



Pointers
along the
way

Devotionals that
make you think

Vol. 1

Jacob Ninan

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Title: Pointers along the way Vol. 1

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Published by: Comfort & Counsel

69, Hutchins Main Road,

Bangalore 560084,

India

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Pointers along the way #1

Our individual responsibility

Each of us is an individual creation of God. He loves us and deals with us directly and personally just as if we were His only child. He plans for us, teaches us, trains us, leads us, disciplines us, and moulds us into His nature as if the whole world was created just for us. He causes everything else - people and circumstances - to work together for our good (Ro.8:28). But in the end, He requires each of us to give an account of ourselves individually to Him (Ro.14:12).

Even though we are a part of a family, church, society, etc., we are responsible to God for our own lives. We make the choices, and we reap the fruit (Ga.6:7). We receive much from others, but then we have to make our own decisions according to the will of

God. In the end we cannot blame others, but bear our own responsibility.

Does this mean that we should become independent of others? No. There is a place for listening to counsel and submitting to those who have authority over us. But we must remember that if we are men-pleasers, we cannot serve God (Ga.1:10). Let us not just drift along with the crowd, but think for ourselves what God would have us to do. Let us be those who will have our own convictions. Let it be very clear in our mind that our ultimate aim is to do God's will and to glorify Him, and not to have our own way.

Pointers along the way #2

What is it to humble ourselves?

The Bible tells us that God gives grace to the humble (Jas.4:6;1Pe.5:5). We are to humble ourselves in the presence of the Lord and under His mighty hand (Jas.4:10;1Pe.5:6). What does it mean to humble ourselves?

We see from the above verses that humbling of ourselves is basically in relation to God. It is not putting up a humble front in front of people. We can say that humility involves a sober estimate of ourselves before God. We must know who we are in relation to a perfect, loving, kind, merciful, compassionate, holy, almighty, all-knowing, all-wise God who has created us. We also must know how dependent we are on Him and on other people.

Humbling of ourselves involves, therefore, taking our small place before God. Pride, which is the opposite of humility, is to think of ourselves as being more or greater than what we really are. When we are humble, even when we see that we are better than some others in some things, we know that it is God who made us that way (1Co.4:7), and also that there are other things where others are better than us.

Humility makes us recognise our sins, sinfulness, human limitations, ignorance, weakness and helplessness without God. It means acknowledging when we have done wrong, both to God and to our fellow human beings. It means being careful not to go beyond what God has assigned to us or to intrude into other people's lives (2Co.10:13). It means obeying God in everything He tells us (Php.2:8). It

means being thankful for all that God has given to us, compared to what we really deserve for our sins (He.12:28). It means giving ourselves to God to serve Him and to glorify Him (Ro.12:1).

Pointers along the way #3

The perils of "positive thinking"

There are positive aspects about positive thinking. But if we don't understand them rightly, we may get caught in some wrong ways of thinking positively. The right way is to believe in God and His promises, and to hold on to the conviction that He loves us supremely, He is fully in control of everything that happens to us and He will work out all things for our good (Ro.8:28). This gives us a positive outlook on life, even in the midst of difficulties.

On the other hand, there are wrong ways of "positive thinking."

1. "If only we keep on thinking that what we want is going to happen, it will happen." This is just mental exercise, and it has no power to change

situations.

2. "If we ask God for something, and we tell ourselves constantly that God is going to answer that prayer, He will." Actually God's promise for an answer is only if we ask according to His will (1Jn.5:14).

3. "We must not allow negative thoughts to be in our mind. They are contrary to faith." If we are thinking of doubts about God or His promises, this is right. But if we are referring to commonsense that questions our assumptions, we need to listen to it if we don't want to do things foolishly.

4. "We must not allow negative thoughts about ourselves." Recognising our sins and repenting from them are absolutely necessary for our salvation. The shame and sorrow that these actions give us will do us good (2Co.7:10,11). On the other hand,

thinking that we are useless, hopeless, etc., is wrong.

Pointers along the way #4

Whose honour do you want?

Jesus once pointed out a poor widow who had given two copper coins as an offering to God. In His view, this was more than what everyone else there had given because this was all the money she had (Mk.12:42,43). No one there would have recognised the worth of what she had done, nor given her this honour that she deserved. On the other hand, some rich man who made a great show of his wealth would have been admired by the crowd.

Are we content to be faithful before God's eyes in secret, knowing that we have done it for Him? This is what Jesus said we should seek to do, giving us examples of giving for charity, praying and fasting in secret (Mt.6). He said that the Father would be observing all such secret offerings to God and rewarding such people

openly. He rewards them by giving them spiritual wealth, and not so much by giving them honour before people. Will we be content to do things for the Lord without caring for honour from people?

Ps.115:1 expresses the conviction of the writer that glory should go to God and not to us. When a painter brings out a masterpiece, the glory does not go to his paintbrush, canvas, easel or paint. We are only created beings given the privilege of being used by the Creator. What we deserve is shame and misery and finally hell for the all the sins we have done.

But we all have this craving for glory before people. We would like to have the centre stage at all times and we would like people to admire us, appreciate what we have done, talk highly about us, etc. We feel hurt when we are neglected, side-lined, ignored

or insulted. We have to 'die' to these cravings if we are to seek the honour that comes from God (Jn.5:44).

Pointers along the way #5

Always learning

The only one who can stop learning is the one who knows it all. We may never say we know it all, but we may behave as if we do! One of the marks is that we have no interest in learning, but perhaps, only in teaching others.

Sixteen times in the psalms we find this prayer to God, "Teach me." Is this your cry? This is a cry of need from one who knows that he does not know so many things, and that he is doing so many things wrong. It is not a matter of saying these words, but having this recognition about ourselves.

Jesus came to make us His disciples (Mt.28:19,20). 'Disciples' are 'learners.' Their aim is to become like the Teacher (Mt.10:25). We need to keep learning from Jesus, not to become better scholars of theology, but

to become like Him in character and behaviour. For example, Jesus said that if we went to Him and learned from Him, He would make us gentle and humble in heart (Mt.11:28,29). Our need is to become like Jesus - kind, loving, merciful, gracious, compassionate, faithful, obedient, truthful, upright, sincere, etc.

The more we want to become like Jesus, we discover that we are farther from being like Jesus than we thought. This drives us to seek Him more.

If we take our eyes off from Jesus and start comparing ourselves with others, especially concerning things where we are comparatively strong, we will become complacent and self-righteous, and stop learning. Finally we will even become unteachable (Ec.4:13).

The Apostle Paul was so aware of his need, that even when his conscience

was clear and it did not accuse him of any wrong that he had done, he knew that he was not perfect in God's eyes (1Co.4:4). Therefore he kept on learning.

Pointers along the way #6

Is God a spoil-sport?

This is a lie the devil tells many people, especially young people, to turn them away from going to God. "If you go to God, you won't be able to have any fun in life. He will ask you not to do many things you like to do. See how much fun your friends are having without God. God will only want you to spend all your time praying and reading the Bible!" That is how the devil whispers in your heart. When you think about it, it may be how things appear to you. But the devil is a liar, and he is only trying to deceive you. He hates God, and does all he can to malign Him.

But think some more about God. Do you think He is one of those who get a thrill in making others suffer? No, He is One who has given us all things to enjoy! (1Ti.6:17). Just think that He is

the One who created all the colourful flowers, lofty mountains, sparkling brooks, the roaring seas, and all the other beautiful things in nature for us to see and enjoy. He has created so many different things for us to eat and enjoy. Think of the pleasures of humour, music, books, movies, games, sports, adventures, etc. What about the joys of family life, friendships, doing an honest and challenging job, etc.? Think of the different abilities God has given us to enjoy the pleasures of life and to do things that can help others to enjoy too.

When God created Adam and Eve, He offered them the choice of hundreds of different fruits to eat. He forbade them from eating only *one* particular fruit. This is a picture of how much He has given us to enjoy, and how little He has really forbidden, in comparison. This is true, even if it appears to be quite

the other way to us when we are tempted. We imagine, like children tell their parents, that we are not allowed to do *anything*!

What are the things God does not want us to do? *Only* those things that will harm us and are not good for us. Such things may not immediately appear to us like that. The devil tells us that even if we disobey God and do wrong, nothing will happen to us (Ge.3:1-4). But all that the devil offers us is like sugar-coated poison. Such things may give us momentary pleasure, but they will surely hurt us in the long run. Remember this the next time you are tempted to do wrong.

Pointers along the way #7

Not my fault!

If someone were to ask you what your greatest problem is, you may say it has to do with money, job, sex, relationships, etc. Someone may even say that his biggest problem is Mr. or Mrs. So-and-so! But do you know something that can be a bigger problem than all of these, something that may even be behind all these other problems?

It is that it is extremely difficult to see our own faults. The Bible says that every man's ways are right in his own eyes (Pr.21:2). Even a murderer thinks that he was quite justified in killing his victim. Sometimes we can be so stubborn about it that even when someone tells us about some wrong we have done, we get angry with him rather than admit our fault. Our heart is really very deceptive (Jer.17:9).

Even after we become Christians, this blindness does not leave us immediately. Church history illustrates how Christians have persecuted one another for various reasons. When we think that we are standing up for Christ in some way, we may not realise how we ourselves are distorting the picture of Christ in some other way.

It is only in God's light that we can see things clearly (Ps.36:9). When the Holy Spirit opens our eyes we can see things we had no idea about before. Then we can see how wrong we were even where we were sure we were right. The Spirit can then start changing our lives according to His pattern.

Recognising that we *could* be mistaken about ourselves is a big step towards deliverance. Then we will ask God to open our eyes. We will begin to search God's word to learn more about God and how He looks at us. We will not be

quick any more to reject what others tell about us.

Searching our own hearts is not what we need to do, because we can deceive ourselves. But we must let God search us and tell us what He sees in us (Ps.139:23). He will also encourage us and lift us up because He loves us and wants to give us His salvation.

Pointers along the way #8

What about good luck charms?

Do you think that by placing a cross in your room you can keep away evil spirits? Can you get rid of bad dreams by keeping a Bible under your pillow? Is God going to bless you if you keep a palm leaf cross from Palm Sunday in your house? Will a "Jesus saves" sticker on your car keep you from accidents? If you claim something in the name of Jesus are you sure to get it? We can go on...

No. These are foolish beliefs that many people have, just like the superstitions in many other religions. There are no good luck charms or magic formulae that work with the God of Christians. He operates in an entirely different way. He is a Person, and He deals with us on a personal level. He is a Spirit, and He deals with our spirit. He

communicates with us in our spirit. The more we get to know Him personally, the more we will get to know His ways.

The only way to get to know Him is through Jesus, God's Son. Jesus said that no one could get to know God except through Him (Jn.14:6). Jesus is the One who died in our place, and took the punishment for our sins. It is only when our sins have been washed away on that basis that we can get near God and begin to know Him. Then He shows us that He has adopted us as His children. And then begins a real relationship between us and God, where we talk to Him and hear Him speak to us.

Jesus said that He is the Truth. He also said that when we know the truth, the truth will set us free (Jn.8:32). It is by knowing Jesus personally that we get set free from fear, anxieties, and all

other forms of bondage. We get boldness from knowing that God is with us, and then we don't have to be afraid of evil spirits, accidents or what people might do to us. It is not that nothing bad will ever happen to us. But nothing can happen to us unless God allows it. He will not allow it unless He thinks it is something we can bear (with His help) (1Co.10:13). At the end He will cause even those bad things to work for our good (Ro.8:28). He is our good luck charm - if we understand it the right way.

Pointers along the way #9

How do you talk to your Father?

The greatest privilege God has granted to us human beings is that we can become His children and know Him as our Father (1Jn.3:1). We can talk to Him, go to Him with our problems, ask Him for His advice and guidance, and experience His compassion, tenderness, mercy, goodness, kindness, patience, understanding, etc., just like little children go to their fathers. Of course, it is really not a good comparison, because the best human father is so imperfect when you look at God the Father. But I wonder how many Christians get to know Him and experience Him as Father, because people have so many wrong pictures of God.

Jesus came down to the earth to reveal the Father to us, to show us what God

is really like (Jn.1:18). Jesus showed us what God is like by His own behaviour and attitude to people. Poor sinners flocked around Jesus because He did not judge them but wanted to save and help them. We see God's compassion by the way Jesus unselfishly spent time, sometimes even without eating, healing multitudes one person after another. He would not mind walking many miles up and down just to reach out to one human being. His anger burned only against hypocrisy and insincerity. Finally we see God's heart of love in letting His only Son suffer and die so that we need not suffer eternal death.

On the other hand, Jesus also showed us as a Man how our relationship can be with the Father. Jesus enjoyed a simple, frank, open, loving, trusting, respectful relationship with the Father. How about your own relationship with

God?

Are you scared of God, thinking that He will find something wrong with whatever you do? Of course He finds hundreds of things wrong with us. But He takes no thrill in telling us about our faults, but only in helping us get out of our faults. Once we have understood that He let His Son suffer in our place for our faults, we will realise how His heart works towards us.

Do you think He will throw you out and refuse to speak to you if you did something wrong, maybe for the umpteenth time? No, He won't. If He asks us to forgive someone who does wrong to us 70 X 7 times a day, will He not do that Himself? (Mt.18:21,22).

Do you think He will get upset if you can't understand what He is doing, and question Him about it? Read the writings of the Old Testament prophets

who did that very thing. No, God can take it from us people, because He understands that we are really perplexed and are only trying to understand His ways. Jesus Himself once said, "Why have You forsaken Me?"

How do you pray? Do you think that your prayer has to have a certain form and has to use, for example, the King James English with 'Thou' and 'Thee' and 'doest'? Why don't you just talk to Him in plain language? Tell Him exactly how you feel. You don't have to pretend and act pious before Him because He knows everything about you and you can't fool Him. You don't have to be afraid of confessing your sins frankly to Him because He knows anyway. Confide in Him, be simple, frank and sincere about it, and He will love you for it.

Listen also to what He wants to tell

you. It must be a two way communication. If you don't quite understand what He is saying, ask Him to explain it to you! Remember, He is your Father and not your boss or school principal. Even if your experience with earthly fathers has been painful, remember that God is the perfect Father, and He is on your side. There is no one better.

Pointers along the way #10

Are you in love with Jesus?

There are many who say they have been born again and that they are children of God. Some of them may be deceiving themselves. But even among those who are truly born again, it may not be always true that they are in love with Jesus. They 'accept' Jesus as their Saviour, but somehow they don't know Him well enough to have fallen in love with Him. They have probably not experienced the depths of His love, mercy, compassion, tenderness and kindness, or seen Him as being 'altogether lovely', and as the 'fairest of ten thousand.' There was a woman who came to Jesus and expressed her love for Him by pouring out a bottle of costly perfume on His feet. Jesus said that it was because she knew she had been forgiven much (Lk.7:36-48).

What would your life be like if you are

in love with Jesus?

You would want to spend much time with Him. Your mind goes back to Him again and again. You would like to listen to Him speaking through His word and through His Holy Spirit, and you would like to talk to Him about everything in your life. There would be nothing you would want to hide from Him, and you would want to share your entire life with Him. Isn't that normal for one who is in love?

You would like to become like Him. He is your Hero, the One you admire the most. You see in Him everything you would like to be. His life, character, values and attitudes to people and things are such examples to you that you also want to be like that.

You would like to tell other people about Him. You wish that everyone could get to know Him like you do.

You talk about Him when opportunity comes up, and you pass on tapes, books and tracts that can help others to get to know Him.

You would like to do everything He wants you to do. You want to show Him your gratitude, and you want to fulfil His plans. You have become convinced that He knows what is best for you, and you want to be on His side always. You want to avoid doing anything that would make Him sad.

If you have it like this, your love for Him is real. If it is not so, you need to know Him better.

Pointers along the way #11

How we miss out on God's best

It's a very simple mistake, and we don't usually realise what we are doing. But unless we understand and correct it, we can't help but miss what God wants to give us.

It is just what happened to the children of Israel, whom God brought out of Egypt with the promise of taking them to the land of milk and honey. But out of all that crowd, only two finally got in there! All the others missed out on it.

It says in the Bible very clearly why this happened. Disobedience and unbelief (He.3:18,19). Disobedience came from unbelief. They didn't trust God to do what He had promised. At every difficulty along the way, they murmured and grumbled in unbelief.

Finally, just outside the borders of Canaan, the promised land, they decided that the giants in Canaan were too much for them, even though Joshua and Caleb, the ones who finally entered Canaan, reminded them that God was able to take them through. That was the last test and it sealed their fate. They perished in the desert, and only Joshua and Caleb entered the promised land.

How does this apply to us? Aren't we believers who have put our trust in Jesus? Who says we don't believe?

If we really believe, why is it we aren't getting all that the Bible promises us? For example, joy and peace under all circumstances? Let's say we are in a tight spot, and it looks as if there is no way out. What do we do then? Get worried? We remember God's words which tell us that He is in control, He is planning for our welfare,

He won't allow things to go out of control, He won't leave us when we are in trouble, He will make all things to work for our good, etc. But our problems are real for us, and these words appear to be too unrealistic. We choose to believe what we 'see' and ignore what God has promised. Plain and simple unbelief! Then how do we expect to get the comfort, grace, guidance, wisdom, etc., which God was waiting to give us?

When we see difficulties ahead of us, we must choose to believe in God - at that point. If we don't do this, all the promises we have heard and understood will not do us any good. Faith is the conviction of things not seen. We can't 'see' God or His working behind the scenes. But if we decide to believe His word and accept it as being true in that situation, it gives us strength. Then God is able to give us

what He has promised. Without faith, it is impossible to receive anything from the Lord (Jas.1:6,7).

Pointers along the way #12

Beware of becoming mechanical

When we are learning how to drive a car, we consciously think about when and how to use the clutch, gear, accelerator, brake, etc. But after driving around for several days we begin to operate these things mechanically, without thinking. These actions which we were very much conscious of at one time have become reflex actions for us.

The tragedy is when this happens in our spiritual life. Prayer, Bible reading, praise and worship services, fasting, intercession, and many activities connected with spiritual life can become mechanical over a period of time. Then they become meaningless and useless.

Jesus warned about meaningless

repetition of prayers (Mt.6:7). He was especially talking about those who repeat a prayer a number of times thinking that the greater the number, the more effective it would be. A prayer which does not come from the heart will be useless even if it is repeated a thousand times.

Think about the number of times we can 'say grace' without thinking about or meaning what we are saying. What about repeating the Lord's prayer on different occasions? Or going through the early morning 'quiet time' without thinking about what we are reading, nor remembering later what we read in the morning? Or singing songs of praise and worship while our thoughts are wandering all around? Or praying for the millions who are getting lost in the world without a Saviour, without any feeling of sorrow in our hearts? We can think of many other examples.

These are all points in our life where we could come into direct contact with the Lord. But doing them over and over again has made them reflex actions without any touch on our heart from the Lord. The greater tragedy is when we think everything is all right because we do all these things regularly. Is it any wonder then that when we need Him at special times we find it difficult to find Him?

Pointers along the way #13

Experiencing the new covenant

When God made the new covenant with us through the blood of His Son Jesus, He promised to

- 1) forgive our sins and to remember them no more,
- 2) sprinkle clean water on us and make us clean from all our filthiness and idols,
- 3) give us a new heart of flesh instead of the heart of stone,
- 4) put His Spirit within us and cause us to walk in His ways,
- 5) make us His people and to be our God,
- 6) cause us to know Him from the least of us to the greatest,
- 7) put His law within us and write it on our heart,
- 8) cause us to live in the promised land, and

9) multiply the fruit of the tree and the produce of the field (Je.31:31-34;Ez.36:25-30).

Of course, there are many more promises - promising actually everything relating to life and godliness (2Pe.1:3,4) - that God has given to us under this covenant. The condition for receiving all these blessings is that we must ask for them (Ez.36:37).

This is a covenant, involving God and us. God has promised all these things for us, and what we have to do is to ask for them. But what does it mean to ask?

Can we just say a prayer asking for all these things and be done with it? No. God's promises concern every part of our life, and we will keep receiving from Him all through life, a little at a time just as in the old covenant

(Ex.23:30). We have to keep on asking.

But is it just asking - meaning, is it just praying? No. It means a longing or desire that grips our heart, and expresses itself in various ways, including prayer. If we have seen what God is promising us, and if we are excited about it, we will long for it - pant for it, as the psalm says. Then it is that we will start receiving the promises, because then God sees that we really value what He is offering.

Pointers along the way #14

A value system that propels us

One of the main changes that happen in our lives when we get converted is to have a hatred for sin. The Holy Spirit makes us, who used to sin without thinking much about it, sensitive about it. Now we don't want to sin. It does not mean that immediately we stop falling into sin. That is a progressive matter and takes time. But in our heart we don't want to sin.

But, is our life characterised only by our desire not to sin?

It is possible after we are born again and receive an assurance of eternal life, to slip into a way of life where we live just like everyone else except for the fact that we try to avoid doing things we know are wrong. We are different from the rest of the world

when it concerns external things prayer, reading the Bible, taking part in church activities, etc. But what else does the rest of our life show apart uprightness?

We work hard to make a good living, we get married, we raise children, etc., just like everyone else. Of course, we try to do things honestly and uprightly. But is the main characteristic of our life only that we are honest and upright and will not do wrong things?

What about an inner urge to be more and more pleasing to the Lord? A longing to be more useful to the Lord, to be a better witness to Him by our lives and actions? A desire to show our gratitude to the Lord in every possible way?

Paul said that the love of God constrained him so much that he was no longer living for himself but for

Him who had given Himself for him (2Co.5:14,15). He counted everything else as rubbish compared to Christ (Php.3:8). Don't think that this is only for apostles and pastors. This is the value system that makes each of us what God wants us to be.

Pointers along the way #15

Balancing mercy and truth

Mercy and truth meet together perfectly only in the Lord (Ps.85:9,10). Most of us tend to take sides, either with one or the other. God's mercy and truth met together in our salvation, when the truth concerning our sins and His mercy for us met together in the death of His Son in our place. But when we try to imitate this towards others, we either show too much mercy and condone their sins, or we show too little mercy and judge their sins.

The Bible warns us not to forget what we ourselves have been washed from. Have you noticed that when God tells us to show mercy to others, He links it with a reminder about His showing mercy to us (Eph.4:32;Col.3:13)? Is this not His way of helping us to be merciful to others? He also warns us that our judgment will be without

mercy if we do not show mercy to others (Jas.2:13), and that He will not forgive us if we will not forgive us (Mt.6:15).

We want to show compassion on the lost sinners, and we try to avoid being self-righteous and judgmental. We remember how much we have been shown mercy by the Lord, and we show mercy to the sinners. But if we are not watchful and alert, we slowly begin to condone their sins and move away from God's hatred for sin.

For example, God hates divorce (Mal.2:16). But we feel compassion when we see the miseries of divorcees and the children who are caught up in the process. We try to think with mercy about why people end up in divorce, and how innocent people suffer, etc. In the process of doing this, we come across various reasons that seem to justify divorce in particular situations,

and very soon divorce does not seem to be all that bad in our eyes! See how we got tricked into moving away from God's thoughts! Of course, this applies not only to divorce but many other things.

We need the balance of God's word to preserve us from this. His word reveals to us what He thinks about various things, and we must remember that He is right even if we cannot understand His ways or feel like agreeing with Him. His word is true even when people in the world change their opinion about various forms of sin. Our safety is to take sides with Him. It is the only way truth and mercy can be kept together.

Pointers along the way #16

When we are weak, we are strong

Some preachers and writers would like to project the Christian life as one superlative experience where all problems disappear, all sicknesses get healed, and everyone prospers in every way. When things do not happen exactly as predicted above, we are made to look expectantly to a future day when they will surely happen. Some are able to continue with this expectation, but many give up along the way. But by placing before people an unrealistic hope, such preachers are actually doing them more harm than good.

It is true that our God is able to do beyond all our asking or thinking (Ep.3:20). He can supply all our need so that we can have all sufficiency in everything (Php.4:19;2Co.9:8). But it

is also true that since His ways are far different from our ways, what we expect Him to do for us differs many times from what He wants to do for us. If we do not understand this in the right way, we are likely to end up in disappointment and frustration.

We also recognise that God does miracles for many people. But they are called miracles because they are extraordinary. God does not do miracles all the time for everyone. Not all prayers are answered, and not all problems are sorted out. These are realities of life. See what the Bible says in Heb.11:35-39.

It is right to ask God for miracles. Many times we do not receive because we do not ask (Jas.4:2), and we do not ask because we do not expect that God will answer. But it is not fair to accuse people of not having faith just because they do not experience miracles.

But true faith believes in God, His supreme love, His wisdom and His sovereignty in all that His does for us. It is not shaken by some inexplicable turn of events, unanswered prayer, or an apparent lack of solution in a difficult situation. All these things make us weak. We are unable to handle them by ourselves. At that point our strength is in knowing God, and knowing that He is with us. *The one who is able to stand without losing faith when there is no answer to prayer is stronger than the one whose faith is untested because his prayer has been answered.* We can have that kind of strong faith only if our faith is related to knowing God rather than to getting things from God.

Pointers along the way #17

Peace in the storm

Jesus said, rebuking the storm in the Sea of Galilee, "Peace, be still" (Mk.4:39). Then He turned to His disciples and asked them, "Why are you fearful? Where is your faith?" He expected them to be bold while the storm was going on. He would have liked to tell the disciples first of all, "Peace, be still." Isn't this what He tells us when we are going through the storms of life?

We would rather He says that to the storm and makes it disappear! That is what most of us pray for. But we forget that He has allowed that storm to come up, and that He is in the boat with us. He is in control! He tells us, "Be still and know that I am God" (Ps.46:10). He can still storms with just a word. But it is more important to Him that we become still even if the storm is raging

on. That is possible when we believe - that He is in control.

Having said that, it is not that we should not ask God to remove the storms. On two occasions mentioned in the Bible, God told them to be still and to see His salvation. Once it was when the people of Israel found themselves caught between the Red Sea in front and the Egyptian army behind (Ex.14:13). The other time, the people of Judah were being threatened by an enemy army before which they were helpless (2Ch.20:17). In both cases they were in impossible situations, humanly speaking. Then God stepped in. He can do that for us too.

But at other times when we are in a position to do something to deal with the problem, to sit still without taking action is to tempt God (Mt.4:6,7). If someone refuses to take medicine when it can heal him, or to ask

someone else for help when he cannot handle something himself, it is downright stupid.

We tend to jump to the wrong side even here, as usual. When we should be doing something we leave things in God's hands, and when we find ourselves in impossible situations we still try to work things out instead of calling for help! Why don't we become quiet in our heart and mind by trusting in God, and then do what the situation demands?

Pointers along the way #18

Two types of faith

A lot of confusion regarding faith can be removed if we understand that there are two types of faith.

There is a faith to live by. This is faith in God, our trust and confidence in His Person, character, attributes and His ways with us, including the way of salvation He has given us through His Son Jesus Christ. This faith is what gives us a relationship with God and a channel of communication with Him. Without this faith it is impossible to please Him, because then we do not even have a connection with Him (He.11:6).

By this faith we believe what God has said, believe that He will do what He has promised, obey His commandments, accept the values He places on everything and allow Him to

work in and through our lives. If we doubt His love, wisdom, power and sovereignty, it shows that we lack in this faith.

But there is another type of faith. This is a gift of faith that God gives for something specific which is not given as a general promise for everyone. Some people get this for a ministry. Others may receive this for particular occasions. By this faith we get an assurance in our heart for expecting something extraordinary.

Let us look at an example. We know that God can do any miracle or heal any sickness. That is faith of the first type. But at the same time we do not know whether He will actually do it for us on a particular occasion - until we hear God's voice in our heart and receive this faith. When that happens we know without a doubt that God will do it.

Every one of us must have faith of the first kind. But the second type of faith is not entirely up to us (1Co.12:9). We can limit it by our unbelief in God - referring to a lack of the first type of faith (Mt.13:58). But we cannot decide by ourselves to exercise it.

Now we can understand the confusion that arises when we try to imitate someone else's faith, claim things by 'faith,' etc., when we have not received a specific promise from God for that. There is nothing wrong in asking God for something based on our confidence in His goodness, but we are not sure we will receive it unless we receive such a faith. It is good to be challenged by the faith we see in others. But we should avoid condemnation if we cannot do the miracles others have done even though we believe God can do them.

We can also see how we cannot blame

others for not having the particular faith we have. God may have used some verse from the Bible in a particular way to give us faith for that situation. But we must be careful not to form a doctrine from that for everyone unless we see it as a general promise for everyone.

The closer we get to God, the better we get to know His heart and voice. Then we can exercise faith for all the things He wants us to have and do.

Pointers along the way #19

Comfort in God's chastening

Chastening is not the same as punishment, in spirit, even though the forms may look alike. Courts and other worldly authorities mete out punishments to those who do wrong. They are expected only to consider whether the people are guilty of wrong and then to give out a just punishment. But chastening comes typically from loving parents who want their children to turn away from the wrong they have done and to turn to good ways.

God chastens His children because they are His children (Am.3:2). He also cares for the other people and would like them to become His children. He provides for their earthly needs because He is the One who created them (Mt.5:45). But it is for His children that He takes the best care. His aim is that we should become

like Him in our character (Ro.8:28,29;He.12:10).

God chastens us when we do not repent after we have sinned. His intention then is that we should realise we have done wrong and repent. He wants to forgive us and get us back on the right way.

Sometimes God also chastens us after we have repented from our sins. The idea is that we should remember what we have done so that we would be careful with sin in future. This is what He did for David after he had sinned and repented (2Sa.12:13,14).

We don't like chastening. We would like to be forgiven and treated as if we had not sinned. But God knows all about our flesh. He knows that we have a tendency to take sin carelessly if we do not taste its negative results (Ec.8:11). Our fleshly tendency is to

avoid admitting our sin unless we are forced to, and we would like to get away without any damage. God therefore takes special care to help us in this area.

When the chastening comes, let us not complain that it is too severe. God knows what He is doing. Let us not forget that what we really deserve is hell. Let us also not ignore what God is trying to tell us through the chastening, by trying to deal only with what we are going through externally (He.12:5). Let us see His rod and staff as a comfort, knowing that He is there watching over us for our very best (Ps.23:4).

Pointers along the way #20

Time for resolutions

One of the tricks of the devil is to make jokes of serious matters. There are so many jokes about new year resolutions that people feel too silly to make any. Christian life needs resolve and determination, and New Year's Day is just as good as any other day to make serious resolutions.

Daniel made a resolution as a young man not to defile himself with food from the table of the King of Babylon (Da.1:8). This was due to Daniel's strong desire to be pleasing to God. He made up his mind that no matter what the consequences were going to be, he was not going to defile himself in that particular way. God noticed this, and immediately started working all things for Daniel's good (v.9).

We may be afraid to make resolutions

thinking that we would look silly when we are not able to keep them. We will certainly look silly if we make rash and impractical resolutions which we cannot keep. But there may be things we have to give up, and there may be other things we need to adopt. It is God who tells us what we should do and gives us a desire to do them, and then it is His strength that He gives us (Php.2:13). It is with this confidence that we can make our resolutions.

If we fail after that to keep any of our resolutions, that is not enough reason to give them up. It is only a time to seek more earnestly for God's grace.

Let us make practical resolutions that would help us get to know Jesus more intimately, because *that* is eternal life (Jn.17:3). Let us also resolve to be careful with things that can distract us and lead us away from Him.

Pointers along the way #21

Nothing automatic

There is nothing automatic about Christian growth. There is asking, and receiving. There is seeking, and finding. There is knocking, and doors opening. What if there is no asking, seeking or knocking? Can we still expect to receive?

Actually, all of us need many things from the Lord, not only for earthly our earthly life, but also for our spiritual life. Then why is it that we don't ask?

Perhaps we are caught in a trap of prosperity. We have enough money for our needs, we are healthy, our job is fine and our family is doing well. What is there to ask for?

Perhaps we are caught in the trap of unbelief. We have asked in the past and not received. So why bother?

Is it that we are too busy with the daily demands of life that we don't have time to think about God?

Are we caught in a situation which, we think, not even God can solve?

Don't we believe that God knows every detail of our life and, as a loving Father, has good plans for us (Zeph.3:17 LB)? Is His arm too short or weak that He cannot save? If we have had problems understanding some of His ways, isn't the reason *our* lack of understanding rather than any fault of His? The One who created the whole universe has enough wisdom and power to solve all our problems, doesn't He? Isn't the reason why we don't receive much from the Lord that we don't ask for much (Jas.4:2)?

God wants to help us, save us, guide us, protect us, show us many wonderful things, teach us, transform us, and do

many things for us. Let us not stop Him by *not* asking, seeking or knocking. Let us fully receive the blessings He wants to give us.

Pointers along the way #22

Many voices to choose from

Do you hear voices? Of course, we do. I am referring to the 'inner' voices that we all hear. They come from different sources. They may be our own ideas putting into words what we would like to hear, or ideas we have got from others which are playing in our mind. They may be from our conscience, or God seeking to guide us. Or they may be from the devil trying to fool us. It is our responsibility to choose. Whether we realise it or not, all of us choose one or the other voice.

As Christians we say we want to obey God and do His will. But many times we don't know His will for us. Jesus said that we could understand God's will if we were really bent on doing it (Jn.7:17). Jesus could always hear His Father's voice because it was clear for Him that He was always going to do

the Father's will and not His own. Maybe we are not so firm about this. The question is whether we are sure that if we knew God's will we would definitely do it.

There are several checks that can tell us that a certain voice is not from God. If it is prompting us to do something sinful, or if it is contrary to God's instructions in the Bible, we can be sure it is not from God. The more we understand God's ways from the Bible, the clearer this distinction will become.

But what if the voice quotes the Bible? If the devil quoted Scripture to try and fool Jesus, he can do the same with us (Mt.4:6). We also can misquote the Bible. See if the quotation is in the right context, and in agreement with the spirit of Christ.

Are we being prompted to do

something stupid and against common sense? This is a particular danger for those who have made up their minds to obey God at any cost. One of the things the devil suggested to Jesus was to jump off from the top of the temple (Mt.4:6).

Can we feel a strong pressure behind the voice, threatening us with dire consequences if we don't act immediately, even though we are not too convinced about what is being suggested? Take care, it is not from God. He is not the type who will force us to do anything. It is another thing if we know what is the right thing to do and God reminds us about doing it quickly.

If what comes up in our mind is clearly according to the Bible and the spirit of Christ, it is easy to decide. If it is not against the general direction of the Bible but it is still not clearly

instructed there, we need to understand the mind of the Lord and the leading of the Holy Spirit. This discernment takes time to learn (He.5:14).

Of course we may make mistakes while we are learning to make distinctions among these voices. But be sure that if we are sincere in wanting to do God's will, God will protect us from making fatal mistakes (Ps.37:23,24).

Pointers along the way #23

Two ways of asking "Why?"

All through time people have been asking this question to God, "Why are You doing this to me?" Most of us have asked this question ourselves. The underlying implication is that we think we do not deserve this kind of treatment from God and that God should treat us much better. This is an attitude of complaint, rebellion, pride, self-righteousness, etc. People also ask other variations of this question such as "Why does God allow the innocent to suffer?," "Why does God allow evil to have power in this world?," etc. It is wrong to ask such question with bitterness, self-pity, complaints and rebellion. This is wrong because in this way we dare to question and accuse the One who created us, just as if a pot complained about the potter.

Some Christians have been so concerned about this way of questioning God that they believe that we should never ask such questions to God or about God. Though they mean well, I think it stunts their own growth and also puts off people who are sincerely seeking for answers.

The second way of asking "Why?" is to ask it in humility, with a desire to understand and learn. God delights in such people, just as a good father is thrilled when his children come to him with their questions. He does not get angry with them, and He does not push them away.

God hardly ever answers the first type of asking "Why?" But He does give answers to those who have the second type of question. He may not give the answer they expect, when they want it, or in the way they look for. But He takes such people to the answers little

by little, from one small step to another. His desire is not to satisfy their intellectual curiosity but to lead them to know Him and His ways in a way that builds their trust in Him. They learn the way of understanding "by faith" (He.11:3). They slowly come to the place where they can stand without being shaken when they cannot 'see.'

Isn't that the answer we really need? What is the use being to explain mysteries in a philosophical manner and impress others when we are unable to stand in the midst of storms ourselves?

Pointers along the way #24

What can give us depth?

Jesus mentioned about the seed which fell in a rocky ground which sprouted up fast but withered quickly when the sun came up - because the soil had no depth (Mt.13:5,6). Jesus compared this type of ground to people 'who had no root in themselves' (v.21). What are the things that we should take care of so that we can have roots which go deep?

The first and foremost thing is a deep and real love for Jesus. This comes from a recognition of His love for us in the face of the fact that we don't deserve it. If we don't recognise this, our relationship with Jesus will be superficial - without depth. On the contrary, the more we appreciate His love, the more we will want to please Him and to do His will.

Another important factor is our

determination to love Jesus and to please Him. The degree of our determination will decide how we would face opposition and hindrances. If we are not absolutely clear about wanting to please Jesus no matter what it would cost us in terms of earthly things, we would wither up as soon as the heat starts coming.

Someone has said that we should gauge the depth of our love for Jesus by seeing how much we are willing to sacrifice for Him. Wealth, earthly honour and pleasures beckon us on every step in life. Some of them tempt us directly to sin, while others would tend to lead us away from Jesus. If we are not willing to deny ourselves in order to be pleasing to Jesus, we can hardly hope to have any spiritual depth (Lk.9:23-25).

Finally it is our faithfulness in the small things of life that will contribute

to our depth. Carefulness with the choice of words, sensitivity to our attitudes that direct our words and actions, willingness to acknowledge quickly when we go wrong and always being willing to learn, will send our roots deep down. Then we will be firm and stable, and not easily shaken.

Pointers along the way #25

Are we childish in Christ?

We may be in Christ, as children of God. We may have asked Jesus not only to come into our hearts but also to take control of our lives as our Lord. Yet it may be that we are actually living our Christian lives in a childish way, and that may be reason why we do not experience many of the things that God has promised for us in His word.

Paul talks about this in Galatians 4. We are heirs to all that God has kept ready for us in His kingdom. But we are only babies in the spiritual realm when we are born again and become Christians. If we do not grow up to maturity and learn to take possession of our inheritance, we would actually continue to live just as if we were paupers or slaves.

One of the things about children is that they do not know what is good for them. They 'want' many things, and even when the parents tell them that some of those things are not good for them they still want them!

Are we like them? Do we just crave for many things even when we know they are not good for us? Do we have the habit of thinking that giving in to temptation "just this once" won't hurt us too much? Have we never learned to say "No" to ourselves? Do we lie down and throw tantrums (or drivel in self pity) when we can't have our own way?

Maturity comes by saying "No" to the things that are bad for us and choosing to obey God (He.5:13,14).

Perhaps some of us have never had our parents teach us to obey. They may have let us have our way most of the

time. Even if it has been like that, we cannot afford to continue in this childish way any more. Let us learn to obey God in everything.

Pointers along the way #26

Will we receive the promises?

The story in the Old Testament of the exodus of the children of Israel from Egypt to Canaan is well known. It started with the promise of God to take them from slavery to the promised land "flowing with milk and honey." The entire episode is marked with miraculous interventions from God, first in obtaining release from Pharaoh's tyranny in Egypt and then in overcoming what looked like many insurmountable obstacles along the way to Canaan. Finally only two out of the multitude of people who left Egypt entered Canaan. What made the difference?

In Numbers 13 and 14 we read of Israel standing just outside Canaan and sending out twelve spies into Canaan to bring back a report on the situation

there. All twelve agreed in reporting that the land was really one flowing with milk and honey, and all twelve reported that there were giants in the land. It was a really good place to go to, but nobody denied that there was real danger facing them if they tried to get in there. The difference came up in their approach to the danger.

Ten of the spies backed out saying that it was too dangerous to go in. They would rather go back to Egypt. All the crowd agreed with them except Joshua and Caleb, the two spies who finally entered Canaan. Their logic was simple. God had promised to take them in. So far He had brought them miraculously through several obstacles. He would do something this time also to fulfil His promise.

God made a judgment that day that divided Joshua and Caleb from the rest of the crowd. He said that because the

people refused to trust Him even after having experienced miracle after miracle in the past, they would not be allowed to enter the promised land (Nu.14:11). It was a matter of trust.

Why don't we trust in God, that He will fulfil what He has promised us? Our own faithfulness is important, but that is not the issue here. The question here is whether we would consider God to be trustworthy. If we murmur and complain, it demonstrates exactly the opposite. If we don't believe what He says, or doubt His love, power or wisdom, we would be like the ten spies and the crowd who lost out.

It is not that we pretend that there are no obstacles, or that we believe we can manage quite easily by ourselves. No, sometimes there are some real insurmountable obstacles along the way. It is possible that we look like grasshoppers in front of those giant

obstacles, like the ten spies felt. But does that change the fact that God is able to do what He has promised? Let us trust Him.

We are not unrealistic to think that once we trust in Jesus He would just wave away any trouble that comes our way. There would be battles like the ones Joshua and the others discovered once they entered Canaan. But they believed that God was with them, and as they did what God told them to do they came to enjoy more and more peace and rest in the land.

Pointers along the way #27

We need the Holy Spirit

The night before His last day as a Man on earth, Jesus requested His disciples to stay with Him in the Garden of Gethsemane and support Him with prayer (Mt.26:38). He prayed three times to the Father concerning the things He was going to go through, and at the end of each session He came to His disciples looking for fellowship. Each time He found that they had dozed off. He told them these famous words, "Keep watching and praying, that you may not enter into temptation; the spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak" (v.41 NASB). Yet some days later these same disciples were on fire for the Lord and unstoppable in their work for Him. What made the difference? The Holy Spirit.

If we are honest with ourselves we would also admit that our flesh is weak

even though many times our spirit is willing. Sometimes we cannot even say that our spirit is willing. But if we are willing to be made willing, God will help us (Php.2:13).

What kind of help are we looking for? Someone to make our problems disappear with a word or a wave of His hands? That would be unrealistic because Jesus Himself said that in this world we would have trouble and problems (Jn.16:33). But what Jesus offers us is Someone who will be by our side in our troubles, and who will comfort, encourage, strengthen, lead, guide, warn, correct and rebuke us - the Holy Spirit!

Caught in controversies about the gifts of the Holy Spirit we tend to miss what the companionship of the Holy Spirit can mean for us.

The Holy Spirit is the One who can

make our relationship with Jesus real (Jn.16:14,15). He speaks to us in our spirit, bringing to our thoughts what we need to hear at that time, whether it is a word of comfort, guidance or warning. It takes time to become able to recognise His voice, but when we do, that is the best help we can have.

Jesus said that the Father hardly needs any asking before He gives us the Holy Spirit (Lk.11:13). Let us seek for the Holy Spirit as a Person, and not for the thrill of His gifts. And let us treat Him with respect lest we grieve Him or quench Him.

Pointers along the way #28

Demystifying faith

Some people make faith look so mysterious, difficult, lofty and rare that ordinary folks like us think we will never be able to have it. Yet it was ordinary people who had faith in the days of Jesus, while the scholars and VIPs rejected Him. So true faith must be something within the reach of all of us. Let us look at a few instances of true faith.

Once when Jesus was inside a crowded house, some people opened up the roof to lower a paralysed man inside (Mk.2:1-5). It says Jesus saw their faith. What did He see? Just that they believed He could heal, and expected Him to. A Roman centurion's faith was seen in that he believed Jesus could heal his servant with just a word (Mt.8:8). A Canaanite woman was admired for her faith because she

asked Jesus persistently for deliverance for her demon possessed daughter (Mt.15:22-28). A woman got healed for believing that a touch of Jesus's garment was enough to heal her (Mt.9:21).

What was their faith? Just that they believed in Jesus' supernatural ability to heal and deliver. They knew who He was and what He could do for them. Once He asked two blind men whether they believed that He was able to give them their sight (Mt.9:28). That was the crucial issue.

In one place Jesus was not able to do many miracles because of their unbelief (Mk.6:5). Their unbelief was that they did not expect anything great from Jesus because they thought of Him as an ordinary Man whom they knew very well! (v.3).

So in simple terms, faith is to expect

great things from Jesus. When we go to Jesus with everything that bothers us, that is an expression of our faith. Unbelief is to think that Jesus is not able or willing to do anything for us.

It is not that He will always do what we want, because we do not always know what is good for us. But when we have faith, we open the way for Jesus to come in and take action. If we are unbelieving, we shut the door ourselves.

Pointers along the way #29

Rising in faith

We hear many people saying (perhaps we have said it ourselves), "Oh, I don't have that much faith." The implication is that faith is something that is based on our capacity. But this is a false understanding! Faith is not a recognition of our strength or ability. It is a recognition of God's ability. Our faith is not in ourselves, but in God. So, if we say we don't have that much of faith, what we are really saying is that we don't believe God has that much ability! I am pretty sure that is not what we meant to say.

There was this incident when a man brought his demon possessed son to Jesus' disciples for healing (Mk.9:17,18). This man pleaded with Jesus to help him if He could (v.22). Jesus said, "If You can!" All things are possible to him who believes" (v.23).

Immediately the man said, "I do believe; help my unbelief" (v.24).

What Jesus pointed out to this man was that there was no question about Jesus' ability, but what was needed was this man to have faith in that ability. When the man's attention was turned away from himself to Jesus, immediately he received faith.

Isn't this what we should do when we are faced with situations that look impossible? Look at Jesus. See His almighty power, perfect wisdom and unending love towards us. Then we too can rise in faith - trusting that Jesus can handle this for us.

Pointers along the way #30

Standing on our feet

It is a great day when a baby takes his or her first step. Just before this, the baby had learned to stand up with support, and some babies had also learned to 'walk' using baby walkers. But when a baby actually stands without any support and takes the first step on his own the parents are thrilled beyond measure!

It is great if we have many or at least some people around us to support us in our Christian life. In one sense there is never a time in life when we don't need anyone else. Perhaps there are areas in life where, by the grace of God, we have become able to stand, and others where we still need support. But even in those so-called 'strong' areas there can be special occasions where we need support from others. Remember how Jesus asked for support from His

disciples in Gethsemane (Mt.26:38).

But we must not become so dependent on others that we always look to others to take care of us, solve our problems, tell us what to do and to clean up when we make a mess. Our progress in Christian life must be such that we not only learn to bear our own burdens in an increasing manner but also become able to bear the burdens of others.

If we think about it we can see that ultimately we ourselves have to bear the brunt of our burdens, even when there are others who are willing to help us. Others can comfort us and encourage us and maybe finally tell us what to do. But then we have to do it or go through it ourselves. We can't escape that.

If we always look to others to help us out through their prayers or spiritual gifts, we are unrealistic and heading

for disappointment. God provides us support, including through other people, so that we will become strong enough to stand and also to help others (Zec.8:13). If we set this as our goal and constantly seek God for it, we can be sure that God will help us along in that direction.

Pointers along the way #31

The pressure to give up

The Bible mentions that in the last days the devil will be furious, knowing that he has only a short time left (Re.12:12). Through the centuries Christians have felt as though their time was really the last hour. We now feel that this present time could very well be the last few minutes before the coming of the Lord.

Can you feel the fury of the devil coming at you personally, almost forcing you, if possible, to give up your faith in God and to give in to the world? He cannot force us, but that is how we feel. All around us we see many falling away from the faith, and we remember the words of Paul that there would a falling away before Jesus came (2Th.2:3). Even Christian leaders are compromising, and Christian churches are giving in to the

philosophies of the world that make the word 'sin' irrelevant. Many are confused because they cannot find true shepherds to guide them, and because they are facing unjust situations beyond their control and complicated problems they cannot handle.

It is in such situations that the word of the Lord becomes relevant to us, that says, "Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal among you, which comes upon you for your testing, as though some strange thing were happening to you" (1Pe.4:12). The Lord calls us to persevere under this trial, which is actually a test of our faith, so that He can finally give us the crown of life (Jas.1:12).

How can we hold on? By holding on to the One we have placed our trust in. His faithfulness is unquestionable. No one who continues to hope in Him will be put to shame (Is.49:23). We may

face hardships or earthly disappointments. But we shall see in eternity that He has not caused us to lose out.

It is a test of our faith if we would be willing to bear with earthly sufferings in order to gain eternal blessings. Paul said that if we had only this earthly life, we could as well let ourselves go and live for our desires (1Co.15:32). But Jesus has prepared an eternity for us and He is waiting for us. Let us trust Him.

Pointers along the way #32

The gospel package

When John the Baptist came preaching just before Jesus started His public ministry, he was trying to prepare the hearts of the people to become ready to receive Jesus (Lk.3:4). He told them that they should repent from their sins in order to receive forgiveness of sins (v.3). When different people came to him wanting to get baptised, John told them specifically about what they should stop doing and what they should start doing. The Bible says that John preached the gospel to the people with many other exhortations (v.18). In other words, he was urging them strongly to do many things that would change their lifestyle.

Now, exhortations are not something that we usually associate with the gospel. Those of us who have heard the gospel many times have understood

that God wants to give everything to us as a free gift and that there is nothing we can do to earn salvation or to deserve it. (That is, of course, a good emphasis to place before people who think that somehow they have to do something to become pleasing to God.) Having learned to accept salvation as a free gift from God, we may find it difficult to understand what exhortations have to do with it.

But remember that John was trying to prepare the people to be able to receive what Jesus was going to come with. If we are to receive from God all that He wants to give us, we also may need to do certain things that would set our heart right and bring us to a place where we are receptive towards God. This may include repenting from our sins, setting things right with God and people, changing habits, taking hard decisions, etc. If we don't want to hear

such words, we are ourselves cutting off what God wants to give us.

Salvation comes as package. There are things God wants to give us, and there are ways in which we have to respond. If we neglect certain parts of the package, we will miss some of the other parts too.

Pointers along the way #33

Missing the point!

When God gave the people of Israel the Sabbath day, His goal was that they would have time to put away their own work and seek Him and spend time with Him (Ex.20:9,10). But they missed the whole point when they concentrated on determining what they were not allowed to do on a Sabbath day. They went on to define what constituted work in terms of the distance they could travel and the weight they could lift legitimately on the Sabbath. The Pharisees tried to extrapolate the restriction on work to ridiculous extents when they objected to Jesus healing sick people on the Sabbath (Mt.12:10). Even now in Israel there are those who believe that switching on lights on the Sabbath day can cause minute sparks in the switch which would be against the law

forbidding lighting of fire on the Sabbath day!

Are we Christians really any better? Don't we unconsciously major on "what we are not allowed to do" instead of thinking about how much closer we can get to God? Even churches sometimes make unwritten rules on what is acceptable, and it is not uncommon for people from different churches to compare notes on these when they meet each other. As children grow up they associate Christianity with what all that they are not allowed to do. We too have missed the point.

Jesus asks us to seek God and His kingdom first, promising us that then all other things will fall in place (Mt.6:33 free paraphrase). We can begin to see all things in the proper perspective only when God occupies the focus of our lives. Is this not the

same thing Jesus meant when He said that only when our eye is clear our whole body will be full of light? (Lk.11:34).

Let us put God first in our lives and seek Him deliberately, consciously and with all our heart. Then we will understand and experience what God has really prepared and kept for us. Then we can also see how questions about what is allowed and not allowed resolve themselves.

Pointers along the way #34

Do we really know grace?

What? Love our enemies? Do good to those who hate us? Bless those who curse us? Let someone who has already taken away our coat take our shirt too? (Lk.6:27-30). What rubbish! How unreasonable! How silly and tame! Is that how we feel? Then we have not understood grace at all.

The question is if we want God to deal with us the same way we want to treat others - taking revenge, teaching them a lesson, showing them who we really are and what we can do, letting them know that they can't get away with it, etc. Surely not. We want God to be merciful to us, forgive us our sins, bless us in spite of what we have done and how we have been, etc. Then why is it that we don't want to be like that to the others?

Perhaps it has not sunk into our heads how much mercy God has had to show towards us! How patient He has had to be towards us. How He has had to overlook what we really deserve when He gave us abundantly of many blessings. How He has had to set aside His feelings of anger and revulsion towards our sins when He came to embrace us. How He would not listen to His sense of righteousness and justice when He wanted to do good to us.

Perhaps we have never understood this at all. Perhaps we just 'accepted' Jesus into our hearts and thought that now we were safe from hell. Or perhaps we have been forgetful of how God has treated us.

If God has been gracious to us, how can we hard towards the others? This is the point Jesus tried to bring, again and again. See Mt.18:23-35, and many

other passages.

Pointers along the way #35

Take it to the Lord in prayer

Have you heard of the saintly man called Augustine who lived in the fourth century? He was so wayward as a young man that his mother Monica went to her bishop with the problem. His advice was, "Stop talking to your son about God. Talk instead to God about your son." The result was there for everyone to see.

There are many things God expects us to do. But we all know that there are many things that are beyond our abilities. Our problem is that when we come to such situations we despair and give up instead of casting them on God. We recognise that we can't handle them, but we still behave as though we are expected to handle them ourselves.

Jesus asks all who are stooping down from trying to carry heavy burdens to

go to Him (Mt.11:28). He promises us rest, and a lightening of our burdens (v.29,30). How can He do that if we won't hand over our burdens to Him but insist on carrying them ourselves?

See what will happen when we actually hand over our burdens to the Lord. See Him keep His promises beyond our expectations. We will feel so foolish for not having done this earlier itself!

The picture of Jesus waiting outside the door of our heart and knocking is relevant even in this context (Re.3:20). He will not force His way in. But if we open the door for Him He will come in and dine with us. It is not that we have to prepare dinner for Him. He will provide a feast for us.

Let us learn to take every one of our problems - big and small - to the Lord, and give Him authority over our lives

to bless us the way He wants to. Let us trust in Him that He knows what is best for us and how and when it should be done for us. Those who trust Him in this way will find honour and glory in the end, even if sometimes we have to wait for them.

Pointers along the way #36

Experiencing God's love

God loves all people and there is no partiality in Him. He does not want even a single person to perish, and that was why He sent His Son Jesus to die for our sins (Jn.3:16).

But all of us do not experience God's love to the same extent! That is not because God shows partiality, but because it depends on us. The Bible says that God came into the world and to the people whom He had created, but most people rejected Him (Jn.1:10,11). But those who received Him were given the privilege to become His children (v.12). There we see that it is our choice that makes the difference.

Even among those who received Him and became His children, all do not enjoy His love equally. That again is

not because He has some favourite children, but because it depends on how we obey Him. Jesus said that if we obeyed Him, the Father would love us and come and live with us (Jn.14:23). Jesus Himself obeyed the Father in everything, and so He enjoyed the Father's love to the maximum (Jn.10:17). The Father referred to Jesus as His Beloved Son with whom He was delighted (Mt.3:17).

God tests us sometimes to see if we would love Him more than everyone else and everything else. God was watching Abraham as he left his hometown and started off to an unknown place at the command of God, and also when he decided to let his nephew Lot take the choicest part of the land in order to avoid a quarrel. When Abraham made the choice to sacrifice his son Isaac rather than

disobey God, God was delighted and blessed Abraham tremendously (Ge.22:12). Is it surprising that when God decided to destroy Sodom and Gomorrah He decided to take Abraham into confidence about it? (Ge.18:17,18).

Can we see what we miss if we ignore God and live our own lives?

Pointers along the way #37

A command to love

It was a new commandment that Jesus gave to His disciples, to love one another as He loved them (Jn.13:34). We can find a catch as well as comfort in that commandment. The catch is that we are not just to love, but to love as Jesus loves us. The comfort is that Jesus loves us tremendously, and the more we experience that it becomes easier for us to love others in the same way.

Our problem is that we find it difficult to love those who are not lovable - those who do wrong to us, who treat us unkindly or unjustly, who don't appreciate what we have done for them, or even those whose face or manners we don't like. But what Jesus is telling us is to love even such people, because that is how He loves us. Looking at us from His state of

perfection, everything about us is so imperfect, sinful and wrong! Yet He loves us. So when He tells us to love others He is not telling us to love only those who are lovable but even all the others out there who come through to us as those who do not deserve our love. He asked His disciples once what was so great about loving those who loved them, challenging them to love even their enemies (Mt.5:44-47).

The closer we get to God, the more clearly we see our own imperfections, and what we had thought were 'small' sins take on an ugly appearance. Then we begin to appreciate better what it means for God to love us. Another thing that happens is that the little things that used to irritate us about others are no longer so big in our eyes, and the sins that we notice in others are not so unforgivable anymore!

That is a wonderful thing to happen.

But this joy of drawing closer to God and experiencing His love and His work of transformation in our lives goes side by side with the pain of recognising how small, weak and corrupt our love is. This should drive us to cry out to God for pouring out His love into our hearts through the Holy Spirit (Ro.5:5). This paradoxical looking experience is what a godly man has as he is drawn nearer to God and draws himself nearer to God (Php.2:12,13).

Pointers along the way #38

Yielding in worship

The dictionary rightfully defines worship as an act of adoration. That is what we should think of when we worship God. We think of who God is, the different aspects of His nature and character, what He has done for us and what He has planned for us in the future, etc., and 'fall' or 'bow down' before Him in worship. While it may not be always practical to express our worship to God physically in that way, a submission in our spirit before the majesty and the greatness of God is an essential element of true worship.

Over the recent years there has been a clear revival all over the world in worshipping God. There is a lot of emphasis on worshipping God in spirit and truth (Jn.4:21-24). We understand that the important thing is not the place of worship or the particular form we

adopt, but in the attitude of our heart. Musicians and songwriters have brought out innumerable songs of worship in different languages, and these are used not only in worship meetings, but also by Christians while relaxing at home, travelling, working, etc.

While songs are a big help for us in worshipping God, we know that mere singing of words without our spirit reaching out to God is meaningless. But whether we worship God through spoken words or songs, we must not forget that without yielding of ourselves to God in response to seeing His majesty will make worship incomplete.

The apostle Paul points out that yielding of our bodies to God as 'living sacrifices' is the reasonable form of worship in response to the mercies of God (Ro.12:1). Let us remember to

yield ourselves afresh to God every time we worship Him.

Pointers along the way #39

Many Ebenezers to strengthen us

A thought that most commonly comes to us is that no one else has had it as bad as we! Even when we know in our mind that this is not true we feel as if it is. But let us not go by how we feel but what is true.

1. Of course we know how many others are in worse conditions. We will see this when we start thinking about it objectively. Let us, as the song says, start counting our blessings and see what the Lord has done. My favourite position at this point is to remember the bottom line - that the Lord has forgiven my sins and made me His own, while billions of others do not know Him at all.

2. Many times earlier in our own lives we have felt like this and then the Lord

has brought us out and taken us forward. This time too He will do it.

3. Many others have gone through tougher situations and experienced the love and power of God through them all. They have come out of them as better persons and more useful to God and men.

4. There are many, many promises for just such situations, as "I will never desert you, nor will I ever forsake you" (He.13:5), "I will not leave you as orphans; I will come to you" (Jn.14:18), "And my God shall supply all your needs according to His riches in glory in Christ Jesus" (Php.4:19), "For I am confident of this very thing, that He who began a good work in you will perfect it until the day of Christ Jesus" (Php.1:6), "Ask, and it shall be given to you; seek, and you shall find; knock, and it shall be opened to you" (Mt.7:7), etc.

When God gave the people of Israel a miraculous victory over the Philistines, the prophet Samuel took a stone, placed it before them and called it 'Ebenezer.' When they faced a difficult time in the future they were to look at that stone and remember, "Thus far the Lord has helped us" (1Sa.7:12). If we look back at the way the Lord has taken care of us and the others in the past, we shall have many Ebenezers to strengthen our faith. And, of course, the greatest Ebenezer is Jesus being raised from the dead - from a state of hopelessness and despair to one of triumph, glory and hope for ever afterwards.

Pointers along the way #40

Why me, Lord?

"Why do I seem to have all the bad luck? How is it that others seem to have an easy time when things don't seem to be working out for me at all? Why is it that others can give testimonies of miraculous answers to prayers and deliverances while I am stuck in my problems in spite of many prayers? Etc." These are age old questions that many Christians have asked. Philosophical answers do not help us when we are caught in a desperate situation ourselves. It is only faith that can take us through triumphantly.

Peter, James and John were three disciples of Jesus who were close to Him. After Jesus ascended to heaven and the disciples started preaching the gospel, King Herod caught James and put him to death. He then caught Peter

and was about to kill him when an angel rescued him from prison (Ac.12:1-10). Now think of what the relatives of James would have thought.

"Why James and not Peter? Weren't they both close to Jesus? If James was a sinner and he got punished that would have been something else. What was the point in training him so much and then throwing up an opportunity for a fruitful ministry? How come Jesus didn't listen to our prayers for James and listened to the prayers for Peter? Etc."

If we look at this from merely an intellectual point of view, it is difficult to find answers that can explain everything. But look at it through the eyes of faith. Here is God the Father who has power to do whatever He wants (Ps.115:3). He could have easily saved James, but He chose this way. The fact is that God has different plans

specifically for each of us. All of us fit into different parts of the large canvas God is painting.

Each of us can contribute something different to the total witness of God in the world and also to the building up of the Body of Christ. Some may have prosperity while some face adversity. Some may glorify God through the exercise of outstanding gifts, and some others may do it through passing on the comfort they receive from God in their suffering. Some may even do it through their death (Jn.21:19).

When we love God and want to do His will, serve His purposes and glorify His name we are willing to go any way He chooses.

Questions, complaints, comparing ourselves with others and discouragement disappear as we choose to please God and humble

ourselves under the mighty hand of
God (1Pe.5:6).

Pointers along the way #41

We need the others

No man is an island. God has arranged it in such a way that we are all dependent on one another, not only for our life on earth but also for our spiritual life. But we may find it easier to recognise and accept our dependence on God than on people. Since God provides us much of His help through people, we tend to miss them when we neglect the process of receiving help from one another.

As believers and disciples of Christ, our sufficiency is of Him (2Co.3:5). When it says that we are complete in Christ (Col.2:10) it is not meant to be an abstract theological statement. It means that whatever we lack, in wisdom, understanding, ability, etc., we can draw it from Him. But when Christ wants to give us some help that we need, He does it many times

through one of the other members of His Body. If we lack the proper humility of heart and recognition of our need of these others, we end up missing this help altogether.

Since, as members of the Body of Christ we are all different from one another in terms of our function in the Body as well as our natural temperament, abilities, etc., this help may come to us in a form that is not straightaway fitting with our own ways. This poses an additional difficulty, that we may reject it even after we receive it.

For example one person may express something in a crude or blunt manner that is unpalatable for our ego. His or her viewpoint may be entirely new to us and we may reject it just because of that. The things that grip and move the other person, or the way he or she works with them, may be different

from ours because our functions in the Body (ministries) are different and we may find it difficult to relate to them. Perhaps out of ten things that a person tells us only one may be of direct relevance to us, but we may get put off by looking at the other nine. Etc.

We need to realise how small we are in the whole Body of Christ, even though each of us is individually precious in the eyes of the Lord. We need to also see how He has placed us all together, each part supplying something to the others for all of us to grow (Ep.4:16). Then we will be open towards the others and also thankful for each one of them.

Pointers along the way #42

Jesus as Lord

There were two sons, Jesus said, whose father wanted them to do some work. The first one said he would do it, but never did it, and the second one refused to do it, but finally went and did it (Mt.21:28-30). Jesus was trying to contrast the religious Jews of His time with the out and out sinners (v.31). But this can very well apply to us, Christians who listen to God, agree with everything He says, but finally do not do it.

There are many things concerning the will of God which we are not sure about. But ignorance is not the reason why we don't do many things which we have heard from God. Whether we have read from the Bible or heard from preachers, there are many things we have understood as the will of God for us. We also agree that we should do

them. But yet it happens that we don't do many of them ultimately. The apostle James saw this danger very clearly when he warned people that they should be doers of the word rather than mere hearers (Jas.1:22).

If we have understood the will of God, agree in our heart that we should do it, and also desire to do it, why is it that we still don't do it? It seems that we have not given Jesus His place as the Lord of our day to day life (Lk.6:46). We choose to do our own will in spite of knowing what the will of God is.

Jesus said that if we loved Him we would do what He said (Jn.14:15). But as it is, we love ourselves more. We see Him as Someone to serve us rather than as One we should serve. But if we see Him as One who gave Himself for us, the natural response should be to give ourselves for Him, to do His will (2Co.5:15). It is not enough if we make

one act of commitment to Him, but we also need to take up our cross daily, deny ourselves, and follow Him (Lk.9:23). That is the way to show our love for Him.

Pointers along the way #43

Want to change others?

From the days of Adam and Eve, people have been thinking that the fault is on the other side. We try to play one up with the others for what they have done to us, giving tit for tat and more, trying to teach them a lesson, or telling everyone around us how wrong the others are. We are always trying to change the people who give us trouble by telling them their faults, giving advice whether it is asked for or not, reminding them every time they do wrong, or praying for them.

We are waiting and waiting for the others to change, but to our consternation this does not seem to happen. Many times things seem to get worse! We tend to forget the fact that we human beings, in addition to being mostly unaware of our faults, can rarely tolerate others pointing out our

faults.

Out of all the methods people use to change the others, prayer may be the safest. In some cases this may be the only practical way that is open for us. God listens to our prayer and takes action. We must persist in this even if we cannot see immediate results. But even prayer does not seem to work in many cases.

Jesus has something to tell us in this connection. First of all He tells us not to judge the others (Mt.7:1). This is not saying that we must not have any opinion about what they do (See Jn.7:24). It means we must not view them with contempt or condemn them, as though we ourselves were angels (Lk.18:9). Jesus goes on to tell us not to be occupied with the specks in the other's eyes while we have logs in ours (Mt.7:3,4). To put it in the context of our subject, it means that these others

are put off by our pious attitude in which we are trying to pick out their specks while they can see logs in us which they see we are totally ignorant of!

This is what makes the whole thing ineffective. God too cannot answer our prayers when He sees such an attitude in us towards the others.

Jesus shows us the way. First take out the logs, and then we can see clearly to take out the specks (Mt.7:5). Keep working on our own lives to see how much we are unlike Jesus and to remove those logs. Then perhaps we can be of help to the others too.

Pointers along the way #44

We have a choice

One way the devil fools us into a sinful bondage is by making us think that there is no way out. He tells us that God has made us the way we are, only He can change us, and that He has not bothered to change us even after we have asked Him. We feel weak with the memory of past failures, and we honestly feel like agreeing with the devil. But a little voice seems to tell us that there must be still some hope with God. Of course, the devil is a crook and a liar, and there is hope with God.

One of the things God has created us with is the ability to learn and to make choices. We did not have a choice about how and where we were born and the circumstances we grew up in. We don't have a choice about many things other people do to us. But we do have a choice about what we do with

the given circumstances. We can complain, give up and give in to foolish reactions, or we can turn to God and earnestly seek for help.

When we yield to sin, a little bit of corruption sets in, and our ability to make the right choice next time becomes less (Ga.6:7,8). The natural course then is to make more sinful choices that ultimately get us into a cruel bondage that makes us miserable. But the good news is that God can break this vicious chain, if we turn to Him honestly, sincerely and in repentance.

There are two important issues at this point. 1. Do we really want deliverance and victory? (Jn.5:6). 2. Do we really believe that Jesus can set us free? (Jn.11:40).

Perhaps we have become so weak in our bondage that we doubt our ability

to 'want' or 'believe' consistently. But if we, for a moment, turn our eyes away from ourselves to Jesus, can't we see that He is not weak, but powerful to save the worst of sinners from any type of bondage? We 'believe' when we see that, and then we also 'want' to be saved. Then we can make the choice to turn to Jesus, and seek His help till we get it.

Pointers along the way #45

Testing ourselves

"The Message" Bible says, "Test yourselves to make sure you are solid in the faith. Don't drift along taking everything for granted. Give yourselves regular check-ups. You need first-hand evidence, not mere hearsay, that Jesus Christ is in you. Test it out. If you fail the test, do something about it" (2Co.13:5). It is possible that some of us may be assuming for ourselves that "Jesus Christ is in us," that we are Christians, while it may not be true. Do you think such a thing is not possible for you? Jesus said that on the judgment day He would have to tell some people who had even prophesied, cast out demons and done miracles in His name that He did not know them (Mt.7:22-23).

Some are afraid of taking such a test because they think they might fail!

Some even think that it is the devil who brings such 'doubts' in their minds. But the intention is not to confuse or condemn anyone, but to help everyone to make sure that he or she is really 'in.' Isn't it better to take the test now when we can do something about the result, than wait for the judgment day when there will be no more opportunity to set things right?

Do we have a personal, living relationship with Jesus, or is it only an impersonal knowledge about Him? This danger is especially there for those who have grown up in a Christian background. The one who has recognised himself as a sinner, repented and gone to Jesus for forgiveness knows Him personally, while the one who knows about Him only through tradition, rituals and hearsay has not really met Him.

The test that Jesus gave Peter was, "Do

you love Me more than these?" (Jn.21:15). We don't know exactly what He meant by 'these.' We can assume that He meant whether Peter loved Him more than he loved everyone and everything else, because that was what He had taught the disciples earlier (Lk.14:26,27,33). Those who really know Jesus cannot but love Him like this. Why don't we get to know Him like this?

Pointers along the way #46

Blessed forgiveness

The Bible says, "How blessed is he whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered!" (Ps.32:1). Why is it that a lot of us who believe and proclaim that God has forgiven our sins don't feel so blessed? Why do we feel diffident, uncertain and hesitant in our relationship with the Lord, and wonder at times whether He is with us or not? Why do we give the impression to the others that we are still carrying some burdens along?

That may be because our eyes have not yet been opened fully to see what Jesus has accomplished for us (Ep.1:18,19). We do see a little bit, but not clearly enough.

If we have truly repented from our sins and trusted in Jesus for forgiveness, He has indeed forgiven us. When God says

that He has forgiven us our sins, what does it mean?

1. Even though our sins were dirty red, now our hearts have been washed and made white like snow (Is.1:18).

2. Even though we were guilty enough to be sent to hell, we have been declared "Not guilty" and qualified for heaven (Ro.5:8,9).

3. God has put our sins as far away from us as the east is from the west (Ps.103:12).

4. God will not remember our sins against us any more (Je.31:34).

So our relationship with God is just as if we had never sinned. Our guilt is gone! We don't need to pay attention to our feelings of guilt. Now no one can accuse us about our past. Can't we now hold our heads up, look people in their eyes, stand up to the devil boldly and

live out the new life that Jesus has given us?

The new testament way of life

One essential difference between the way of life in the old and new testaments (not the books but the covenants) is how we obey God. The old covenant gave a list of commandments which had to be obeyed, and whenever there was need for further explanations the people could go to the priests or the prophets. What is the difference in the new covenant? Is it that we have been given more number of commandments or a higher standard?

The difference is that in the Old Testament people obeyed a set of commandments, and in the New Testament we obey a Person. Another difference is that in the Old Testament people obeyed because they were afraid of the punishment for

disobedience or because they wanted the rewards of obedience, but in the New Testament we obey because we love Jesus who has given Himself for us (1Jn.4:19:Jn.14:15).

The Bible says that God has not left us with laws or commandments but given us Someone who will be with us forever (Ro.7:4). In other words, we don't have to mechanically refer to the book of the law and see what we should do, but we can turn to Jesus and ask Him, "What do You want me to do, Lord?"

When Jesus went up to heaven, He sent us the Holy Spirit as our Comforter and Helper who would be with us forever (Jn.14:16). He will lead us into all the truth, and bring to our mind what we have learned earlier (Jn.16:13;14:26). He will not only tell us 'the truth,' but He will do it with compassion, understanding and

encouragement.

If we seek Him and listen to Him, we will also grow in our relationship with Him and experience the riches of His grace upon our lives in every way. Let us learn this way of life.

It is not that we don't need the Bible any more! The Holy Spirit teaches us His ways through the Bible which was inspired by Him in the first place. He makes the words come alive for us in the different situations. But it is no longer a cold dependence on the written word but a day by day relationship with the living God.

Pointers along the way #48

The excuses we make

We human beings are very clever at making up excuses. Look at some of the common ones for sin.

If it makes me happy, it's all right.

If it doesn't hurt anybody else, it's all right.

Since 'everybody' does it, it's all right.

You have to live in this world.

Nobody is perfect.

God wouldn't mind us having some fun.

Nobody will know about it.

I can't help it.

I don't know what made me do it.

God can't send me to hell for a small thing like this.

There are no absolute rules. Sin is
what you think it is.

I know Christians who do it.

I am willing to take a chance.

I can always repent later.

This will surely be the last time.

I can quit any time I want.

God is the One who made me like this.

God is a God of love. He is not a
legalist.

The devil made me do it.

My father (mother) was like this.

If only you knew what I grew up with!

I couldn't take it any more!

I gave it back to him.

It's not as if I committed murder or
something.

Etc.

But we really have no excuse, because Jesus has come to take away our sins (Mt.1:21;1Jn.3:5). If we don't go to Him and ask Him for salvation, it is our fault. When He sets us free, we will be truly free (Jn.8:36).

We would have to give an account for even every careless word that we speak (Mt.12:36). It is not that we can get away with anything, or any excuse. It is not that God will just ignore our 'small' sins. But small sins or big sins, Jesus can save us from them all. That is His work. Even if we have been failing right up to now, even now we can ask Him to step into our life and set us free.

Pointers along the way #49

Faith vs. obedience?

There is a large number of Christians who major on 'faith' to the extent that they believe that 'obedience' is legalistic. They relate obedience to the old testament and to the law, and think that faith is the only thing we need in this new testament period. They talk of freedom and liberty in the spirit, and especially of freedom from the law.

As in many cases where there is a conflict about doctrine, this also is a case of over-extending one part of the truth at the cost of another, without trying to see the balance. In this case, it is not really a matter of faith versus obedience, as if we have to choose one or the other. We need faith *and* obedience, in their own proper places.

The apostle James saw the need to resolve this issue. He went to great

length to explain that faith without works was dead (Jas.2:14-26). We understand that the 'works' he refers to are not the works people do by which they imagine God would accept them (Ro.3:20). But these are works which are the result of our faith. Our faith in Jesus makes us acceptable to God (Ro.4:5). Then we begin to obey Him because we love Him (Jn.14:15).

The Bible gives us many examples of what people *did* through faith (He.11). They were not just being optimistic and thinking that God will make things happen. Faith is optimistic, but is not merely optimism. Faith gives us a conviction of things that are not yet seen (He.11:1), and that conviction leads us to definite choices and action.

What James says is that without this conviction and the resulting action, our so called faith is a dead faith. It is not real. But the more we trust in God and

His word, and the more we allow ourselves to be led by His Holy Spirit, the more we will obey God. If we continue to live as we please and yet claim that we have faith, we are only deceiving ourselves (Jas.2:17,18).

Pointers along the way #50

Scared of the Holy Spirit?

Many Christians are scared of any experience with the Holy Spirit because they don't want counterfeit experiences. Many of them thus decide to keep a safe distance from the gifts of the Spirit rather than get into dangerous situations. They are right in wanting to have it safe, but very much wrong in missing out on the genuine.

The Holy Spirit is the Comforter and Helper whom the Father has sent us after Jesus went up to heaven after His resurrection (Jn.14:16). The Holy Spirit helps us to repent (Jn.16:8) and to pray (Ro.8:26), reminds us about the things Jesus has taught us (Jn.14:26), makes Jesus more and more attractive to us (Jn.16:14), gives us power to be witnesses for Jesus (Ac.1:8), transforms us into the character of Jesus (2Co.3:18), gives us gifts to

serve and bless the others with (1Co.12:7), guides us in the way we should go (Ro.8:14), comforts us (Ac.9:31), etc. What a great loss for us if we miss Him! However can we live a proper Christian life without Him!

Yet it is true that there are many counterfeit experiences that we need to avoid. We are not to believe every manifestation that looks like coming from the Holy Spirit (1Jn.4:1). Not everything that is supernatural is from God, because the devil also has some such powers. The devil even pretends to be coming from God in order to fool us (2Co.11:14). We need to look at the the end result to see if something is from God (Mt.7:20).

Not all counterfeits are from the devil. We ourselves can imitate the gifts of the Spirit to get into the club of Spirit-filled Christians or to impress people with our spiritual power. Some

experiences that people have in large meetings may be due to psychological and emotional influences.

But, as someone has said, the very fact that there are counterfeits shows that the genuine thing is really valuable. That is why we should not miss the genuine baptism of the Holy Spirit.

Are you afraid you might end up getting a counterfeit? Remember it is our Father who gives us the Holy Spirit, and He has promised that if we ask for bread He won't give us a stone, and if we ask for fish He won't give us a snake (Mt.7:9-11). If we seek Him honestly and sincerely for the Holy Spirit and we are not looking for cheap thrills, we can trust Him to give us the genuine experience.

Pointers along the way #51

Faith vs. optimism

It is through our faith in Jesus Christ that we are saved (Ep.2:8), and it is through faith that we can receive things - blessings, answers to prayers, help, healing, deliverance, etc. - from God (Mt.9:29). What if our 'faith' is not of the kind that God has in mind? What if what we consider as faith is one we have been taught wrongly by the others or we have made up by our own imagination?

It is possible to have a false faith, isn't it? The apostle James talked about a faith without works which was dead and worthless (Jas.2:20). Isn't it possible that some of us may have that kind of faith and are not aware of it?

Looking around at Christian circles I get the impression that there are those who, without being conscious of it,

live as though faith is the same as being optimistic. Now faith *is* optimistic, but to have faith is not the same as being optimistic. Imagine if someone thought that God would certainly take him to heaven because he was born in a Christian family or he went to church or did some good things for other people, etc., even though he has never recognised himself as a sinner, repented and trusted in Jesus as His Saviour! Certainly he is optimistic, and thinks he has faith, but obviously he does not have the faith that can save him.

We can infer from this example that for our faith to be acceptable it must conform to the facts revealed to us in the Bible concerning faith. If we are just optimistic about the future it will not help us unless our optimism is based on things God has told us. If God has not promised something to us, we

can't be sure of getting it just by wishing for it and hoping for it with optimism. Genuine faith has an assurance and conviction about it because it is based on God's clear promises and not on our wishful thinking (He.11:1).

How do we get genuine faith? By 'hearing' what God says concerning anything (Ro.10:17). We can depend on it because it is God who has said it. If He has promised something we can be sure He will do it. 'Hearing' can refer to God speaking to us when we read His word or listen to someone preaching it. It can also be when God speaks directly in our heart through the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit may bring to our mind something that God has said in the Bible, or He may specifically tell us something in line with the general principles given in the Bible. But whichever way He speaks,

when we hear Him we can have faith.

It is not wrong to be optimistic. But we can avoid a lot of disappointment if we learn to distinguish between the certainty of faith and wishful thinking.

Pointers along the way #52

Remembering God's mercies

When we first come to the Lord the thing that grips us most is the mercy and love He has shown to sinners like us. We are full of gratitude to Him for His amazing grace towards wretches like us. But so often this gratitude cools down as we move forward from the day of our conversion, learn greater truths and get involved in Christian activities. We tend to take the mercy of God for granted. Little by little our eagerness to please Jesus disappears and our approach towards sin and disobedience becomes more 'practical'! Backsliding has set in.

One of the things we can do to counter this tendency is to take time now and then to sit quietly before the Lord and think of the numberless mercies He has shown to us. The reason why Jesus established the practice of 'the Lord's

table' (or communion or breaking of bread) is that every time we do it we can remember and give thanks for His death on the cross on our behalf and what it has accomplished for us (1Co.11:24,25). The whole chain of His mercies starts from the cross.

But we have received much more from His hands than His forgiveness. The eyes of our Father see every blemish and imperfection that is in us, but His heart covers them all up with love. How patient He is towards us even though we take such a long time to learn His lessons!

Day by day we experience His mercies in many forms. There is not one child of His who cannot testify to miraculous escapes, protection in unexpected ways, and divine provisions when we were at our wit's ends. Maybe we didn't notice many of them as we sped along life's highway, but when we sit

down and think about them we see that there they were anyway.

Perhaps for some of us the way has been extremely hard and perplexing. But even then we cannot but admit that we too have experienced His miraculous interventions now and then.

The most marvellous thing about His mercy is that it is something we don't deserve. If we should have been sent to hell for but one of our sins, we should have been sent a thousand times. If the 'prodigal son' had been received back by the father after his backsliding, our Father has received us back countless number of times!

Once we start thinking of His mercies, can we but love Him? The closer we walk with Him, doesn't the wonder of His mercies strike us much more strongly? Won't we want to serve Him and proclaim His mercies to the others

too?

Pointers along the way #53

The Ephesus syndrome

This is a spiritual sickness that is more common than we usually realise. Its symptoms are several - lots of zeal, many activities, perseverance, a highly developed sense of discernment, an uncompromising attitude towards error, not easily giving up, etc. These symptoms make one think that we are not talking about a sickness but a state of vibrant health. But there is another symptom which, along with the others mentioned so far, is the outstanding feature of this sickness. That is a cooling off of the love for Jesus. Read Re.2:2-4.

This last symptom takes away all the positive values the other symptoms could have produced. In other words, a lack of love for Jesus makes all the other virtues without value.

Now let us think of how easily we can catch this sickness. Our own training in this world and the pressure from other Christians compel us to "do more" for Christ. The questions that we often ask ourselves and what others ask us are, "How many souls have you brought to the Lord?", "How many tracts have you given out?", "How many sermons have you preached?", "How many churches have you established?", "How many ...?" Therefore what we usually strive for is to have *more* of all these things. This is how we judge our success rating.

But the Lord has another basis for rating us. He asks us, "Do you love Me more than these?" (Jn.21:15). He does not want even our obedience apart from our love (Jn.14:15). Even if we burn out our bodies in so-called service for Him, He counts us as nothing if it did not come from love

(1Co.13:3).

There is no vaccine against this Ephesus syndrome that can protect us permanently. Our immune system is very weak against this particular germ. Our only protection is through a lifelong vigil against this attack, and a daily dose of love for Christ.

Pointers along the way #54

Overflow from inside

If we look at the lives of great men of God we see that they have all been driven to attempt and achieve great things for God because they were driven by a great love for God and their desire to show their gratitude to Him. The Apostle Paul said, "The love of God controls us" (2Co.5:14), and, "To me, to live is Christ" (Php.1:21). But what happens if we are driven instead by a desire to make a name for ourselves, make money, enjoy life, etc.? Even if we are busy in 'Christian' activities, and our ambitions are all centred around 'Christian' accomplishments, if we are driven by selfish motives we would be wasting our lives in terms of eternity. As someone has said, only things done at God's initiative, in His strength and for His glory will have value in eternity

(Ro.11:36).

It is not that we should not work for earthly things. Certainly we have to make our living on the earth, we have to earn money, and we have to be diligent and faithful in whatever we do. The difference between a godly life and a worldly life is where the heart is. Every earthly thing we do can be acceptable in God's sight if it is done according to His will and for His glory (Col.3:23). But now I am writing about doing things for God.

Jesus said that rivers of living water would flow from our innermost being, concerning how the Holy Spirit would work through us (Jn.7:38,39). In other words, any work that is of God will flow from deep inside us. That is where God is at work, *in* us, transforming us into the character of His Son, Jesus Christ (Php.2:13). It is out of the abundance of that life that

our external actions have to proceed, if we are to be accomplishing the will of God.

How easy it is for us to be taken up with all the things we are "doing for God," from singing in the choir to preaching (or any other thing) and not give attention to what God is trying to do *in* us! Using the above examples, we can be worrying about training our voice and protecting our throat from infections, or finding impressive illustrations and perfecting our delivery, while we do not pay much attention to keeping a good conscience or forgiving others. Then a time will come when we become dry and hollow inside and we have to resort to pretence and acting in order to preserve our name.

A life of pretence is heavy and hard to keep up for a long time. On the contrary, how pleasant and joyful it is

to listen to the Spirit of God and yield to Him, and do everything else in step with Him!

Jesus said that a cup of water given from the heart of a disciple would have its reward (Mt.10:42). He praised the widow who gave two coins to the temple because she gave out of her physical poverty but out of the abundance of her heart (Lk.21:3,4). It is not the quantity of the outward things that matters but the quality of the inside.

Let us seek to be true and real inside, and then the outside will also be real and lasting (Mt.23:26).

Pointers along the way #55

The offer of forgiveness

Why is it that it is so difficult for many people to receive forgiveness of sins from God, and for many who have received forgiveness to come into a bold confidence that God has accepted them the way they are? I can think of two main reasons.

The first one is that it seems so incredible that God should forgive sinners like us. When we are so much aware of ourselves, our sins and rejection from people we find it difficult to imagine how anyone, especially God, could accept us.

The second main reason seems to be that we may not be willing to give up some sin or secret idol in our lives. We recognise that if we have to go to God for forgiveness, we would also have to give up certain lifestyles.

The first group of people do not lack conviction of sins or repentance - they have more than enough of those - but they have been overcome with a sense of hopelessness or worthlessness. These are usually people with a sensitive mind or who have been taught by legalistically minded people that acceptance is based on performance.

The second group has a different problem altogether. They have experienced some conviction concerning sin, because they recognise that certain things need to be given up in their lives. But they do not understand the serious implications of those things that they are clinging to, how those things will strike them on their faces sooner or later.

The facts of the gospel are truly incredible from a natural point of view. It appears to be really illogical to believe that God who is pure and

holy will forgive sinners and accept them just as they are. If we consider only the righteous part of God it would have been impossible for God to forgive us. But what makes it possible for God to receive us is His love, and its largeness. It is when we see this love of God that we can understand how the laws of justice are overruled in the process of God reaching out to us (Jas.2:13).

It is when we are gripped with a clear view of this love that we can know acceptance - independent of performance (Ro.4:5) - and also find it easy to give up sins and idols that hold us back from God (2Co.5:14,15).

Pointers along the way #56

The way we think

Bad things happen to both good and bad people. When they happen to us we have a choice of how we will react, with complaining, questioning, blaming and cursing that we are tempted to, or in a good way. We have all reacted badly in the past, and because of repeated action some of that has become a way of life for us. It is almost as if given a certain set of circumstances it can be predicted how we would behave. If we now want to *become* godly, we have to learn to react in new, godly ways that we are not used to.

Jesus said that when we know the truth, it shall set us free (Jn.8:32). In other words, if we learn the truths concerning who God is, how God Himself behaves, who we are, what makes us behave the way we do, how

God wants us to behave in different situations, how we can become able to behave as God wants us to, etc., that will help us to be free from wrong ways of reacting to bad situations, and to become godly.

Of course Jesus did not mean just knowledge in our head. The more we learn these truths, the more we set our heart on becoming godly, and we seek God more to change our lives into His image. Bible study is important, but so is prayer, and so is fellowship and every other means of receiving grace.

Our old ways of reacting to bad situations and people used to lead us into more unhappiness, confusion, tension, anxiety, discouragement, depression, anger, malice, etc. These feelings would then lead to some bad words or actions from our side, and it would become a vicious circle. Now we need to learn how to break this

circle and get on to the way of godliness.

Paul talked about the need to be renewed in our mind in conformity with the new birth Jesus has given us (Ro.12:2;Ep.4:23;Co.3:10). Let us not think that it will happen automatically, but seek God actively for it.

Pointers along the way #57

Putting away childish ways

No one wants a child to remain as a child. Everyone wants children to grow into maturity. One mark of maturity is to be able to make the right choices in the midst of temptations from within, and suggestions, attractions and pressures from the world around. Children are characterised by their "I want", and their sulking or tantrums when they cannot get what they want. Grown ups who behave like this have not yet grown out of their childish ways.

God wants us, His children, to become mature (Ep.4:13). His word teaches us what is best for us, and He wants us to become able to choose that consistently even when we feel like doing something else. This involves a long learning process from the time we are born again, and never finishes fully

as long we are on this earth. This is the school of the cross, where we consistently take up the cross, crucify our desires on it, and walk forward doing what God says is the best for us (Lk.9:23). This is the 'not I but Christ' and 'not my will but Yours.'

Isn't this the essence of becoming mature? On the contrary, isn't it being childish when we insist on our own way and sulk and throw tantrums when we can't get it?

God's best for us can clash not only with what we would like to do, but also with what others want us to do. These 'others' can be our relatives, friends, or anyone else. When what they suggest or even insist on does not fit in with what God tells us to do, the mature man will choose God (Lk.14:26).

It is obviously not true that whatever

we feel like or whatever others tell us is always wrong or to be denied. Certainly not. Many times God speaks to us in our heart and through the others. But we shall be childish if we insist on our own way or slavishly do what others want us to do. Maturity is to be able to sift through all these inputs and choose what God wants us to do(1Co.14:20).

Pointers along the way #58

Active prayer

We people have a strong tendency to want to pass the buck, as they say. One common way is to pass the blame, as in, "Why did you eat from this tree, Adam?" and "This woman Eve gave it to me, Lord." Another way, which is not so easily noticed, is in our prayer. We like to pray to the Lord, pass on the responsibility for our lives to Him, and then behave as if we have no further responsibility.

For example, we pray, "Make me patient, Lord." And the next morning when we get impatient we question the Lord by wondering why He didn't make us patient. After all, we think, we acknowledged our need to Him and trusted in Him to change our lives. Why didn't He do His part?

The reason is that we were just passing

the buck to Him. He doesn't work that way with us. He wants us to grow up and become mature people. Of course He has the power to instantaneously make us patient people. But the way He actually works with us is to help us to *grow* in patience (2Pe.3:18). This is the reason why even asking godly people to pray over us does not change us overnight.

God works in us both to will and to do His good pleasure (Php.2:13). He gives us the desire and the willingness first. Then He also helps us by giving us ability to do His will.

Let us look at our prayer for patience. God first gives us an awareness of our lack of patience. We start praying for patience. The next time we begin to get impatient, He is there to make us alert and to remind us not to become impatient. He helps us as we 'struggle' to be patient. (This struggle is a part of

our growth process. Don't confuse it with 'works.')

Even if we fail to be fully patient we find that it was better than what it used to be.

If we seek for wisdom the Lord will show us *why* we become impatient, and *how* we can avoid that in the future. He trains us for this battle against impatience (Ps.144:1). And finally we become patient, through His grace, and in answer to our prayer. This type of prayer is an active, moment by moment, seeking after God, listening to Him and doing what He tells us.

We should not misunderstand "salvation by grace and not by works", and "casting all our cares upon Him", and end up becoming passive and irresponsible.

Pointers along the way #59

Which side are you on?

In democratic countries there is a ruling party and an opposition party. Usually it happens that the opposition party keeps opposing whatever the ruling party proposes, because that is how they see their role! On the other side, the people in the ruling party always support the party position. The question that bothers these people is which side they are on, and not what the issue is.

What about us Christians? If the teacher wants to meet you because your son has done something wrong, do you argue that he is innocent and that it is the teacher's fault? Do you think that is what it is to take your son's side? Sure, we must be on our son's side in that we love him and stand by him even when he has done wrong. But taking sides with him against the truth is not

pleasing to the Lord, is it?

That was about right and wrong. Let's go a bit further. If our enemy is suffering, do we get a thrill out of it or do we feel sorry for him? If we wish that he will get what he really deserves, whose side are we on, on the side of God who has shown us unmerited favour or with the devil who gets a thrill out of making us miserable?

These are issues that separate godly people from the ordinary. We may be Christians in that we have received forgiveness of sins and experienced that much of salvation. But godliness is more than that. It is to have the mind of Christ in us.

Jesus once mentioned about loving our enemies as going beyond what ordinary people do, that is, loving those who love us. He said that His

Father is good both to the righteous and to the unrighteous (Mt.5:44-47). That is *godliness*. When we become godly, and only then, we will be able to truly love our neighbour as ourselves (Mt.22:39). Then we will wish for the others what we wish for ourselves (Lk.6:31).

When we are on the side of truth, goodness, etc., we are on God's side. Or do we take our stand with "I, me and mine?"

Pointers along the way #60

Give and take

"Give and it shall be given to you, good measure, shaken together, running over" (Lk.6:38). Many times this verse is used in connection with giving money to the Lord and His work, and receiving blessings from the Lord in return. But how about looking at this along with the other verse that tells us to do to others as we would want others to do to us? (Mt.7:12).

Don't we all want to be loved, told that someone loves us, forgiven for our sins and mistakes, shown kindness, patience and mercy rather than harshness, appreciated, thanked, congratulated, etc.? What don't we be generous towards the others in doing these same things to them?

Instead we tend to be stingy with good things like these, and rather free with

the opposite - criticism, accusation, blaming, coldness and indifference towards people and ignoring them, holding on to their mistakes without forgiving them, impatiently demanding that they should be perfect in their behaviour towards us, etc.

On the top of that we complain that everyone is treating us badly. But aren't we simply getting back what we are merrily doling out?

Changes have to be initiated from our side. Of course. We have wasted enough time with the futile effort of trying to change the others. We have no power to change the others. But the power that God has given us can change us. And when we start giving out good things, we shall also begin to receive good things from the others. Isn't that quite natural, apart from God supernaturally working out things to fulfil His promises for us?

God says that our goodness can even change our enemies. If we respond in gentleness when someone is angry towards us, it can calm him down and make him also gentle (Pr.15:1). If we show goodness to someone who is doing wrong to us, it may cause him to repent (Pr.25:21,22). If our goodness can change our enemies, how much more it can change our friends and loved ones in dealing with us! The key is in our own hands.

Pointers along the way #61

How do we judge ourselves?

Back in the beginning, Cain and Abel, children of Adam and Eve, brought forth offerings to God. Cain was an agricultural farmer and he brought the first fruit of his field. Abel was a cattle farmer, and what he had to bring was an animal sacrifice. The Bible says that God was not happy with Cain and his offering, but He was pleased with Abel and his offering (Ge.4:3-5). It seems to be a bit too far fetched to interpret this, like many theologians do, that God was unhappy that Cain did not bring a blood offering like his brother Abel did. If Cain had brought his grain offering - what he had to offer - out of the love and gratitude that he had for God, how could he have been blamed?

But the Bible says that God was not pleased with Cain *and* his offering.

Perhaps the right way to understand this is to think that God was not happy with Cain, and therefore He was not happy with his offering.

We read that Cain was not at all happy with God's response. In fact he was very angry, first with God and also with Abel. He was so angry that he didn't listen to God's warning and went on to kill his brother.

Perhaps Cain could have explained his anger like this. "It's not fair. What was wrong with my offering? Didn't I bring what I had? How could God be so partial like this?"

But God looks at the heart (1Sa.16:7). He looks more intently at *why* we do and say things than at what we do. Perhaps Cain brought his offering from a sense of duty rather than from a heart of love and gratitude.

When people look at us, they can see

what we do and hear what we say, but they cannot pin us down on our "why." So we can try to justify our actions and words to people even in cases where our motives and attitudes have been wrong. But we can't fool God with that. If we want to be right with God we must concentrate on the inside. Jesus said, "You blind Pharisee, first clean the inside of the cup and of the dish, so that the outside of it may become clean also" (Mt.23:26).

Pointers along the way #62

How we conclude

Not all temptations can be dealt with immediately. If we are tempted to do something we know to be wrong, we can decide against it immediately. But then there are other situations where we are not so clear, and it may take some time to decide, with seeking the Lord for guidance, spending time in prayer, searching the Bible, and seeking counsel from others. There are still other situations where the temptation itself can be a long drawn affair, such as unbelief, doubt, anxiety, discouragement, etc., where it can be like a war with many small battles. In such cases, the most important goal is to win the war, even if we lose one or two battles.

You know how anxiety can be, for example. You are anxious about something that is going to come up in

the future. You pray and also remember the promises of God in the Bible. As you try to take hold of the promises you seem to get on the top of the situation. But then soon enough you are back in your anxiety as some new thoughts come up in your mind about what could happen to you. The battles go on. Sometimes you are up, and sometimes you are down. You finally get the victory when you get hold of faith, and what you were anxious about does not shake you anymore. On the other hand, if you go into the dumps and give up hope you have lost the war too.

Abraham, the father of faith, had his battles too. We read about him that he did not waver in unbelief, but grew strong in faith, giving glory to God (Ro.4:20). But just how exactly did he grow strong in faith? Not without battling with doubts. In fact his faith grew stronger as he battled and

overcame his doubts. Every time he had a doubt he told God about it, and received encouragement from Him. The time he lost the battle was in the matter of Hagar when he went on without reference to God.

The point about Abraham's faith was that he did not give up in unbelief, but endured till the end. That was how he received the promise (He.6:12). For us too, the important thing is that we must not give in or give up even if there are ups and downs in between. Then we can end triumphantly in faith.

Pointers along the way #63

Is God our genie?

When Jacob in the Old Testament had an experience with God, he tried to make a deal with Him. Jacob told God that if He took care of Him and provided for all his needs, *then* God would be his God! (Ge.28:20,21). Isn't this the way many people treat God?

We would like to live our own lives, do whatever we like, and enjoy ourselves in every way, and we want God to take care of us. He should come and clean up the mess after us, go in front of us and shield us from things that could hurt us, bail us out when we get into problems, and run here and there getting whatever we ask for. Then we shall like Him, and maybe *accept* Him.

But if He doesn't answer some of our prayers or lets us get into some

difficulties then we don't like Him. Then He has to win our favour again through some special blessing!

Are we treating God as if He is a genie who has to appear whenever we rub a ring or lamp? Do we expect Him to run around at our command doing whatever we want? Then we have got it all wrong, all upside down.

God is the One who created us, and in that way He owns us. When we went away from Him and became children of the devil (Jn.8:24), He is the One who gave Himself (through His Son Jesus) to save us from the hold of sin and its punishment, and purchased us from back Satan's hands. He is now our Owner by both rights. We are now His *bondslaves* apart from being His children (1Pe.2:16).

Now we, as slaves we ought to be standing at God's beck and call, asking

Him, "What do You want me to do,
Lord?"

Curiosity can kill

Curiosity can be a good thing. We can see that intelligent children show a lot of curiosity about the world around them, and they are always exploring and making new discoveries. Curiosity drives us to seek for more knowledge and understanding as we wonder about the how and why of people and things. But an undisciplined and unrestrained curiosity is a major tool in the hands of the devil to lead us into many temptations.

When children begin to explore things, they have no idea about what is good and bad for them. They touch, pull, push, grab and put into their mouths whatever they find. Parents usually have a tough time protecting them from things that can harm them. They try to keep certain things out of the children's reach, and teach the children not to do

many, many things. "No", and "Don't" become some of the most used words for the parents at this time.

When we are spiritually babies, it seems as though *all* that God tells us is "No" and "Don't". But when we grow and become more mature we realise that when God tells us "No", it is to protect us from some harm.

But it is not always easy to remember that when we are tempted by something through our curiosity. We like to explore new experiences, see new things, feel new thrills and try out new fads. "Just try it once" is what the devil and some of our friends tell us. We think we can just enjoy something for a fleeting moment and then decide not to do it again. But it doesn't work that way.

Eating forbidden fruit always brings us 'death' (Ge.2:16,17). Something dies in

our spirit when we disobey God. We lose touch with God, a sense of defeat, shame and guilt comes in, and we become a little distant from other people (Ge.3:7-10).

We can't flirt with sin and get away free. We lose out. We may be lured by the momentary thrills that wait for us. But there is always a hangover! Life becomes more complicated every time we yield to sin.

Let us not imagine that we are strong enough to quit after we have tried our hand at some new pleasure. Countless number of people in hell and on earth can tell us how they got tricked into a miserable bondage of habits and life changing decisions because they did not contain their curiosity. Let us be among the others who realised their danger and clung on to God for safety.

Pointers along the way #65

How do we make decisions?

We know that when God left Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden there was only one thing that He specifically told them not to do. They were not to eat from the tree of knowledge of good and evil (Ge.2:16,17). God also told Adam about what would happen if they disobeyed. They would 'die.' This death was not only physical death that they would have to face, but also spiritual, in that they would lose their fellowship and communion with God.

But we know what happened. Satan tempted Eve, downplaying what God had told them and luring her with the attractive appearance of the fruit, her curiosity to taste it and the possibility of becoming wise (Ge.3:1-6). Poor Eve fell into the trap because she could not see what could be wrong with attractive and tasty fruit, especially if it

had the power to make her wise. Her biggest mistake was in overruling what God had clearly and specifically said.

When God has said "No" to something, it is certainly because it is bad for us. On the other hand when God tells us to do something, it is because it is good for us. How do we fall? When we are moved by our feelings or reasoning and ignore what God has said. Certain things seem to be attractive to us, and we put aside what God has said.

Even when we are going against what God has said, like Eve we justify ourselves by bringing out some 'good' reason for our disobedience. When we want to marry an unbeliever we make ourselves believe that by doing so we would be able to bring him or her into God's family. When we are running after money or doing something crooked to make more money we tell ourselves that we will have more

money to give for missionary work. We are quite ingenious when it comes to justifying ourselves.

But the fact still remains that every time we disobey God we 'die' (Ro.8:13). If we have fallen there is good and bad news. The good news is that we can be forgiven if we confess our sins (1Jn.1:9). The bad news is that some of the consequences of our sins may last through our whole life.

Why don't we learn to recognise that if God has said something there is no going around it? There is no way we can ignore or disobey God and justify ourselves. It doesn't matter how attractive a proposal appears to be to us. If God has said "No", that settles it.

Pointers along the way #66

Practical forgiveness

Sometimes our ideas about forgiveness are unrealistic. Perhaps the most common mistake is to think that God's forgiveness has no conditions. We must remember that God forgives us only when we repent and believe, and not just believe (Mk.1:15). 'Believing' as it is taught in the New Testament includes repentance. Jesus said also very plainly that unless we forgive others our Father in heaven will not forgive us (Mt.6:15).

God's forgiveness is not irrevocable. Jesus gave a parable to teach that God can withdraw the forgiveness that He once gave us if we refuse to forgive someone else down the line (Mt.18:32-35).

God promises us that He will be merciful to our sins and will not

remember them any more (He.8:12). Of course this does not mean that He forgets them, because God cannot forget anything. What He means is that He will not hold them against us anymore.

When God forgives us it does not always mean that we suffer no consequences of our past sins. God may sometimes do such miracles, but usually the physical and social results of our sins continue (to humble and discipline us).

When it comes to us forgiving someone else, we must remember that we are not God but only men. God has the authority to forgive or to punish. But we must leave vengeance to God (Ro.12:19). We have no option but to forgive those who do wrong to us, if we want to be forgiven ourselves. We cannot even wait for others to repent before we forgive. One of the most

powerful examples Jesus gave us as a Man was to forgive those who were killing Him in a most cruel way (Lk.23:34).

It is unrealistic to try to forget what others have done to us. What we can do is to make sure that we don't hold people's sins against them any more. We don't wish them any evil and on the contrary, we wish and pray for their welfare (Lk.6:27,28).

We cannot wait for the pain and sorrow to disappear before we forgive. Forgiving is an act of the will which we do first based on our knowledge of God. God gives us grace to do that, and then takes us slowly out of the pain and sorrow.

We cannot forgive if we think of what people deserve. But we can forgive when we think about how God forgives us, not according to what we deserve

(Ep.4:32).

Forgiving others does not always amount to becoming the best of friends with them. If others continue to be hostile towards us, we certainly have to be careful in associating with them (Ro.12:18).

Pointers along the way #67

Sometimes just to endure

We would all like to be free from trouble, and we would like Jesus to come and take away our problems the moment we ask Him. There are preachers who invite people to come to Jesus giving an impression that once they come to Jesus He will do that for them. But one of the most common reasons for backsliding is disappointment when our expectations are not met or when God does not seem to answer our prayers.

When Job was going through trouble - all his children killed, all his wealth destroyed, his body incapacitated with an irritating disease - his wife gave him her advice, to curse God and die (Job.2:9). Job had more sense, and more faith in God than to do that. Do we realise that if we turn our back on God and 'curse' Him we will be the

losers? We may even end up sliding down to our spiritual death.

If we cry out to God in the name of Jesus we can be sure that He hears us (1Jn.5:14,15). The only thing that will cause God to turn away His ears is if we are holding on to some sin in our lives without being willing to give it up (Ps.66:18). Once God hears our prayer, we can be sure that He will do something about it. He may not act in the way we expect, but He will do what is best.

If God has specifically promised us something, He will grant it to us. We should not stop asking. Perhaps He will do it immediately, or perhaps He will answer it at the appropriate time later. In Abraham's case, it was 25 years after he received the promise of a son that Isaac actually appeared. But because Abraham held on to the promise with *endurance* he received

more than what was promised. He got a son, as well as acceptance by God as a righteous man (He.6:12;Ro.4:19-22).

But we should not stop praying even if there is no specific promise from God for our situation, because we know He is a good Father. Sometimes God may tell us that He is not going to take away our trouble, but that He will give us special grace to endure it (2Co.12:7-9). Perhaps there is some person in our life who constantly irritates us, or there is some financial pressure that does not go away, or there is some nagging sickness that is not responding to prayer or treatment. We are not able to change the situation, and our prayers to God to change it also seem to go unanswered. Perhaps God wants to tell us, "My child, I am not going to change your situation immediately. But I will help you so that *you* can change, and demonstrate My love, mercy, kindness

and patience much better." Shall we rise up to the challenge?

Pointers along the way #68

Why do we backslide?

I am using 'backsliding' to mean slipping down from the level of love and devotion towards Jesus and the intimacy to which we have come with Him (Re.2:4). In other words, backsliding is a cooling off in our relationship with Jesus. If we don't watch out at this point, we may finally end up going back into sin, worldly ways and even losing our salvation.

I want to list below some common reasons why we start backsliding. The list is not exhaustive.

*** When we feel disappointed with God.** If a prayer is not answered, or when we wonder why God has allowed something terrible to happen to us or a loved one, it is natural to feel disappointed. But that is no reason to give up on God. On the contrary it is

the time for us to draw nearer to God and get to know Him and His ways better.

*** When we feel envious of worldly people.** When we watch worldly people 'enjoy' themselves, 'prosper,' 'rise' in position or fame, we wonder why we shouldn't too. Soon our thoughts get occupied with how we too can enjoy such things. We forget that their fun and prosperity are lined with sin and compromise, and that they are on a slippery way to destruction (Mt.7:13;Ps.73:18).

*** When we are tired of our self-denial and sacrifice.** The thought may come into our mind that in all our seeking to live for God we may have been a bit foolish to miss out on many things we could have enjoyed. The devil tells us that ministry is fine but we also need to have some fun. God tells us not to grow weary in doing

good but to continue in faith (Ga.6:9;1Co.15:58).

*** When we want to cover up some sin.** If we do this, it will slowly harden our heart and break our connections with the Lord (Pr.28:13).

*** When we love someone or something more than God.** When some human relationship, position or thing becomes so important for us that we are willing to disobey God, what we lose is our relationship with God. Let's not imagine that God will wink His eyes over it.

*** When we are double-minded.** If we have not made up our mind to seek God and His righteousness *first*, backsliding is not far away.

*** When we are prospering.** We tend to forget God when things are going well and we don't find any particular

need for God (De.8:11-14).

The best way to avoid backsliding is to be constantly seeking for more of God.

Pointers along the way #69

Running to the Father

Do we keep a child-Father relationship with God? It is not a matter of calling Him "Heavenly Father" but recognising and living in a simple, practical relationship. "Father knows," "Father can" and "Father will" can be daily parts of our thinking. We can run to Him at all times, like a small child to his father, whether it is to thank Him for what He does for us, to worship Him when we realise how awesome He is in His holiness, love, power and wisdom, to tell Him what we are going through or how we feel, to ask for help for ourselves or for others, etc.

What are some of the wrong thoughts about God that prevent us from running to Him?

Lie No. 1. "God must be angry with me." When it says that God so loved

the world (i.e., all the sinful people of the world) that He gave His only begotten Son, does it look like He will be angry with us because we have done something wrong? (Jn.3:16). No, He is not angry. He wants to *save* us. He will not throw us out if we go to Him, whatever condition we may be in (Jn.6:37).

Lie No. 2. "God is not bothered about my little problems." He is, very much. It was to impress this on us that Jesus mentioned about the Father counting every hair on our head (Mt.10:30).

Lie No. 3. "Even God can't do anything now." Is there anything too hard for the Lord? Don't limit what the Lord can do by not asking Him (Jas.4:2).

Lie No. 4. "I'm scared of what God will ask me to do." Don't think of God as hard taskmaster, a nit-picking legalist, a spoilsport, or someone who

gets a thrill out of making things difficult for us. On the contrary, we can never have a friend who is more understanding, tender or merciful, wiser, or one who is more eager to do us good.

Lie No. 5. "I'm very upset now. I'll go to God later." No, this is the very time when we need to go to Him. We can tell Him about our frustration, disappointment, discouragement, how we hurt, etc. He knows, and He cares.

Lie No. 6. "What's the use? I'll never be able to please Him." It is because we are not able to go up to His level that He came down to our level. He takes us as we are and from where we are. He is not looking for perfect people but a trusting, humble acceptance of His love.

Lie No. 7. "He seems so far away." God is near to *all*, all who call on Him

sincerely (Ps.145:18). If you have been born again, He is also *in* you (2Co.13:5). Don't depend on your feelings.

Pointers along the way #70

Standing with the others

As we look around we find that people everywhere are getting more and more confused. Life's problems are getting more and more complicated. More and more people are giving up than ever before. Many Christians are also getting weary and losing faith. There is so much need for those who can stand holding out hope and confidence for the future. Shall we be such, as the light and salt of the earth?

God describes such people in Is.32:2. "And each will be like a refuge from the wind, and a shelter from the storm, like streams of water in a dry country, like the shade of a huge rock in a parched land." Who can be like that in these days? We would all like to know such people to whom we can go with our problems. But can't we become such ourselves so that we can bless

and serve the others by helping them to carry their burdens?

When the pressure increases, those who know God can stand without buckling (Da.11:32). That is when our knowledge of God is tested. If it is only theoretical, accepted second hand from others, we shall not be able to stand. But God has now made it possible for us, from the least to the greatest, to know God personally (He.8:11). We know Him in a real sense, and not just as a matter of doctrine or belief. We experience His fellowship and get to know His ways. And then we can stand with confidence in His love, strength and wisdom at those times when we cannot feel His presence or see answers to our prayers and things look impossible.

All of us will go through such trying times, when we cannot understand what is happening or know what is

going to happen. At such times it is our knowledge of God's help in the past and trust in His promises which will hold us up.

Then we can also stand along with others who are going through tough times, and encourage them to go on and not to give up (Ro.15:1). God needs many such witnesses these days. What a great joy it is to help someone to tide over his time of trial! God promises those who make efforts to help others that their own needs will be taken care of abundantly (Pr.11:25).

Pointers along the way #71

Proactive thinking

Have you noticed that one of the questions Jesus frequently asked His disciples was, "What do you think?" He wanted to know if they had thought about the issues that came up as they dealt with different situations in life. This also tells us that He wants us to think for ourselves about the issues that we face.

Many Christians seem to have handed over their thinking to their priests, pastors or prophets. They seem to think that they are not capable or equipped enough to think for themselves because they do not have a theological background. Some seem to be too lazy to think. Some are obviously trying to transfer the responsibility for their actions to their leaders! Some leaders apparently enjoy such dependence that their people have on them, and some

even use it to manipulate their followers.

But Jesus wants us to think, and have our own opinion about different people and things. Did you know that even when a recognised prophet speaks, we are supposed to examine what he says and make sure that what he says fits in with what God's word says? (1Th.5:20,21;1Co.14:29; 1Jn.4:1). In other words, don't swallow everything blindfolded! Don't be overawed by the 'greatness' of the prophet or fear his wrath. There is no man who is infallible or who knows everything.

We need to be humble before the Lord, when we do our thinking. We acknowledge that He is always right even when we cannot understand His ways. When God says something clearly in His word, we must accept it. We also recognise that there are people who are more mature and experienced

who can guide us to the truth, and we listen to them without giving up our right to differ with them. When we don't understand something we must search out the answers honestly and humbly (Pr.25:2), recognising that as long as we are here on earth we need to be willing to learn and change.

In this way we can become mature ourselves, and become able to stand without wavering in times of adversity or misunderstanding. Then we can also help the others to grow up and become strong.

Pointers along the way #72

Talking with God

Moses and God used to speak to each other face to face like friends! (Ex.33:11). Moses could never see God, even though he could see some small manifestations and hear an audible voice at times. But Moses chatted with God, asked Him questions, argued with Him, tried to change His mind, pleaded for the people, told Him about his problems, frustrations and limitations, asked Him to intervene in the different situations, etc. Just like friends.

We say we are not Moses. We say we have never seen God in a dream or vision leave alone face to face, or heard any audible voice from heaven. And then we conclude that we might as well reconcile ourselves to such a routine humdrum life and just make sure that we don't backslide! What a

shame!

Some Christians have been taught from childhood to think of God in such awesome terms that He is so far above them, out of reach. A large number of Christians think of God only when they get into trouble. Many others have practically stopped going to God because of some disappointment in the past.

But like James said about prayer, we don't get to know God as a friend because we don't go to Him as a friend! (Jas.4:2). Why don't we start talking to Him as a friend? Tell Him all that is on our heart, our plans, problems, etc., and listen to Him as He talks back to us in our heart.

How can we hear God? Remember that under the new covenant which Jesus has made with us, God lives in our hearts. We can 'hear' God in our spirit

(heart). This may be in the form of ideas that come to our mind or a reminder of some verse in the Bible that is appropriate for the situation. Sometimes the 'voice' can be clear. But most of the times it may look just like our own thoughts.

Perhaps we find it difficult to distinguish His voice in the midst of all the thoughts that crowd around in our mind. But if we believe that He delights in chatting with us and if we don't give up, we can get to know His 'voice.' Let us also keep in mind that when God speaks He will not contradict what He has already given us in written form in His word.

It is not that we treat God as if He is 'one of us' (Ps.50:17-21). With reverence towards Him as our Lord, we can still become close to Him as a friend.

We will face times or periods when, for reasons we cannot understand, we can't seem to hear anything from God. Those are times we have to tide over by holding on in faith. We know that even if we can't hear, *He* hears us.

We will never come to a place in this life, as long as we have this sinful flesh, where we cannot make mistakes concerning His voice. But while that teaches us to be cautious and not to be presumptuous about our ability to hear God, let us not lose out on the fellowship God offers us as His children, from the greatest to the least (1Jn.1:3;He.8:11).

How shall it go better with me?

One question that troubles Christians is about what we need to do in order to make it go better with us, both concerning our spiritual progress and our life on earth. Some of the aspects that we address in this connection are:

1. **Love for God.** We are to love God with all our heart, and more than we love people or things (Mt.22:37;Lk.14:26). Otherwise, we really don't love Him the way He deserves.

2. **Fear of God.** A reverence and respect for God, knowing who He is in relation to us, will give us a proper perspective in dealing with Him and His commandments (Pr.2:3-5;9:10).

3. **Faith.** We must trust in the Lord,

knowing that He cares for us, He is always for us, He will keep His promises, He will never leave us, etc. Even when fears and doubts trouble us, we must settle down quickly to this faith.

4. **Repentance.** A sense of repentance must be constantly in us that acknowledges every sin we become aware of, and which moves us to confess and set it right.

5. **Humility.** A recognition of who we are in relation to God, accompanied by love and gratitude towards God, will help us to keep away from high thoughts about ourselves and going beyond the boundaries God has set for us.

6. **Honesty.** This is more than being honest in our transactions with the others and in our speech. It is an openness towards God, without hiding

or pretending.

7. **Fellowship.** Fellowship with other members of God's family encourages, challenges, corrects, guides and protects us, and helps us to grow.

8. **Bible study.** Just reading the Bible is not enough. When we study it personally or in groups it helps us to understand God's ways and to change our lives into His image.

9. **Prayer.** This is our link with God. It is not telling Him what all we want, but to 'talk' things over with Him, telling Him about ourselves and listening to Him.

10. **Self denial.** The more we get to know Him, the more we find we have to deny ourselves what our flesh would like us to do. We choose this way because this is the one that will lead us closer to Him (Lk.9:23).

One common mistake we make is to think that any one of the above (or something else) is the secret of an abundant life, and neglecting the others. We do that when we become aware of some particular lack in our life, or when some preacher or writer presents his message forcefully. But our life is a whole, and it must be wholly directed towards God if we are to draw closer to Him.

Pointers along the way #74

The first sacrifice

The most popular Christian activity nowadays seems to be "praise and worship," and even unconverted people enjoy it for its "soul stirring" experience. One of the common exhortations preachers give in this connection is to make the sacrifice of praise to God with our lips (He.13:15). It is certainly right and good that we learn to give importance to worshipping God in contrast to being occupied with ourselves. However there is a sacrifice that should come before this, which is really the first sacrifice that we should go to God with.

I am referring to the sacrifice of a broken and contrite heart (Ps.51:17). This is the one we have to offer to God when we meet Him for the first time. At that point in time, we relate to Him

as sinners standing before a holy God, with nothing in our hands to earn His favour. "Sin," "sinner," etc. have become unpleasant words for many people and politically incorrect to mention. But the fact is that Jesus Christ came into the world to save sinners, and that there is no way we can find acceptance with Him if we go to Him as righteous or good people (1Ti.1:15;Mt.9:13).

If we don't go to Jesus first of all with the sacrifice of a broken and contrite heart, repentant and sorry over our sins, we cannot receive from Him the cleansing that His blood can give. He wants to wash away *all* our sins, and make our hearts white like snow (Is.1:18). But He cannot do it if we go to Him as "I am OK" people.

Can we end with having to deal with sin once we have received a cleansing from Jesus? Unfortunately not, because

we all have a tendency to fall into sin again. We fall, either by doing things we shouldn't do or by not doing things we should do, all our life. If we are sensitive in our heart, we will always have need to carry this sacrifice of a broken and contrite spirit to God as we approach Him.

A godly sorrow over our sins and our sinfulness will help us to be careful about sinning and give us a strong desire to be more pleasing to the Lord (2Co.7:10,11). This will also help us to have a more humble attitude towards others when we see their faults. And, this will also make our praise and worship more meaningful.

God's love and the fear of God

This is a paradoxical situation for the Christian. We recognise and believe in the great love God has for us, which He has demonstrated by sending His Son Jesus to die in our place for our sins (Ro.5:8). We recognise that His love for us is not because we are acceptable to Him, but because He is love. He loves us because that is His nature. He loves us whom He has created even though He sees everything in us that is unacceptable to His holiness and sense of righteousness. But the more we learn to enjoy this love, the more we are tempted to misuse it and take it as a license for sin. The more we know His love, the more we tend to ignore the fear of God.

On the other hand, those who fear and

respect God and seek to obey Him in everything tend to be uncertain about His love for them! The more they try to be faithful to Him and to do His will, the more they become aware of how much they are in fact coming short of His standards. They wonder how God could be pleased with them when they themselves are not pleased with their lives.

But as someone said about many such paradoxes in Christian life, the solution is not to take one side as being more important than the other, but to hold both sides as being equally important and keep working on our lives to become compatible with both at the same time.

It is easy to take one side or the other, depending on factors such as how our natural temperament is inclined or what emphasis our local church provides. But this will invariably make

our Christian life unbalanced. We can't afford to neglect one part of the truth in favour of another. We need to fear God and respect His commandments while at the same time being assured of His love for us irrespective of our spiritual attainments or failures.

Jesus said that if we loved Him we would keep His commandments (Jn.14:15). In other words, if we are not driven by love, we can't keep the commandments in the proper manner. On the other hand, if we are being negligent about keeping His commandments because we think He loves us, our love is not genuine.

There is a sense in which we experience God's love much more closely when we are faithful in our love for Him and in keeping His commandments than when we are casual about faithfulness. This is the natural result of coming closer to Him. But if

He loved us when we were His enemies He does not stop loving us when we sometimes fail as His children.

We love God because He loved us (1Jn.4:19). We don't want to grieve Him by taking sin lightly. Our love for God and our fear (respect) for God drive us to be careful in keeping His commandments.

Pointers along the way #76

We all make many mistakes

This is what the Apostle James, who is known for his plain speaking, said (Jas.3:1,2). He included himself, even though he was an apostle, and did not claim any infallibility. We can say that our fallibility pertains to every area of practical life. We were all born as fallen people (Ps.51:5), and even when we were born again we remained fallible. The only one who is infallible is God Himself, and not even the angels.

James was referring especially to teaching when he mentioned this. We all make mistakes even when it comes to doctrines. If any one of us imagines that we have got all the doctrines right, down to the punctuation marks, we are fooling ourselves.

It does not appear that everyone

acknowledges this. Practically every church group implicitly claims perfection in their doctrines, even when they prefer to keep silent about their practices. When they find that there are differences in their doctrines compared to others, they prefer to start their own Bible schools to propagate their views rather than acknowledge that they could be wrong too in some points.

I don't think there are any two Christians in the whole world who agree completely on all doctrinal matters, unless one of them has chosen to let the other do all the thinking.

Even when we agree on the essential and major aspects of doctrine, we differ on relative emphasis of different aspects and especially on the applications. This is unavoidable while we are still on earth because we are all so different from one another as

human beings in many respects. Our temperament, intelligence, upbringing, social and cultural background, church experience, ministry, etc., all play some part in shaping our views and understanding.

The net result is that we see things differently, and none of us sees the full picture. As Paul said, we see only in part, and that too dimly (1Co.13:12). If we recognise and acknowledge this for ourselves, we can stop being pig-headed about our own views, and be willing to give respect to other people's views and learn from them.

It is not that we accept everyone's views. Many times we may have to disagree with them. But if we are willing to keep an open mind and examine their views, it may help us to round off the rough edges in our own views. And certainly it will help us to have a more sober estimate of

ourselves.

Pointers along the way #77

Taking our position

One of the things that may confuse us when we read the Bible is about reconciling the strong statements about victorious life with what we see in our actual experience. The Bible says that when Jesus died on the cross we died with Him and that we are now seated with Him in heaven (Ro.6:6,8;Eph.2:6). As a result of this, we are dead to sin, freed from sin and alive to God (Ro.6:7,11).

Now there are two simplistic ways to deal with this. The common way is to look at our experience and conclude that these things are not true or at least not true for us. The second way is to struggle to make our experience fit with these words in the Bible. The first way results in settling down to a defeated life with no hope of victory. The second way also ultimately results

in defeat, because we are not able to get to a life of victory however much we may struggle. At the end of the struggle this way leads to frustration and disillusionment also.

When we look at our experience we think we are right here on earth and not in heaven, and we have not died or become dead to sin. We do see that when we were born again the Lord has given us a desire to stop sinning. But does our experience seem to indicate that that is just as far as we are likely to get?

If we want to find the right approach we have to start from a position that what the Bible says must be true, even if we are unable to explain it in terms of our experience (Ro.3:4). What we can understand then is that what the Bible describes is the position God has granted to us through grace because we believe in what Jesus has done for

us.

It is like God placing a large amount of money in our account and asking us to take and use it. The money is now ours by right. But we can only enjoy it as much as we take out and spend. At the same time we must realise that it is there for us to take, and that we don't have to struggle and earn it.

There is a crucial difference between believing that the things God has said are true and then going on to enjoy them, and thinking that we have to work hard and somehow come to attain to all such levels. When God asks us to *work out* our salvation (which has already been granted to us), we don't have to work *for* our salvation (Php.2:12,13).

Meditate on what God has said He has done for us till we receive faith. When we believe what God has written, faith

comes in, and then we won't even have any problem believing that we can stop becoming anxious, losing our temper and being overcome by lustful thoughts.

Pointers along the way #78

Learning relational skills

There are many things that come up in personal relationships that can cause a lot of distress and sometimes long lasting breaks. People tend to either withdraw and distance themselves from the strife, or take it up on a confrontational basis. Neither approach works. We can look at an example in the life of David where it was a case of passive inaction.

One of David's sons, Amnon, raped his step sister Tamar. David heard about it, fumed about it, but did nothing. Tamar's brother Absalom kept quiet for two years and then killed Amnon. Absalom then ran away from David. For three years David did not do anything about it. The story developed further, till one day Absalom rebelled against David and declared himself king (2Sa.13-15).

There are many issues in this story, but what I want to look at is only about how many things could have been avoided if Absalom and David had taken steps to resolve the issues rather than allow them to fester, deepen and get more complicated.

There will be conflicts. They won't go away if we ignore them or pretend they are not there. Neither can we imagine that if we wait long enough they will resolve themselves. Time is a great healer, but only when a healing process has been started and not when destructive forces are at work.

Some of us are temperamentally inclined to avoid conflicts. We may think we are peace-loving people. But the fact of the matter may be that we don't know how to handle conflicts. Even if we have tried to put out the fire in the past and our attempts have only resulted in bigger eruptions, all it

shows is that we need to learn how to handle such situations.

On the other hand, some of us are inclined to fight it out, no matter if the other party responds favourably or not. We think we don't want to stand any nonsense and we are prepared to go to any length to set things right. But the fact may be that we imagine that we are right and the others wrong, which is hardly the case most of the time! We don't know how to handle things in a humble and an understanding way.

So what is needed? 1. Seeking God for wisdom and grace. 2. A strong desire to resolve the issue. 3. Willingness to listen to the other side. 4. Patience to listen without interrupting. 5. Inner acknowledgment that we could be wrong. 6. Humility to ask and receive forgiveness. 7. Determination to try and discuss things without getting upset, blaming each other and calling

names. 8. If possible, set up ground rules with the other party for holding discussions.

Of course, when we try this, we may fail. But we can learn to do things better each time.

Pointers along the way #79

In line with the promises

God has given us many promises in the Bible. If we are wondering why we are not receiving what are promised, one reason may be that we are not taking hold of those promises.

What happens when we come across a promise in the Bible? Let us look at one example. "For sin shall not be master over you, for you are not under law, but under grace" (Ro.6:14). This means we are to be on top of sin. We don't have to be defeated by sin. What is our response?

"That's all very well. It'll be good if it happens. But I am only human and I am not strong enough to defeat sin." Is that our response? There are a couple of things wrong with this approach because we have misunderstood what is involved. We think that it is up to us

to defeat sin, and that we have to struggle and fight to get the victory. The other thing is that we don't believe God really means what He says. Then it is no wonder we never get to experience what is promised.

If we read the promise again we can see that it is "grace" that will make the difference in our lives. If we are to struggle to keep the "law" then it is hopeless. Then it would have been a *commandment* that tells us to be free from sin. But here it is a promise given to us that since we are under grace, sin need not rule over us.

'Grace' is not just to do with God forgiving our sins and accepting us. It is also a 'help' (He.4:16). In this context it is a help God gives us so that sin need not rule over us.

Whether it is this promise or something else that God has given us, let us start

from a point of faith and not unbelief. Let us believe that whatever God promises He is able to fulfil (Is.55:11).

Of course, we must not fall into the common practice of reading only the promises in the Bible without looking at what we are expected to do on our part. Also, we must not imagine that all the promises in the Bible are meant for us. Some of them have conditions attached to them, and some others are only for certain groups of people.

If we really believe, we will look forward with expectation to the fulfilment of the promises (Jn.11:40). If there is no such expectation on our side it may be that our 'faith' is just a theoretical acceptance of the doctrine which does not touch our practical lives. Our way of life must be in line with what we believe God is going to do for us. For example, with respect to the promise we have been considering

above, when there is a fall we must not accept that as an inevitable thing. We must see it as something unacceptable and press on with God so that it doesn't happen again.

Pointers along the way #80

Threefold forgiveness

Many times we don't enjoy what God has prepared for us because we understand only a part of the truth. This is true with respect to forgiveness too. A large number of Christians seem to think only of *receiving* forgiveness from God. They don't seem to think seriously about *forgiving others* and *asking others for forgiveness*. But these go together. We can't have one without the others.

We need forgiveness from God constantly, because we always end up doing things imperfectly even when we wholeheartedly desire to do the right thing. And many times we can't even claim that we have desired to do the right with *all* our heart. As long as we carry about this fallen flesh with us - and that will be as long as we are on this earth - this will be our experience.

Sometimes we do the wrong thing, and sometimes we fail to do the right thing. We need to tell the Lord that we are sorry.

God promises us that if we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness (1Jn.1:9). Of course, when we 'confess' our sins it is expected that we *are* sorry about them, and that we don't want to do them again. That is repentance. When we do our part, God is faithful to do His part. If we have done our part, we can take it that He *has* done His part, even if we don't feel any different.

Jesus said that the Father will forgive us just as we forgive others (Mt.6:12). He emphasised the point that otherwise we would not get forgiveness ourselves (v.15). Did you know that if, after we have received forgiveness from God, we refuse to forgive

someone else, God may even take back the forgiveness He gave us earlier. If you don't believe me, read it in Mt.18:23-34, and note especially v.35.

Another thing Jesus said about forgiveness is about getting right with people we have done wrong to. When we stand before Him making Him an offering, say when we are praying, praising or worshipping Him, if we remember that someone is hurt with us because we have done some wrong to him, we need to first go and set that right before we can continue with the offering (Mt.5:22-24). We need to ask for their forgiveness first. Otherwise God cannot accept our offering.

If we want forgiveness, we need to be willing to give forgiveness. On the other hand, the more we recognise how much we have been forgiven, the more freely we would like to forgive others.

Pointers along the way #81

The comfort of God's company

If you ask preachers what their audiences like to hear most about, the answer would probably be that they like to hear about the promises of God. People are looking for comfort. The world is a dreary place to be in, and we can't have too much of comfort. God knows that all too well, and He also tells His prophets to proclaim comfort to His people (Is.40:1).

But words of comfort can be brought forth by false prophets too, who proclaim peace where there can be no peace and who try to cover up cracks in the wall with whitewash (Ez.13:10). Can there be true comfort from the Lord where there is no true repentance, and where sin is covered up and not forsaken? Just as a wound cannot be healed if it has not been first washed,

we cannot experience the healing comfort of the Lord without first getting right with Him.

It is right and legitimate for us to go to the Lord and ask for deliverance from difficult circumstances and to look for comfortable lives. But the Lord does not always grant such requests. He knows that difficult situations can make us tough, and that when we have been tested we can strengthen others (Jas.1:2-4;Lk.22:31,32). The comfort that we can look for all the time is the comfort of His presence with us, and not always the comfortable ease of a life without problems.

Jesus promises us that He will never leave us nor forsake us (He.13:5). He will stick with us through thick and thin. Even if we are going through flood or fire, He will be right there with us making sure that neither flood nor fire can overpower us (Is.43:2).

Even when we can closely feel the threat of flood and fire, the knowledge of His presence with us will be our strength. We know that if He is with us we will be safe everywhere and always.

Can anything take God's love away from us (Ro.8:35)? If He loved us when we were His enemies, we can be sure that now that we are His children we are loved much more (Ro.5:10). This is something we must hold on to, even if circumstances, people and our own feelings seem to scream at us telling us the very opposite.

If we want to experience God's comfort all the time, what we need to make sure is that we stay with Him always. Let not unbelief take us away from His presence. Let not sin come between us, but if it does let us confess it and receive immediate cleansing (1Jn.2:1). Let us also make it a habit to

receive the comfort of the Holy Scriptures daily which the Heavenly Comforter wants to give to us.

Pointers along the way #82

Our private world

The Bible says that while man looks at the outward appearance God looks at the heart (1Sa.16:7). We can be impressed by other people's looks and by what they say and do. Or we can form a low opinion about people based on how unimpressive they appear to be. But God may have an entirely different opinion about these people. He looks inside, at the thoughts that go on, the attitudes and motives, and the values people hold.

As Christians we are keen that we should present before people a good Christian testimony. So we are careful about how we behave and what we speak, especially in front of the people whose opinion matters to us. But it is possible that what they see and hear may not be the real us.

If we have unkind thoughts about people in our mind most of the time we are unkind people in fact, even if we know how to say kind words and do kind deeds. If our thoughts are critical, self-centred, proud, self-righteous, unforgiving, complaining, envious, jealous, bitter, resentful, dirty, etc., that is what we really are.

We may be 'comfortable' with a private world of our thoughts where we can indulge ourselves in any way we like, because we fool ourselves into imagining that what we are is what people think about us. We may be tolerant of wrong thoughts, attitudes, motives and values because people do not generally know what is going on in our minds.

But don't we realise that our *hidden* life speaks out very loudly in God's ears? He is not fooled by what we say and do outside if there is something

very different inside. He knows our thoughts even when they are still on their way! (Ps.139:2).

The point I am making is not so much about whether we are hypocrites, acting before people, as about whether we are fooling ourselves about what we are. Do we evaluate ourselves based on the impression people have about us or on what we are inside?

God tells us what we should focus on. He says that all our life springs forth from our heart (Pr.4:23). Jesus pointed out that it would be foolish to focus on the external things because all our deeds proceed from the heart (Mt.15:17-20). Trying to control our words without focusing on having good thoughts inside is a futile exercise (Mt.12:34).

If we want to be the type of people that God wants us to be, we have to,

slowly but steadily, learn to think in line with His thoughts. This is why Paul exhorts us to bring every thought to be in obedience to Christ (2Co.10:5). And then we will be renewed in our mind more and more, and we will come more and more into conformity with the will of God (Ro.12:2).

Pointers along the way #83

Nurturing depression?

Depression is something all of us face at times. But some of us are more prone to it than others. Disappointment, frustration, setbacks, inability to handle crises, etc., can cause depression. Usually it passes off soon. But unless we know how to face and overcome it, it can overpower us. If that happens, we can set a vicious circle into motion, in which our depression causes us to make wrong moves which backfire and cause us to be more depressed.

Some people seem to kind of *enjoy* a light dose of depression because it makes them feel sorry for themselves and they like that attention. But what we must remember is that depression will only produce negative results. Satan finds depression a fertile ground to plant his pernicious seeds, and his

goal is to lead us to more and more confusion and bondage and ultimately to suicide.

Of course, sometimes depression can be due to physical reasons in which case it has to be treated by doctors. If anyone has been depressed for more than two weeks, with symptoms of early morning awakening, loss of appetite, loss of weight, constipation, decreased sexual interest, general loss of interest in everything, inability to enjoy the things he used to enjoy earlier, etc., he needs to see a doctor urgently.

As Christians we have a right to rejoice *always*. This is the opposite of being depressed. But the secret of rejoicing always, irrespective of people and circumstances, is to *rejoice in the Lord* (Php.4:4). He is always with us, He will never leave us, He is dependable and trustworthy, He has

everything in His control, He will cause all things to work together for our good, and He is always planning for our welfare and not for our calamity. In every circumstance and situation, if we look towards Him we can recognise ways to overcome depressing moods and thoughts.

Sometimes it may be that we feel too depressed even to think about the Lord. We don't feel quite up to it. At that time the devil comes along and tells us that it would not be of any use anyway. But of course, true to his nature, the devil is telling us another of his lies. The only thing that can *really* set us free is to turn to the Lord. When we choose to turn to the Lord, the veil that kept us blind to the truth, right perspectives, right values, and the right way forward will be taken away (2Co.3:16). If we truly turn to Him, He will see to it that we will not be disappointed (Ps.22:5).

If we are feeling a bit depressed let us also take natural measures such as relaxing with a walk, listening to soothing music, seeking out the company of our friends, having a work out at the gym, etc. These will help us to take our mind off from brooding about our depression. Singing praises to God (even if it takes some effort to start) can do wonders for us, helping us to turn our attention to the Lord.

So let us not believe that depression is something we have to live with. Our right is to rejoice always. We can learn to do that.

Pointers along the way #84

More blessed to give?

I am not questioning whether it is more blessed to give than to receive. Jesus said that (Ac.20:35). I am wondering whether we understand how it is more blessed. All of us have learned from childhood the joy of receiving, gifts and blessings. It is somewhat foreign for our nature to give. It is only when we receive the Spirit of Christ that we really learn how to give. Christ gave Himself for us, and the Father gave us His only Son. When the Holy Spirit changes our life, we also begin to learn how to give freely - without measure, without expecting anything in return, and without keeping a record of how much or how sacrificially we have given (Mt.10:8;Lk.6:35).

How blessed it is to give like that!
How much greater joy it is to give secretly, without receiving any honour

or recognition in return! We give because we have received freely and graciously from the Lord. We give because our heart rejoices to give in such a way that God's name is honoured, His kingdom is built, His people are blessed and others come to know our Lord and Saviour for themselves.

How sad when some preachers encourage people to give to the Lord as a business proposal! Of course they quote from the Scriptures. "Give, it will be given to you; good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over, they will pour into your lap" (Lk.6:38). "Bring the whole tithe into the storehouse, so that there may be food in My house, and test Me now in this if I will not open for you the windows of heaven, and pour out for you a blessing until it overflows" (Mal.3:10). The words are right, but

the spirit is that of a merchant. Surely the Lord will not be a debtor to anyone. He will greatly reward those who give, especially those who give with great sacrifice (Mk.12:43,44). But does He want us to give in a calculating manner, keeping in mind the high interest rate of the bank of heaven?

Didn't Jesus tell us very plainly, to give without expecting anything in return? Why don't we give because we love Him? The woman who broke the alabaster box of perfume at the Lord's feet and the widow who gave two copper coins will have their reward in heaven because they gave out of love and gratitude, more than many who have given large offerings to the Lord as sound investments for their future.

It is not how much we give that is important to the Lord. Let each one give as he can (1Co.16:2;2Co.9:7). Of

course, the more we love, the more we will give. But it is *how* we give that the Lord looks at more than how much we give.

Pointers along the way #85

Looking for feedback

We are *all* imperfect. Most people acknowledge this general statement without problem. However that is very different from acknowledging real imperfections in ourselves. Our response to criticism, correction and friendly jibes shows others how mature we are.

Generally speaking, we go into what psychologists call 'defence mechanisms' when our fault is pointed out. We may straightaway deny it. We may attack the person who is pointing out our fault. We may point out that the 'accuser' also has the same fault. We may divert attention to some fault of the 'accuser.' We may give an explanation for our fault. We may try to justify our fault given the 'special' circumstance. We may change the topic. While these are common tactics,

they will not help us to grow up and become mature.

One mark of maturity is that while we are pressing on to perfection, we are comfortable with accepting the fact that we are imperfect and that we will keep on discovering our imperfections. In other words, we are not shocked when we see our imperfections. We know that God has accepted us in Christ Jesus just as we are and loves us even though we are not worthy. So we are not in a constant struggle to make ourselves acceptable to God. And when we know that God has accepted us, we are not straining to make people accept us.

A mature man is aware of his strengths and weaknesses (Ro.12:3). He acknowledges God in all his ways and He believes that it is God who has given him those strengths (Pr.3:6;Jas.1:17). He also believes that

God will help him to deal with his weaknesses. His 'self-confidence' is not easily shaken when he comes face to face with his weaknesses or failures. But he presses on to perfection, seeking God for help (He.6:1).

But one who has not come to this maturity is very much disturbed when someone points out a fault, and starts up one of his defence mechanisms. He can't bear to see his faults because acknowledging them would result in a reduction in his self worth.

The mature man, on the other hand, is always looking for feedback on what God and people think about him. He is not a slave to the opinion of man as an immature man is, but he looks forward to this feedback because he is pressing on to perfection. He knows that unless he knows where he is wrong, he cannot become better.

Pointers along the way #86

Getting shaken up?

When the Lord is our rock, salvation and stronghold, we shall not be greatly shaken (Ps.62:2). It is unrealistic to interpret this to mean that we shall not be shaken *at all!* Some people seem to think that we would be exalting God by attributing high standards for His people saying that we shall *not at all* be shaken. But by holding up unrealistic goals, they tend to lead themselves and others to unnecessary disappointments and possible loss of faith. On the contrary, if we pursue after realistic goals we have a good chance of reaching them.

The more mature we become, the less we will get shaken by the things that happen. The things that used to shake us up in the past don't cause that same reaction from us now. Our response is now more calm and objective and less

impulsive than it used to be. It also takes us less time to settle down *after* we have been shaken up.

The Bible teaches us that trials of our faith help us to become stronger and tougher (Jas.1:2,3). When we barely know God in the beginning and we suddenly come across a difficult situation, we are shaken up badly. But when we go through the trial leaning on the grace of God we learn a few things that make us stronger and more mature.

1. We see that God has helped us to come through. We may have expected an easier passage or a different outcome. We may have wondered why God allowed us to face such situations. But in the end we see that He did help us to come through, and He also taught us a few things in the process.

2. We have learned a little more about God's ways, that they are not like ours.

We see what is important to Him and what He is aiming for. That helps us to get in tune with Him better.

3. We have learned a little more about ourselves. We see that we are not as strong as we thought we were, and that we need God's strength and His wisdom. This helps us to lean on Him more.

4. We have learned a little more about people, some good things and some bad. This helps us to know what to expect in future.

Determination to change

What do we do when we see that we lack something, or we have been wrong in something, in the sight of God? Let us say that we don't want to justify ourselves or blame others, but we know that the fault is really ours. What do we do then? Of course we ask for forgiveness, from God and from other people whom we have hurt. Don't we then wish that we could change and be different in the future?

This is a point at which we can make one of several mistakes. If we just 'wish' that we could be different, it would not change us. On the other end of the line, if we determine that we are going to change, grit our teeth and try to change our behaviour, we may probably succeed in changing our *external* behaviour, while inside our spirit we may continue to be the same

person as before. This will become clear when we are caught off guard, and our inner nature comes out in our words or our behaviour.

Some people think that the solution is to pray and leave the matter into God's hands. There is indeed a great truth in this. By this we acknowledge our utter dependence on God. We cast our burdens on Him, and get rid of our worries and anxieties which, in any case, could not help us. We express our confidence in God and His promises and expect that He would take action on our behalf. This is all how it should be.

But by doing all this it should not be as if we relieve ourselves of any responsibility in the matter. We are *always* responsible for our actions including the words we speak (Ro.14:12;Mt.12:36). We will also have to reap the consequences of what

we say and do, whether good or bad (Ga.6:7,8). We are responsible if we continue to yield our body to the desires of the flesh (Ro.6:13).

It is our choices and our actions that shape us. A man of God has said that what we are today is the result of all the choices and decisions that we have made in the past. If we want to be any different in the future, we have to necessarily make different choices and decisions.

Are we determined to make these changes, in the way we think - about God, people, the world, ourselves, our goals and desires - and in the way we speak and behave? If so, we need to equip ourselves to make these changes and we need to be diligent in watching our own progress. Don't leave it to chance, expecting that changes will take place automatically. God is working in us, helping us to make the

right choices and to carry them out, and we have to cooperate with Him by actually doing what He tells us through the Bible - directly or through other people - and through the promptings of the Spirit in our spirit.

Pointers along the way #88

When a bad mood creeps in

A bad mood can come up suddenly, apparently without reason, and before we realise it, it can have us in its vice-like grip, pushing us down to lower depths. But does it have to be like this?

The Bible says very plainly that we are *not obliged* to yield to the whims of our flesh just because they come up (Ro.8:12). If we can see them as temptations that are enticing us, we will understand that we have the opportunity to make a choice. We have the authority to say "NO" to our feelings and thought patterns before they take us to wrong destinations.

We know that we have no direct control over our feelings. We can't become happy just by deciding to be happy, and we can't get rid of our gloom just by deciding that we don't

want to be gloomy. But still there is a way to deal with our bad feelings.

The first step is to recognise that we are getting into a bad mood. This not only means that we call it by its name, but we also recognise that it is a *bad* mood and that we need to get out of it as fast as possible.

The next thing is to see *why* we have got into this feeling. The reason may be that something happened to us, someone made some remark, we are physically unwell, we are fearful about some task ahead of us, we are guilty about something we did, etc.

Our feelings are related to what we believe about our situation. We may or may not be consciously aware of what we believe, but still they are there in our mind. For example, if we have bungled up some matter and we believe that it is going to get us into

trouble, it is natural that we get into a bad mood. But on the other hand if we believe that with God's help we are going to get over it, we will soon have good feelings. So it is helpful if we can pinpoint what is causing this bad mood.

The solution is to look to God and see what He has to say about the situation. For the example above, God may say that even though we have messed up something, we can still sort out things and go ahead with life (Is.1:18,19). When we change our belief system from "There is no hope for me" to "Oh, God is still with me. He will help me through", our feelings also will begin to change!

This is so simple, and yet we are tempted to think that once a bad mood creeps in we can't do anything but endure it. Let us not respond anymore in that habitual way, but go along

victory's way with the Lord's help.

Pointers along the way #89

Persevering faith

What would be the greatest need among God's people in these last days? Of course we have many needs for our earthly life and our spiritual growth. But perhaps the one thing that we need *for our survival* is a faith in God that stands. Didn't Jesus wonder whether He would be able to find faith on the earth when He comes again? (Lk.18:8).

Why is faith so difficult these days? I am thinking about sincere people who *want to believe* but who find it difficult. There are many who talk glibly about faith, and who *pretend* as if everything is just fine. They are superficial and unwilling to face up to reality. But for people who acknowledge that they don't understand, and are seeking for answers, God's promise is that they shall find the answers (Mt.7:7).

There are several reasons why we find it difficult to have faith. For example:

1. We don't understand *what* is happening to us. Our situations seem to be *peculiar* and they don't seem to fit in with what we have understood from the Bible.

2. We don't understand *why* God is allowing certain things to happen to us. We know He has the power to change things, and we can't understand why He is not answering our prayers.

3. We think we have done everything we can, and yet God doesn't seem to be doing His part.

4. We wonder why things are going well for *others*, including unbelievers, while we seem to be having a tough time.

5. We wonder *how long* things are going to continue like this.

6. We wonder how things are going to

end up.

There could be other reasons also. But if we look carefully we can see that the basic problem is with our wanting to "understand". We feel helpless when we cannot "understand".

Isn't this where faith has to step in, with the conviction of things not seen? (He.11:1). We have to accept the fact that as long as we are on earth we will never get to a position where everything will be clear to our understanding. We *have* to learn to trust in our Lord even when we cannot understand. When we trust in Him and hand over our cares to Him, it is only then that we will be able to persevere (1Pe.5:7).

When we trust Him in this way, He will also give us the understanding that we need. We will see that many of the reasons given above show a wrong

way of thinking, not knowing how we ought to think. When we understand *by faith*, it will be a different understanding altogether (He.11:3).

Pointers along the way #90

Nurturing temptations

Do you think that when David fell into adultery it happened all of a sudden, on the spur of the moment? What if he had already determined, like Job, not to gaze upon a woman (Job.31:1)? Do you think David would have even thought of killing anyone under normal circumstances? But he did, when he was caught in a situation where his adultery was likely to be found out. What we don't often realise is that by being careless at one stage we are actually setting up ourselves for a stronger temptation.

Jesus said that if we were unfaithful in

little things, we would also be unfaithful in big things (Lk.16:10). But when it comes to little things, we may fool ourselves by thinking that little things don't matter and that when it comes to bigger things we would certainly be faithful.

Just think of how many temptations develop. 1. We see or hear something that provokes us. 2. We think about it and let our imagination run. 3. Our conscience and will power become weakened by these thoughts that we have permitted to dwell in our mind. 4. We console ourselves thinking that we are not 'doing' anything wrong, and we continue to be open to the things that provoke us, enjoying our imaginations. 5. The pricks of our conscience become less and less. 6. Then one day we are provoked a little too much, and we end up 'doing' something wrong. 7. We justify ourselves saying that it was

only a small slip and that it won't happen again. 8. Now the level of our tolerance of sin has gone up and when a sudden provocation comes up we give in. 9. This act of ours creates circumstances, like it did for David, which open up new temptations which we had never imagined in the first place we would ever get into.

How and at what level can we have victory? If we are hoping and aiming for a victory at the level of not 'doing' something wrong, while we indulge our thoughts, we can be caught off guard. It may be only a matter of time before a powerful temptation comes and knocks us down. It is in our thoughts that we have to learn to be faithful. It is there that we have our value system based on God's standards based on which we have decided that certain types of behaviour, including wrong thought patterns, are taboo for

us.

Our battle is to avoid entertaining thoughts that are contrary to God's values and instead to think of things that are pleasing to Him (Php.4:8). Once we have our values right and we don't allow wrong thoughts to occupy our mind, we are better prepared to face temptations to do wrong than if we had been careless in our mind.

Pointers along the way #91

Looking ahead

Jesus commented once that the people of the world were more shrewd in managing earthly things than the people of God with spiritual things (Lk.16:8). It is true that we Christians who have everything going for us - God is with us, He is working for our good, He has given us instructions about what is good for us and what is not, we have other Christians who are around to help us - still mess up things by making the wrong choices. We do that because of several reasons, one being that we make short sighted choices, not thinking about how they will affect us in the long run.

Pilgrim, in the story "Pilgrim's Progress", went to the House of the Interpreter where he was shown several object lessons. One was about two boys called Passion and Patience.

Passion wanted to enjoy everything 'now' and couldn't wait for things which were promised to him for later. He 'enjoyed himself' so furiously that all his things were spoiled in a short while and he was left in misery. Patience was willing to deny himself immediate pleasures, and finally he had the satisfaction of getting much better things.

Jesus said that those who were willing to lose their own lives for His sake and for the sake of the gospel would gain life (Mk.8:35). Isn't "our life" nothing but our own desires, ambitions, etc.? Isn't it clear that if we deny ourselves in order to do what the Lord wants, we shall gain in the end?

If we know this, why is it that we still choose to do our own thing? The answer is mostly that we can only 'see' the present and visualise the immediate benefits, and we don't realise that

choosing these short term pleasures may cause us long term harm or that if we give up these pleasures our gain could be far greater in the future.

Isn't this one of the problems for young people who, naturally, don't have the experience to be able to see ahead? They can't understand why older people should tell them *not* to do certain things which they, the young people, can easily see are 'good'. They think that these older guys just don't know what they are talking about.

But when we know how to walk by faith and not by sight, we are comfortable looking at the things that are not seen and ignoring what are seen! (2Co.4:18). We receive by faith and choose to follow what God tells us through His word and what mature people pass on to us from what they have learned in their own lives. Then we are able to make choices based on

a long-term strategy rather than grabbing transient pleasures.

Pointers along the way #92

Things that are not promised

Shall we pray for things that have not been specifically promised by the Lord? By all means. God is a *good* God, who likes to freely give us all things to enjoy (1Ti.6:17). We don't have to hesitate to make our requests known to God (Php.4:6). There is no catch in this, but there is need for some clarifications.

Of course there is no harm in asking God for anything. But it is good to add at the end, "But not *my* will, but Yours, O Father." Why?

1. We don't always know what we should ask for. We may ask for something that may be harmful for us. Let God decide what is best for us. He won't in any case give us something that is really harmful, but He might give in to our request if we pester Him

too much (Ps.106.15).

2. We shouldn't think that we can get whatever we ask, even though many preachers give that kind of impression quoting Jn.14:13, 15:16, Ps.37:4, etc. The first verse talks about asking things in Jesus' name. This doesn't mean just adding "In Jesus' name" at the end of our prayer. It means asking things in line with His nature or character. The second verse talks about asking anything in connection with wanting to bear much fruit so that the Father is glorified, not just anything we like. The third verse talks about delighting ourselves in the Lord and then the Lord giving us the desires of our heart. We can easily see that what we delight in is the Lord, we won't be asking for things that are displeasing to the Lord. There is also another verse that says that we can have anything we want *if we ask according to God's will*

(1Jn.5:14,15).

3. If we ask for things God hasn't promised but which we fancy, and we don't give God a chance to refuse, we are likely to get disappointed, and then we might be tempted to blame God for not answering our prayers.

But having said that, we can still pray for many things *in hope*. Since we know that He loves us and is able to do whatever He wants, we can go ahead and ask. We shouldn't be missing out on things just because we wouldn't ask (Jas.4:2). This doesn't mean that when we want something we can just "claim it by faith" or get someone to "agree with us." We have faith when we have the assurance that we will get what we have asked for (He.11:1). We can have that assurance only if God has promised it to us, either in writing in His word or through the Holy Spirit speaking to our heart. Otherwise we

can only pray in hope.

I am not wrangling about words. If we claim we have faith for this or that and we don't receive it, we get disappointed and others get disillusioned with our claims about God. Let us be sensible about it.

Misunderstanding God's word

It is one of the common questions unbelievers ask us Christians, about why there are so many groups among Christians each with its own interpretation of the Bible. What they would like to say is that this goes to prove that the Bible is unreliable. That is a gross mistake. The fact is that we human beings are fallible creatures and that no one of us has understood everything rightly about what the Bible says.

What are some of the reasons why we misunderstand the Bible? My intention in looking at the subject is so that we can be more careful in future when we try to understand the truths of the Bible.

1. God promises understanding to those who fear (deeply respect) Him

(Ps.25:14;111:10). Such people earnestly desire to honour God, to do His will and to be pleasing in His eyes. Can we expect to receive understanding if we approach God in a casual manner?

2. Jesus said that it is those who are sincerely interested in finding out God's will in order to *do* it who will be able to see His will (Jn.7:17). If we are just curious to know many things but have no real interest in *doing* God's will, don't we think God can see through that?

3. What is our motive in getting understanding? Is it to make ourselves bigger or greater? How was Paul able to get such a high level of revelation of God which he could not pass on to us (2Co.12:4)? Is it not because he was not living for himself but for God (2Co.5:14,15)?

4. Those who want understanding will be always spiritually alert and *seeking* for it (Pr.2:2,3). In other words, it is something they value very much in their heart and they are always on the lookout for it, just as a businessman is looking for business opportunities.

5. God's wisdom is so wide and with so many sides to it, and all of us have so many limitations, biases and prejudices that we are unaware of, that it is impossible for us to get a totally balanced understanding of any part of the truth. Therefore if we want to be able to get nearer to the perfect truth about any subject, we must be open to correction and willing to change (Pr.15:32). We must keep in mind that other people, especially those who see things differently, have something to contribute that can round off our understanding (Eph.3:18,19).

Pointers along the way #94

It is possible to change

God is a specialist at changing people. He makes all things new (Re.21:5). He takes people who are bound in sin and misery, washes them with the blood of His Son Jesus, and makes them new people who become more and more like Jesus (2Co.5:17;Ro.8:28,29). When this earth is destroyed and we all stand before Him in eternity, He will display as His great trophies those whom He has changed from hopeless misery and shame to godliness. The good news is that any of us can take part in that work of God. We can change, however deep down we are in the pit of hopelessness now.

Don't stay in the world of unbelief and fear that gives only a feeling of hopelessness. Don't believe the words that some others may throw at us, that we are useless, nothing good will

come out of us, nobody wants us, we are caught in a trap of generational curses, etc. With God *nothing* is impossible (Lk.1:37). He who created us and the whole universe, is also in the business of re-creating people who go to Him.

Jesus will *never* turn away anyone who goes to Him, whatever that person's condition or circumstances may be (Jn.6:37). He hears all our prayers and understands the agony of our hearts. He starts working in us and around us to make things work for our good (Ro.8:28,29). If we respond to Him we can receive all that He has prepared and kept ready for us.

We don't have to be caught in a rut and continue to behave in the same way as we have done in the past, like old gramophone records which get caught in a groove. We don't have to behave in a certain way just because we feel like

it. The Bible says that we are not under any obligation to serve sin (Ro.8:12). Jesus has come to set us free.

One of the lies that Satan has spread among people is that certain behaviour is unavoidable in the face of certain circumstances. People therefore say that if somebody does certain things to us we *have* to respond in a certain way, if we *feel* a strong urge for something (eating, drinking, smoking, sex, etc.) we can't do anything but give in, we are like this because our parents were like this, we can't escape because a curse has come upon us because of what our ancestors have done, etc. Those are lies. When Jesus sets us free, we will be truly free (Jn.8:36).

Jesus said that when we know the truth, the truth will set us free (Jn.8:31,32). 'Knowing the truth' is not the same as reading or hearing it. When we hear or read the truth - concerning God, His

ways, His plan of salvation through Jesus Christ, what Jesus will do for us, etc. - and we respond from our heart by believing it and receiving it, we begin to act on it. If no action comes out of it, we haven't let the truth touch our heart but only our head, and that won't do us any good.

But when the truth grips us, we begin to seek Jesus for its fulfilment in our life. He changes our value systems, and gives us new directions and strength to do things differently. So then we don't do things just because we feel like it. We come under the leading of the Holy Spirit, and our body comes under our control. Our long time habits change. Jesus and our fellowship with Him become more important to us than all else, and our life itself changes to fall in line with Him.

Pointers along the way #95

What forgiving others is not

Sometimes an unrealistic perception of what it means to forgive others may make it look as if it is beyond our ability, and actually stop us from going ahead and forgiving them. Let us start by believing that if God asks us to forgive, He certainly thinks it is possible for us to do it.

What God asks us to do is to forgive others *just as* Christ has forgiven us (Ep.4:32;Co.3:13). He has forgiven us out of His mercy, as a free gift (Ep.2:4,8). 1. We didn't deserve it. 2. It was unreasonable, after all the things we had done against Him. 3. He had to suffer in order to forgive us. He loved us, and therefore He forgave us.

As a Man, Jesus forgave even when people did not repent (Lk.23:34). This is how we have to forgive. God does

not forgive unless people repent. We just have to leave judgment for God to decide (Ro.12:19).

But sometimes we tend to be unrealistic with regard to forgiveness.

Many people think that we have to forgive and forget. Anyone who tries this will come to see that the more we try to forget, the more it gets imprinted in our mind. When God forgives us, He does not forget our sins. What He promises to do is *not to remember* them (He.8:12). It means that He will not bring them up and hold them against us anymore.

When we forgive someone, what we do is to let go of the hold we have on him because of the sin he has done against us. It is basically a choice we make in our will. It doesn't mean we think that what he has done is all right. He still has to repent or face the

judgment of God. While Jesus forgave those who crucified Him, they still had to face judgment for their sins.

We may take time to get over feeling hurt over what someone has done to us, even after we have forgiven him. We can't wait to feel good before we decide to forgive. But when we choose to forgive, our feelings towards him will start changing, and we may start praying for him.

After we have forgiven someone we don't necessarily become friends with him as if nothing has happened. It also depends on him. We wish he would repent and get right with God. But if he doesn't change, we have to be wise in our dealings with him if we don't want to get hurt again.

On the other hand, our demonstration of forgiveness may be the thing that convicts him and causes him to repent,

just as in the case of Jesus and us. But in some cases it may be necessary to let him know that he needs to set things right, just as the Corinthian church did to the man living in sin. We need wisdom.

God wants us to lighten our load as we walk along life's way. One good way to do that is to give away grudges, malice, vengeance, bitterness, etc., and to soothe our minds with mercy and kindness.

Pointers along the way #96

Helps for humility

Many times it is pride that makes us do things wrong, in relation to God and to people. We act as though we are someone special with God and take liberties with His commandments. We deal with other people as though we are superior, without caring about how it would affect them and how they would feel. It is humility that can change this type of attitude and behaviour.

God provides things which are needed for earthly life even to wicked people (Mt.5:45). But life changing blessings can come from God only when we are humble, because God opposes the proud and gives grace only to the humble (Jas.4:6).

Being humble is not the same as doing humble things. For example, we can

say, "I am sorry," because that is the socially acceptable thing to do. But it may be just an act we put on. Or we may do something 'humble' such as sweeping the floor when other people are watching. But humility is an attitude of our heart. It is seen basically in what we think about ourselves in secret, and then it also decides how we behave on the outside.

I would suggest that there are three things we could address towards growing in humility. Becoming humble takes time, and we need to grow in it all our life.

Think about where we have come from. If we have been born again, we have been brought from sin to life, from being a child of Satan to being a child of God, from despair to hope, from purposeless drifting to a goal driven life, from confusion and chaos to peace and rest, etc. Who has done

this? Not we, but the grace of God.

Think of what we are. Do we think that what we have today such as money, position, reputation, skills, etc., is from our own making? No. Acknowledge God (1Co.4:7). On the other hand, if we are conscious of our lacks in these areas, can't we think of what gives us true worth - our acceptance by God?

Think of our dependence on God. Our life on earth is so uncertain in many respects. The only thing we can be certain of is our death, if Jesus does not come before that. We are dependent on God for every part of our life.

Think over these things frequently. Take time to do that. Do you see that humility is essentially to acknowledge God in every part of our life?

Are you lonely and without friends?

It is a common complaint many people have, that they don't have any friends. It is true that some people find it easier to make friends than others because of certain natural advantages. Some are by nature outgoing (extroverts) and it seems that they never lack friends, while others who are generally reserved by nature find it difficult to make new friends. But there is also another side to it, that these so called introverts, when they do make friends, may turn out to be more reliable and self sacrificing as friends!

When people complain that they don't have friends and nobody wants to make friends with them, it is quite possible that they may have to take some blame for it themselves. And it is also possible that once they set out to

correct some of their approaches to friendship they too can find good friends.

One version of the Bible says that those have friends must show themselves to be friendly (Pr.18:24 KJV). This means that we must visibly demonstrate our desire and willingness to be friends. Our behaviour and approach must convince others that we are inclined to be friendly towards them. An expression of warmth including a welcoming smile, a strong handshake, and words of acceptance will go a long way in making friends.

What are some of the reasons why it can be difficult to make friends?

1. We are so much occupied with ourselves that we don't have much interest in others except in what they can do for us. Others can easily notice this.

2. We have such a poor self image that it is difficult for us to open up to the others. We feel guilty of our past or conscious of our lacks and we expect that nobody can ever love us.

3. We have such a high opinion of ourselves that we don't see any need for others. This gives us such an air about us.

4. Some of the poor responses we have received in the past make us hesitate.

5. We have had some bad experiences with some people and we don't trust anyone.

6. We want something from friends, but we are not willing to sacrifice anything for them.

7. We are unwilling to bear with weaknesses or forgive sins in others.

We need friends. God has made us that way. If God has accepted us in Christ,

we don't have to feel inadequate or unworthy. On the other hand, if we want to have friends we must be willing to accept them as they come, and be willing to love them and care for them. Jesus said that a good friend will lay his life down for his friends (Jn.15:13). If we are like that, we can also expect to get friends like that (Pr.22:11).

Many lonely people are willing to give up their principles in order to get or to retain their friends. But this will only bring them great sorrow and damage in the end (Jas.4:4).

Building up friendships may take time, and it calls for a give and take. But it is worth it.

Pointers along the way #98

Thanksgiving from the heart

Even secular psychologists have discovered that an attitude of thankfulness can do wonders for our mental health and total well being. But some of them propose that we should *fake* thankfulness in order to get the benefits, even if we aren't exactly feeling thankful. We are to be thankful, because that is good and right in the eyes of the Lord. We are also glad that it will be a blessing to us.

It is the humble people who find it easy to be thankful (Ps.69:30-32). It is quite natural for them to be thankful to God and to the people around them. They recognise how dependent they are on God and people, and they have no problem with being thankful.

So if we find ourselves grumpy, complaining and critical a lot of the

time, we need to look at how we can become more humble.

Do we think God ought to do a better job at taking care of us? If so, who do we think we are to make such demands? Do we think people should be more helpful, more understanding, more kind, etc., towards us? That's fine, even we ought to be *more* like that towards the others! But do we think we are someone special that others have to wait on us and serve us?

It is probably true that if we have problems with pride we are not very much aware of that. But complaining and fault finding is one of the symptoms of pride that we can't explain away.

Wealth, education, job, family heritage, talents and skills, spiritual gifts, etc., have a way of making us proud when we compare ourselves with the others

and feel superior. It gives us a certain air about us. Even if we are not so crude about it that we make open statements with disdainful looks at the others, insulting remarks, etc., just the fact that we are not thankful but complaining proves our pride. We need to peer inside us and see what exactly is making us proud.

Our natural tendency is towards pride and not humility. All of us must recognise that we need to deal with our hidden pride constantly. We can get much help in this connection if we keep thankfulness as a measure of our humility. Then we can serve God increasingly better as we continue to humble ourselves (He.12:28).

Pointers along the way #99

With a pinch of salt

God says that the last days will be difficult times, especially for Christians (2Ti.3:1 LB). Deceiving spirits will be more active than ever before because Satan knows that his time is short (Re.12:12). False prophets and teachers will increase in number with strange doctrines and practices (Mt.24:11;1Ti.4:1). Jesus said that it would be so bad that even the elected saints could be misled (Mt.24:24). "Be on the alert" is the word for the times.

If Peter who loved Jesus and who was willing to lay his life down for Him could be deceived by Satan to the extent that Satan could use him to try and mislead Jesus (Mt.16:22,23), we cannot rule out the possibility of any preacher of today making mistakes in doctrine or practice. We mustn't just

fall for people or blindly accept every new idea that comes up.

Be careful of 'prophets' giving us personal directions, especially of the type that tends to bloat up our ego. In these days when the least in the Kingdom can know the Father directly (He.8:11), we should want to hear the Father tell us directly what He would want us to do. Perhaps He would tell someone else to confirm what He has already told us. He seems to have told Paul and Barnabas about their missionary call before He showed it to the church (Ac.13:2). Don't be scared of prophets. Be bold enough to examine everything with the revealed word of God (1Th.5:20,21).

Don't let anyone make God's forgiveness complicated. If we have repented from our sins and placed our trust in Jesus for forgiveness, we must simply take it that God has forgiven us.

Some people insist on trying to remember and confess every single sin down to the childhood days. Others tell us to confess all sins publicly and 'bring them into the light.' Do you imagine God likes to torture or humiliate us rather than cover our sins? (Ps.85:2).

If you ask God for healing in Jesus' name and you are not healed don't let anyone tell you it's because you don't have faith. If you didn't have faith would you have asked Him? And hasn't Jesus said that faith as small as a mustard seed is enough? (Mt.17:20). Ask the Father why He hasn't answered your prayer, and you may learn many things. But don't let anyone bully you.

God has provided mature people to help the younger ones. That doesn't mean that younger ones become dependent on them. Don't fear people who make out that you need them

badly. Listen to those about whom you sense that they sincerely want to help you, and don't give in an inch to those who want to control you.

There are many "new" ideas and techniques coming up these days which sound interesting and intriguing. Don't fall flat for them without checking to see if they fit in with the principles of the gospel. Clearer understanding of known truths are welcome, but discoveries of "new" truths and "revelations" may be received with a pinch of salt till they are proved to fall in line with other truths.

If we walk carefully, we can avoid a lot of danger.

Pointers along the way #100

Grace, unbelievable but true

The Bible describes grace like this. "For one will hardly die for a righteous man; though perhaps for the good man someone would dare even to die. But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us" (Ro.5:7,8). How can He love us who are so unlovable?

Jesus said that He would never reject *anyone* who came to Him (Jn.6:37). However filthy, depraved, wicked, shameful and hopeless we are, He is willing to receive us if we go to Him.

However wretched our past is, God promises that He will wash us (with the blood of Jesus) and make us *white like snow!* (Is.1:18). When we start with God, we can start with an absolutely clean record.

God makes us who used to be children of the devil (1Jn.3:10) and enemies of God as His children and brothers and sisters of His Son Jesus (1Jn.3:1;Ro.8:29).

Once He has cleansed us, He is never going to bring up our past and hold it against us (He.8:12).

If we fall into sin after that, which happens, of course, He will wash us again and take away every stain of sin (1Jn.1:9).

God loves us with an *everlasting* love (Je.31:3). He doesn't stop loving us if we don't measure up to His standards (which happens, of course).

He has taken a vow never to leave us or forsake us (He.13:5). Even if we fail Him (2Ti.2:13)..

Unbelievable! Unreasonable! Illogical! Unfair! Unjust! Yet true!

The reason for a lot of insecurity, fear, doubt and the resulting lack of joy and thankfulness in Christian life is that we have not seen grace like this. Without doubt, it is very difficult for us to believe, especially if we have been religious minded thinking that somehow we have to *earn* God's favour by our behaviour. However difficult it may be for us to believe, it is still true. This is how grace is.

So some of us who consider ourselves as Christians may never have really experienced such a grace in our lives and entered into a relationship with God. And some of us who have tasted something of this grace and have received the forgiveness of sins may never have come to believe in and experience the full extent of God's grace towards us. May the Lord help us to grow in grace and in the knowledge of our Lord and Saviour

Jesus Christ (2Pe.3:18).

About the author

Jacob Ninan (b. 1948), has master's degrees in engineering, and counselling and psychotherapy. He retired in 2008 from the Indian Space Research Organisation as the Programme Director for international cooperation. He met with Jesus while studying in Bangalore in 1972, and from then onwards has been an ardent student of the Bible, reading hundreds of Christian books, listening to hundreds of messages, and being very active in the church in speaking, counselling, writing, editing, etc. He runs the 'Comfort & Counsel' web site (www.c-n-c.org) where he has published a large number of articles on practical Christian life and counsel. With advanced training in Christian

counselling, he has been counselling individuals and couples, and also facilitating in counselling training programmes for many years. Jacob Ninan joined the editorial board of the Christian magazine Light of Life in 2008, and is currently contributing as editor, writer and web master. Jacob Ninan has been married to Susan for 40 years. They stay in Bangalore, and they have five grown up children and six grandchildren.

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About the book

Pointers along the way are brief messages on the practical Christian life, originally sent out weekly through email to those who asked for them. Now, after completing 600 messages through the grace of God, they have been compiled into six volumes carrying one hundred pointers each and published as e-books. They are also available on the web site www.c-n-c.org. New pointers are available on the Facebook page www.facebook.com/waypointers and on the WhatsApp group 'Pointers along the way'. You can subscribe to the email at the web site.