrong? What's wrong?" Her eyes were open and she was breathing, but she was, it was as if she had no cognizance of his presence. He picked her up, put her on their bed, dialed 911. The police arrived, the ambulance arrived, they whisked her off to the hospital. He had called neighbors and they came over to watch their two children, Alexis and one year old Riley. And then he called family to see if they could get there sooner. And he jumped in his car and raced after the ambulance. As he was headed to the hospital with her, he was wondering, "What in the world could have happened to her? Is she suffering concussion from the fall? Is this some type of damage that has happened as a result of falling? Why did she fall?" And all of these questions are going through his mind, and then of course he, he runs the gamut of emotions to total fear, that "What if this is really, really serious? What am I going to do with two daughters? How can I handle this?"

They got to the emergency room. She wasn't there very long and the doctors came out and said this situation is too serious for us. We need to send her to a larger hospital that has more equipment, and are better suited for this. So he jumped in the car and followed the ambulance again. When they got to the second hospital, they took her immediately into the emergency area. And when the doctors came out he said, "Your wife has suffered a severe stroke." Well this shocked him. She is thirty five years old, very slim in great physical condition, doesn't smoke... How could this happen? And then what really threw him into a tizzy is that doctor said that there is a fifty-fifty chance that she won't make it. Fifty-fifty chance that she'll live.

How many of you are baptized members of the church? May I see your hands please? Most of you. Do you know that between this day and ten years from now there is a fifty-fifty chance that you will no longer be serving God. Fifty-fifty chance, you will no longer be serving God. I would like to study that with you today.

Please turn in your Bibles to Acts chapter 11. We are continuing our series in the book of Acts. Last week we followed the Gospel to Antioch where God was pouring Himself out upon that city, and hundreds of Gentiles were being converted. We'll read just a little bit about that in verse 21, and the passages we'll be studying are 22 and 23. Acts 11 verse 21 it says: "And the hand of the Lord was with them, and a great number believed and turned to the Lord. The news of these things came to the ears of the church in Jerusalem, and they sent out Barnabas to go as far as Antioch. When he came and had seen the grace of God, he was glad, and encouraged them all that with purpose of heart they should continue with the Lord."

A great number of people were believing, and a great number were determining to turn to the Lord. When this information got to the church headquarters back in Jerusalem, they sent Barnabas up there to investigate and to see what was going on. It simply says this, "When Barnabas saw the grace of God, he was glad." You know that would be a powerful sermon right there because whenever you see the grace of God it makes you glad. Well Barnabas was glad. And it says: "...he encouraged them that with purpose of heart they should continue with the Lord," with purpose of heart to continue with the Lord.

The New International version says: "...encourage them to remain true to the Lord, with all their heart." The New American Standard Bible says: "...encourage them all with a resolute heart to remain true to the Lord." The Amplified version says: "...urge and encourage them all to cleave unto and remain faithful and devoted to the Lord with resolute and steady purpose of heart." Apparently continuing with the Lord requires determination. It requires decisions. It requires some discipline.

I know that many of our brothers and sisters in other faiths believe that once you have accepted Christ as your Savior, once you have accepted Him in your heart, you have Him as your Savior, you are saved. And it is once saved, always saved. Many sincere people believe that. I'm not going to give you a Bible study on that today, but I'm going to tell you that the Bible is pretty clear that you can choose to turn away from God. You can turn away.

There are choices along the road. And apparently fifty percent of people who are baptized choose not to serve God anymore. Why do they do that? Is there anyway to prevent that? You see, in walking with God it's kind of like exercising. I found out on Monday, that I qualify to be in the senior Olympics. I don't understand why that's funny? But I qualify, and I'm going to be. I have an application. And there is a number of activities I wanted to be involved in. I wanted to be on three basketball team. But you know how hard it is to find fifty year old guys that still play basketball? Where they can bend over to catch a low pass. It's pretty hard. But I decided I'm going to be in a senior Olympics. And so I looked at all of it and they have hundred meter, two hundred meter, four hundred meter, fifteen hundred meter. They have the long jump, balling and a few other things, stuff that I don't do. And I thought well hundred meter there are probably still some guys that can really burn and that would be embarrassing. Two hundred meter, aaa may not

be too bad. So I'm going to enter into two hundred meter and the fifteen hundred meter race. So Tuesday I started training. I don't like to train. I don't like to exercise a whole lot. But I had a motivation.

I don't know if any of you have run track before. I did, when I was in high school. Oh I was flied the foot. Set the school record, low hurtles. And there are not too many things on earth more exciting than coming around that turn, just burning it as fast as you can. And the crowd roaring, and when you break that type, they'll go yeeeahh aren't you cool. Nowadays if you saw the video, you would say, "Get some decent shorts on." But anyways, I've got a motive and I want to in my older years stay in good enough shape that maybe I could win an event in the senior Olympics. I have a secret plan, a hope that nobody in my age category will show up. And they say right on the application you still have to do the event. I hope there is no fifty to fifty four year olds out there who want to run two hundred meters or fifteen hundred meters. And I'll come in first and I guarantee you that will be on the wall in my office at the new church. Senior Olympics champion, local champion. It will be there.

I have that goal. I am looking forward to the reward of the effort now. I started running on Tuesday. It's downhill on our street when you start out. And I measured it with the odometer yesterday. It doesn't register from my house to the corner. So it's not very far. And I took off and I ran down to the corner, downhill. I'm thinking, "You know I still have some spark." Then it leveled out, and then there's another hill as I was going up in through Misty Valley. I began to think, "You know, my knees hurt, my back hurts, my elbows don't hurt, but they could anytime. I mean what am I doing this for? Who am I trying to impress?" But you keep going. Why? Because down the road is a reward. So I ran again on Wednesday. Thursday Kevin got me out walking. We walked six miles around the track and then another mile or so chasing golf balls. Friday, busy day, hard to get it in, but my wife and I with our pregnant daughter and her two Chihuahuas, we got about three miles in. And some of those hills were steep, so it counted for something.

Do you like to exercise? If you do, you are younger than me. I used to like to exercise. I used to run four miles just for kicks. If I had to run four miles now, I don't know. I might be able to. Depending on how high the hill was I started. But what keeps me wanting to do this is down at the other end. Let me tell you brothers and sisters that is a principle spiritually. In our walk with God every experience and every day is not great, it is not grand. But we proceed because down the road there is a payoff, a tremendous payoff. It happens here in this life, but it will especially happen in another life when we are raised to eternity.

Continuing with the Lord requires determination, desire. I contemplated why is it that people turn away from serving God? As I meditated on that I realized "Aha, Jesus talks about that in Luke chapter 8." And so let's go to the same author, different book. Luke chapter 8 and we'll see a story that Jesus tells. It is a story that is very familiar to you. But my prayer is that by the grace of God you may see this in a new light. You may experience the story in a way that is more meaningful to you than it has been in the past.

Chapter 8 verse 4. "And when a great multitude had gathered, and others had come to Him from every city. He spoke a parable. So there is a large crowd that listens to this. "A sower went out to

sow his seed. And as he sowed, some fell by the wayside; and it was trampled down, and the birds of the air devoured it. Some fell on the rock; and as soon as it sprang up, it withered away because it lacked moisture. And some fell among thorns and the thorns sprang up with it and choked it. But others fell on the good ground, sprang up, and yielded a crop a hundredfold.”
 “When He had said these things He cried”, “He who has ears to hear, let him hear!”

It’s a familiar story to us. To the people in Jesus’ day it was a familiar scene. A man would have a container, a bag of some kind filled with seeds. Strapped over his shoulder, kind of hanging around in the front, grab a handful and broadcast the seed, grab a handful and broadcast the seed. This was done usually between October and December because the wet months are in the winter, over there in that part of the world. And the harvest would take place in June.

It’s likely that somebody is doing this while Jesus is telling the story and He can see over the crowd and see somebody doing it, and He just thought of it. A sower, a Kingdom of Heaven is like this, a sower who goes out. And as you know there is nothing wrong with the seed. But it falls in four different areas. There is the wayside, the rocks, the thorns and it falls on the good ground.

Jesus explains what it means in the 11th verse. Let’s look at that. “Now the parable is this: The seed...” is what? “... the word of God.” This experience is all about the word of God. The seed is the word of God. Many of you have heard how Christ came into my heart back in January 1975. But it was because of the word of God. In the summer of ’74 I was given a Bible while hitchhiking; put it in my locker on the ship. January came along, I got in trouble, I was restricted to the ship and so I turned to my locker to the Bible that was there and I started to read the Bible. At that time I was a practicing atheist, and I say that the way I did on purpose. I was a practicing atheist. You have to practice to be an atheist when you know there is a God. And I knew there was a God, but I didn’t want to have a God that I had to answer to, and so I had to practice not believing in Him. It’s hard to do and it’s pretty hard to be an atheist. There are too many evidences for the presence of God.

But I started reading the Bible and everything, everything in my life changed from that point forward. There is power in the word of God. Jesus says this parable is about the word of God. “The seed that is sown is the word of God.” Look at Luke chapter 11 verses 27 and 28. Jesus is speaking again and something happens. It says in verse 27: “And it happened, as He spoke these things, that a certain woman from the crowd raised her voice and said to Him, “Blessed is the womb that bore You, and the breasts which nursed You!”” In modern language she is saying boy your mother has really got it. Blessed is your mother. How neat that she could be your mother. Jesus kind of waves it off.

In verse 28 He said: “More than that, blessed are those who hear the word of God and keep it!” Here’s what He is saying to us today. Have you ever imagined what it would have been like walking with Jesus? Have you ever imagined what it would have been like being one of the twelve or the disciples you know as the circle got larger? Maybe to have been in the crowd where Jesus was teaching and healing and working His ministries? Maybe have you ever pictured where He comes and He speaks to you directly and you see in His face such love? All those are fantastic imaginations and can be very helpful. But Jesus says “Look, My mother who

gave birth to me...” You can’t get any closer than that. Are you with me? You can’t get any closer than that. Jesus says, “Better to hear the word of God and keep it.” We will not, in this life, walk with Jesus as twelve or as the disciples did back when He walked on the earth. We won’t have that privilege, but we have more. Jesus says: “Better to have the word of God and to keep it.” That’s the privilege that we have.

The word of God does something for us. It changes us. In Romans chapter 10, it tells us an amazing thing. Please turn there. Romans chapter 10 verse 17 is talking about faith. And Paul says this: “So then faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of God.” This supernatural Book if read, if heard, if followed produces in the “hear” supernatural faith. You see the faith that we need is not just this faith where “Oh I believe, I believe, I believe” and we work ourselves up emotionally to a point where we believe, despite all that evidences to the contrary we are still going to believe. That is not the faith of the word of God. The faith of the word of God is supernatural, given to us by God, through His word. No other way to get it. And as we read His word, He informs our heart. He inspires our heart. He instructs our heart. He changes our heart. It’s His work, but it’s our choice. And it’s all centered in the word of God.

Well, let’s go back to Luke chapter 8. What happens in this parable? Jesus will continue explaining it for us. In Luke chapter 8 He talks about the word of God. The seed is the word of God. He says in verse 12: “Those by the wayside are the ones who hear; then the devil comes and takes away the word out of their hearts, lest they should believe and be saved.” They never did accept Him. And I’m not talking to that group today, so we’re not even going to worry about that.

Verse 13, “But the ones on the rock are those who, when they hear, receive the word with joy; but these have no root, who believe for a while and in time of temptation fall away.” Here you have the picture of a person whose heart is like a rock. Now it doesn’t mean they are stonehearted. It means that there is a probably like a limestone layer of rock with a small layer of earth on it and the seed has enough to start to sprout, but it has no ability for depth. These people heard the word with joy, but when temptation came they fell away. What kind of temptation causes us to fall away? I got thinking about that, and I realized there is one temptation that will come upon every one of us, every one of us; whether it’s being baptized, or whether it’s being reconverted, or converted, or experiencing a revival in our lives. In the wake of those experiences, guaranteed this is going to happen to you. You can read about it in Mathew chapter 4. Jesus was baptized, “Then being led by the Spirit into the wilderness Jesus went there to be tempted of the devil.” First temptation, devil comes along and he says: “Oh, so you are the Son of God? If you are the Son of God prove it, turn these stones to bread.”

Like you I’ve heard many sermons about appetite, regarding that passage. I’ve heard many sermons about that. That’s really not what it’s about. It is simply and completely and totally about trying to prove something. So here is a person. Here is how it applies to us. We accept Christ as our Savior, or for the first time, or we renew that experience. We go through revival. We are riding a high spiritually. We are really committed now. With joy we have received the word of God and it is moving in our lives. It is changing us. And it is just a short period of time. It won’t take long and you’re going to sin. You’re going to offend God someway. You are going to hurt somebody. You’re going to hurt yourself. You’re going to sin. And the devil will be right

there behind it and he's going to say: "Oh, wait. Hold it, hold it! I thought you had changed? I thought you had become a child of God? I thought you were walking this narrow path? What's this all about?" And in a clop of doubt, he will say something to this effect: "You know what? You need to prove that you are a child of God. You really do."

And in our context, we have things that teach us from how to dress, to how to eat, to how to keep the Sabbath, to who..., we got them. We have all kinds of information to help us how to live our lives, to prove we're a child of God. And over time discouragement sets in because we can't prove we are a child of God. You can't ever prove that. The only thing you can do is go to the word of God, where the word of God says: "You are a child of God. Anyone who is in Christ is a child of God. Anyone who by faith accepts Christ into their heart has eternal life." That's what this Book says. But that's not what the devil is going to tell you. And how many of you have heard people come to an experience religiously and they say: "Why bother? Why bother?" and they turn away. And the path that leads to eternal life, the ditches on either side of that path are filled with people who were trying to prove they're a Christian.

Well the good news for you, and the good news for me, is brothers and sisters; the Bible is pretty clear, God knows you are going to fail. God knows you are going to sin. And He's made provision for it. It's called forgiveness. You confess that sin, He'll forgive that sin and He'll cleanse you and put you back on your feet again. You know the Bible even says in Proverbs and I mentioned this text from time to time. A righteous man may fall seven times, but what will happen? He'll get up. But a foolish man, that's the man that does not serve God. When he falls what happens to him? He stays down. So there is a temptation that comes to everybody and that is to try to prove that we are actually serving God. And the ultimate result of that will be failure. "Why bother?" And many people turn away.

Let's go back to Luke Chapter 8, verse 14. It says: "And the ones that fell among thorns are those who, when they have heard, go out and are choked with cares, riches, and pleasures of life, and bring no fruit to maturity." They go out? Go out from where? I don't know, maybe from a gathering like this. They come in with a burden, and for short period of time the burden is lifted. And the songs, and the prayers and the children's story and the preaching of the word of God, it kind of lifts the heart, you forget for a few minutes. But if you came in here with a problem, when you leave, you're going to face that problem again. It doesn't change.

And here Jesus says is a group of people. They also hear the word of God gladly, it moves upon their hearts, but life overtakes them. The cares of life, the worries of life, the concerns of life, could be relationships, could be health, could be finances, you name it, we have those problems. And Jesus told us that "Look in this world you are going to have problems. It's going to be there." But He said, "Look, why are you worried about tomorrow? Why are you worried about what you are going to eat or what you are going to wear? Why are you worried about those things? The birds of the air," He says, "My Father feeds them all, and He clothes the earth with grass and then puts beautiful flowers in there. So the fields are arrayed more beautifully than Solomon was in all his glory. Why are you worried, you are more important than that? Why are you worried?"

I am convinced if I lived to be an old man, and I am laying on my death bed, and my family is gathered around me, and the ones I can remember their names are there. I am convinced, probably two thoughts. Number one, I should have loved more. Number two, I should have worried less.

Jesus says the cares of life choked these people out. You know how it happens. I know how it happens. The miracle of faith that we need in our heart comes from exposing our self to the word of God. And some of you are maybe thinking “Oh Pastor, I’ve done that before and I read the Bible and I don’t get anything out of it.” Well then change Bibles. I am serious. It doesn’t have to say, “Thee, Thou, therefore” in order to be holy. Find the Bible you can understand and read it. I preached to you from the New King James version of the Bible. I don’t study it devotionally. I go to those easy to understand paraphrase Bibles for my devotions. And then I feel like I can relax a little bit in the presence of God because the burden is to know God. Because Jesus says, “Knowing God is eternal life”.

Now I wouldn’t use a simple paraphrase, easy English Bible to prove Biblical doctrine. But Biblical doctrine never saved anybody, but a relationship with God will. And so if the Bible -- if you are not connecting with God, get an easy to read Bible. By one for a couple of bucks, a paperback and do what I do. I fill the tub full of suds and I just read. That’s right! Now you know my secrets. I call it naked before the Lord. I do most of my studying in the tub. But Winston Churchill did to so, thought he didn’t read the Bible, much. Read a Bible. Read a Bible that you can relate to, that you can understand, that speaks to you. And then, let me give you permission. Many people start in Genesis and they say “Wow, this year I’m going to read through that Bible” and some of you have. And you get about half way through Exodus and you got all the descriptions of how the sanctuary is supposed to be made, and you go “Bro-ther!”

And you get into Leviticus, and you got to kill this animal and that animal and ring this neck and pour the blood here and there and you go “What in the world is going on bro-ther?” And you think “Well this is discipline, got to do it, got to do it!” May I give you permission? In fact, I’m not going to ask for your permission to give you permission. I’m going to give you permission. Skip the boring part! Just skip them. Who cares who begot who, if I don’t know who is that person anyways? Just skip it. I recommend you began reading in the book of Mathew. And when you are done with that read Mark, then read Luke. And you’ll say “You know those are all kind of similar” and, hello, they are the synoptic gospels. They do follow the same stories. But you’ll get just a little different perspective. Then you come to John, and “WOW! This is new, this is refreshing. This is a different perspective.”

John has a different slam on things. But by then you should become acquainted with Christ, who is our Savior. Just read. Enjoy the process. If you come to something you don’t understand, just praise God and go on. Those hard parts of the Bible, maybe I’ll preach about them someday. I doubt it! But I might. ‘Cause I like... I like to read where I am been spoken to. Because I’ve come to realize, I would rather know God than a lot of facts about Scripture.

Choking, the cares of the world, pleasures of life, I don’t think it’s just hedonism that is being spoken of there. It’s just life, life taking us away, taking the God out of our focus and consequently breaking that beautiful bond that can only be developed and nurtured through the

reading of His word. It says that those people who, where life just chokes out the relationship, they bare no fruit to maturity. There is no growth spiritually. Now listen to this. This is an amazing statistic. But they've done studies and they've discovered across denominational lines. If a person when they are baptized, if they are not disciplined, in other words, if they are not taught how to read the Bible, how to pray and how to walk with God, eighty percent of them, ten years later will be at the same level spiritually they were when they were baptized. It was that statistics that gave Karen and me one of the visions for this church, that we would be making disciples, teaching people how to read the Bible, how to pray, and how to walk with God. If we can do that for you, you are on your way. Amen? You are on your way.

Eighty percent! In essence what Jesus is saying, what is cute for a three year old to do is obnoxious for a teen to do, and it is really stupid for a thirty year old to do. We need to be growing spiritually, and it only comes from reading the word of God. Jesus says, verse 15: "...but the ones that fell on the good ground are those who having heard the word with a noble and good heart, keep it and bare fruit with patience." It's our choice, always our choice. You and I determine how we will receive the word of God. It's always our choice.

For Michael Miller, as he was thinking of his wife, Tracy, he was overwhelmed. He was told there was a fifty-fifty chance that she would live. As they were wheeling her into the room where they were going to operate on her, he was following her, holding her hand the whole length of the hallway saying, "I love you Tracy, I love you! It will be okay, I love you." Then he went into the waiting room and collapsed in the chair thinking, "What am I going to do with two little girls, a three year old and one year old if their mama dies? How am I going to teach them to brush their hair or to put on their dress, or to do the things girls do?" He was overwhelmed with sadness.

They had just invented a new procedure to work with stroke victims. And I can't tell you the technical names although I have written them down. I decided that I am not going to read them because it will botch that and it will ruin the illustration for people that are medical. So I am going to do it in complete layman terms. They took a little tube, tiny tube. They entered in one of her legs. They followed the arteries all the way up to her brain. They had some type of x-ray machine where they could see how it was going, and where it was going. And they went to the very spot where the blood cloth was in her brain. The blood cloth was blocking the flow of blood and consequently no oxygen was getting to that portion of her brain. When they got to the cloth they squirted a little bit of medicine on it to loosen it up. Then, inside of that tube they inserted another tube. And that tube went all the way to the cloth, and when it got to the cloth, there was a little piece of metal that went through the cloth.

I don't know how they do this, but the metal; it says in the article, had memory. And at the certain point it coiled. And then they pulled it backwards and it coiled around, I should do it this way, it coiled around the cloth. And they were able to pull that cloth all the way out through that tube, remove the other tube, and immediately she had blood flow to that portion of her brain. That was in April of 2006. Twenty four hours later she was able to complete sentences in her speech. And by June she went back to work. But, she cut way back on work because she realized the priorities where at home, those two little girls and a husband. Everything changed in her life.

She is quoted as saying, she said it's so hard to believe she had fifty-fifty chance, and she is alive.

Brothers and sisters, I hope your priority is home; a home that Christ is creating for you. And we, if we choose can be there with Him throughout eternity. It's our choice. He's made every provision. It's our choice. And can you imagine what it would be like, instead of you know, Senior Olympics and few people clapping, and the rest of them wondering "What happened?" And me arriving there and there are five runners. I'll probably come in sixth you know. There will be some cheering, "Yeah!" Now compare that with entering Heaven's gates. Our Savior standing there, places a crown on your head gives us a harp, and He says, "Now Jerry, you can do music, but go home and practice." And He takes me to the house that He's built for me. He takes you to the house He's built for you. Now you are home. Can you imagine some million years down the road, and we run into each other. I run into Steve and Darlene, we shake hands and say, "Do you realize there was a fifty-fifty chance we wouldn't be here, fifty-fifty chance!" Steve, I want to be there, do you? I do too. Fifty-fifty chance!

What is your choice? Are you willing to endure some exercise if you will for that final goal? If you are, if you are willing to say to the Lord, "Lord, I want a heart that receives Your word, and I want to spend time in Your word, and I want you to work a miracle in my life." If you want to say that to God, please stand. "Father in Heaven we are standing before You making a decision. Now we pray by Your grace, please Lord, work a miracle in our lives through Your word. We pray in Jesus' name, Amen."