



Pointers along the way

Devotionals that
make you think

Vol. 2

Jacob Ninan

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Devotionals that make you think

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Pointers along the way #101

Escape from responsibility?

When we were children we could expect others (starting from our parents) to take care of us, provide for us, plan for us, help us out of difficult situations, clean up our mess, etc. Unfortunately, many of us have not yet grown out of this attitude and come to the place where *we* take the responsibility for making decisions and taking action.

One common symptom of this problem is that we complain why *God* is not taking good care of us. We think we have prayed and committed our problems to Him (doesn't the Bible tell us to cast our burdens upon Him (Ps.55:22)?), and we wonder why God is not answering our prayers. Or we mess up our life in some way, ask God for forgiveness and then wonder why we still have to clean up the mess. If

we have spoiled our relationship with our spouse over the years and then come to the Lord, we expect that our marriage should become like heaven overnight. We fool around in school or university and then we pray for good grades overnight.

Sometimes we expect that when some godly man prays over us our problems will be gone. When that does not happen we conclude that he is not so great after all, not realising that we need to do something about our attitudes, behaviour, etc.

We are unwilling to take up responsibility for our actions. We are ourselves unwilling to change, and we want God to change the others and our circumstances. Is this how God works?

God is ever willing to forgive. He is gracious and longsuffering. But when we *repent*, it is not that we feel bad

about the predicament we find ourselves in, but we feel sorry for what *we* have done. Feeling bad about our situation is a *worldly* type of sorrow or remorse. But repentance means that we are sorry that *we* did certain wrong things. If our repentance is genuine, we will also want to set things right, and do things differently now (2Co.7:10,11).

It looks very appealing to pray and leave things in God's hands. There is a right way to do this, and that is to recognise that without Him we can do nothing (Jn.15:5), and also that with Him we can do all things (Php.4:13). But to expect that we can continue to act irresponsibly and that God will do all things for us is sheer folly.

But we *are* foolish people, especially in spiritual matters. The devil is also out to deceive us. Don't we need to sit up and take note of our tendency to this

folly and learn to change our ways?

In the famous passage about God's way of free salvation, He said that He would wash us and make us clean even if our past record has been dirty and seemingly irreparable (Is.1:18). But in the same passage He also tells us that we have to change our ways and learn new ways (v.16,17). He will certainly do His part. But let us not imagine that we can get away from doing our part. God loves us as His children, but He will not pamper us.

Pointers along the way #102

Receiving grace

In one sense, *everyone* receives grace from God as an unmerited favour from Him. That is because God is so good, and gracious. He gives many good things for both good and wicked people (Mt.5:45). And *no one on earth* receives the wrath of God as much as he or she deserves. Yet grace is more than this. It includes everything that God would like to give us - material and spiritual blessings, wisdom and strength for all situations, the power that transforms our lives, fellowship with God and His children, etc. Actually we know only such a small part about all that He has prepared for us (1Co.2:9).

Why is it that we receive so little of all that He has prepared for us? In simple words, because we don't approach Him in the right way. The 'right way'

involves many factors. But let us look at a couple of important ones.

There was a 'gentile' (non-Jewish) woman who asked Jesus to cast a demon out from her daughter. Jesus tested her a bit by telling her that such blessings were basically for the 'children' (the Jews) and not for 'dogs' (the Gentiles). Her reply was that even the dogs could get the crumbs that fell from the children's table. Jesus was astonished at her faith (Mt.15:22-28).

Another time a Roman centurion requested Jesus to heal his servant. He told Jesus that he was not worthy for Jesus to go to his house but that a mere word from Jesus would be sufficient to heal the servant. This was another time when Jesus praised a man for his faith (Mt.8:5-10).

Two things stand out in both these examples. Both people readily

admitted that they did not deserve that Jesus should do anything for them. And both believed that Jesus could do miracles for them.

Aren't these qualities or attitudes what we need to receive the things that God has kept ready for us? The first attitude recognises that it is *gracious* of God to be good to us, and the second trusts in His power to grant us what we need even through miracles.

On the other hand, what blocks the grace of God from coming down to us? The first factor is an attitude that thinks that God ought to take care of us, it is His duty to do so, we deserve to be treated better, etc. The second wrong attitude is to consider that God couldn't be bothered with us, He is indifferent towards our needs, or that He can't do anything for our problems.

How we can limit God by our pride

and unbelief! Our proud stance not only prevents God from doing for us what He wants to, but also causes Him to actually oppose us (Jas.4:6). Of course we know that without faith it is impossible to receive anything from God, even when He longs to grant us many good things (Jas.1:6,7;Lk.12:28).

Humility and faith open us towards God, and then He is able to pour out His blessings upon us without measure. Let us learn to have an attitude like the above two people whom Jesus praised.

The bridegroom and the best man

There was a time when the disciples of John the Baptist were upset because Jesus whom John had baptised was also baptising people (Jn.3:26). The way John responded shows us the greatness of the man as well a guideline for our own behaviour. John said that Jesus was like a bridegroom and he himself was only like the best man at the wedding. The person who should be in the limelight was the bridegroom and not the best man. The best man's desire should be to ensure that the bridegroom received his prominence at the wedding and that everything went smoothly for him (v.27-30). It was not an occasion for the best man to "shine".

We all have a desire in our flesh to shine in front of others. Right from

birth we have this tendency to want to draw attention to ourselves. But we have many occasions in life when it is our responsibility to ensure that someone else gets the prominence and not us. We are tempted to jump in and do something to get the attention, even momentarily. Sometimes people butt in and try to point out some mistake in the prominent person in order to demonstrate how they themselves are cleverer. Smart alics who ask the teacher questions just to embarrass him are like this.

This is where we need to recognise who we are in relation to the person who has the prominence at the moment. For example if we are with our boss we must remember that we are not the boss and we must be careful not to behave in such a way as to put him down in front of others. If we are not the leaders of the church or

responsible for some activity, we need to recognise our smaller position and submit to what God has arranged.

If the best man notices that the bridegroom's tie is gone out of place, for example, he has to let the bridegroom know that in a most discrete way and not by going in front of the bridegroom and making a show of straightening it. The best man who can be discrete and blend into the background will be a highly valued support for the bridegroom. But one who tries to steal the show will be sidelined at the first opportunity.

One reason why we seek prominence may be because we equate our worth to what other people think about us. Then we would be always trying to impress others even by showing off. We would also feel depressed when we don't get any prominence. If we don't learn to overcome this tendency,

we are also likely to cause problems all around.

In the ultimate analysis, what people think about us is not of any real value because it may be true or false and at best it is temporary and transient. For Christians our value is what God thinks about us. We are valuable to Him because He paid for us with the death of His Son. He guards us like the apple of His eyes (Zec.2:8). He has also entrusted each of us with some task in His kingdom and He will honour us for our faithfulness in carrying it out. He is going to reward us individually and not in comparison with anyone else (Ro.14:12).

Pointers along the way #104

Sharing our griefs

However close someone is with us, it is still impossible for that person to

enter fully into our feelings when we go through times of sorrow, perplexity or confusion. Those who have been through similar situations may know something about what we are going through. But even they cannot fully understand us because no two people are exactly alike, and many factors in our life influence the way we feel and the way we look at things.

On top of that some of the people we meet may be callous towards our feelings, some may be indifferent and some others may be insensitive. Instead of words that should help and encourage us they may say things that may hurt us further, some in ignorance, and some with good intentions but without proper understanding. We can't totally avoid people giving us unsolicited advice or making unwise comments that hurt us. But we can learn to become tough and to avoid

bothering about them too much.

But there is One who understands us perfectly and who is totally committed to be on our side all the time. "Tell it to Jesus." He knows, He cares, He understands. He knows us even from our mother's womb because He is the One who created us (Ps.139:13). He knows everything about us, all that we have said and done and all that we have experienced. He knows our thoughts even from a distance (v.2). Even before we say something He knows our words (v.4). He knows exactly how we feel because He has been tempted just like we are (He.4:15). In all His thoughts towards us He is planning for our good (Je.29:11). He knows how frail we are, and makes sure that we shall not have to face more than we will be able to manage along with His help (Ps.103:13,14;1Co.10:13). He will not

scold us when we go to Him in our need (Jas.1:5), or throw us out (Jn.6:37).

We can share with Him whatever is on our mind, without fear or embarrassment. Our limitations of grammar or knowledge of theology will not put Him off. He understands even broken words and the groanings of our spirit (Ro.8:26). In fact, He is not going to be upset even if we tell Him our complaints, doubts, fears, worries, problems with people, etc., because He knows we are seeking Him because we don't know what to do and we need His help.

Like the hymn says,

"Oh, what peace we often forfeit,
Oh, what needless pain we bear,
All because we do not carry
Everything to God in prayer."

Pointers along the way #105

You are altogether beautiful

You have probably heard the chorus that says, "He is altogether lovely." This is how we find the Lord Jesus Christ when we have come to know Him closely. But will you be surprised to hear that what Jesus thinks about us who have become children of God is, "You are altogether beautiful, my darling, and there is no blemish in you" (So.4:7)? That is because He has washed us thoroughly with His blood and made us whiter than snow (Isa.1:18). All our sins have been washed away and we have been 'justified' in God's eyes, when we acknowledged our sins, repented, and placed our trust in Jesus. Someone has said that 'justified' implies 'just as if I'd' never sinned. We are spotless and without blemish in His eyes.

Sometimes it is very difficult to

believe this, especially if we are sensitive to our inner nature, and notice all the things that go through our mind and what we say and do. We wonder how God can think like this about us when we are absolutely clear that we are far from being without blemish! We ask ourselves the question how God can accept us the way we are when we can't accept us ourselves.

If we have never wondered about this question, perhaps we have not thought much about what it took for God to forgive our sins, why Jesus had to actually die, and what it means for us. It is good to get a clear view of this in order to get a good foundation in our Christian life.

In giving us salvation, God has done what was impossible for us. We know that all of us have sinned, and grieved God who created us, took care of us and did many good things for us

(Ro.3:23). On the other side God is absolutely holy. The justice of God demanded that we should be punished, but the love of God longed to take us into His arms. God found a way through this stalemate by letting Jesus die in our place. Therefore when we placed our trust in Jesus, God has forgiven us all our sins. This much is common knowledge to all believers.

The next aspect of the truth is that in forgiving our sins God has also accepted us as we are, without waiting for us to come to a certain level of holiness first (Ro.4:5). He loves us so much that He does not focus His attention on our faults but on our love for Him and what He is going to bring out in us even though both these are still small and underdeveloped right now (1Pe.4:8;He.8:12;Is.62:3-5).

Of course God is not blind to our lacks and failures, and He is working in us

and outside in order to mould and shape us into what He wants to make of us (Php.2:13;Eph.2:10). His love for us is so full of hope that even now He is shouting over us with joy (Zeph.3:17).

Do we 'see' this? Let us not condemn ourselves even if we have fallen, because when we confess our sins God is faithful to wash us thoroughly again and restore us to full fellowship (1Jn.1:9), nor lose courage when we see our lacks and failures because His love for us is much stronger than our lacks.

Pointers along the way #106

Not in competition

Perhaps some of us have gone through unfortunate circumstances in our formative childhood years, in which our parents or others have told us things like, "Why can't you be like so and so?", "You good for nothing boy(girl)!", "You won't come to anything in life!" etc. As a result we feel worthless or insignificant.

Some of us try to overcome this feeling by (unconsciously) trying to prove to everyone around that we *are* somebody. This becomes a driving factor in our life. We become very sensitive to what other people think about us, because we have made it one of our major goals in life to impress others. We try to attract people's attention, either in conversation or other ways, to our achievements, and we feel upset when other people notice

or point out our lacks.

The other tendency is to take on an attitude of denial with respect to our faults, because a recognition of our faults tends to belittle our self image. So whenever we are faced with one of our faults we get on to an act of self defence by passing the blame to someone else, justifying ourselves, or simply refusing to listen.

All this kind of reaction is totally unnecessary. OK, we can't change what we have gone through in our past life. But we *can* change the way we now respond to the impact of those experiences on our life.

Read Ps.139 carefully. The secret is to realise that God does not compare us with anyone else. Each of us is His special creation. He has caused us to be born to a particular set of parents at a particular time with a particular set

of abilities and lacks. He knew before we were born what we would go through after we were born and how that would affect our personality, outlook on life, etc. Each of us is a unique person, and there is nobody else who is exactly like us. God has created us like this because He has a particular plan for our life which no one else can fulfil. We are not in competition with anyone else! Our success in life does not depend on how well we compare with others but on how well we fulfil God's special plan for our own life.

Do you remember that in the story of the talents, Jesus talked about giving different number of talents each to different people? (Mt.25:15-30). All were not given the same number of talents. And notice that when the master came to ask them about what they had done, he didn't compare one

with another. He didn't ask the man with the two talents why he hadn't produced as much result as the one with the five talents! The Bible says that each of us has to give an account of (only) ourselves to God! (Ro.14:12).

How liberating this is! We don't have to go around trying to impress anyone. We don't have to get upset if someone else is able to do better than us. We don't even have to worry if no one seems to recognise what we have done. *God* knows. That is sufficient.

Pointers along the way #107

Chosen for a special task

Each of us is unique in the sense that there is no one exactly like us in the whole world. We have each such a combination of abilities, background, circumstances and experience that makes us just the right people to carry out a particular task that no one else can fulfil. Don't think only about the prominent and outstanding ministries as the tasks people have to do. Very few people are called for such ministries, and most of the work is expected to be carried out by ordinary people like us! (Ep.4:11,12).

Many of us make the mistake of imagining that we are not so important in God's kingdom. But it is easy to see how we are mistaken when we look at the way the human body works. Granted that what other people notice most are what the mouth, hands and

legs do. But think of the important roles played by the hidden parts like the brain, heart, lungs, kidneys and many smaller parts. It is when all the parts of the body work together in harmony that the body is able to function normally and carry out useful service for the others.

In the kingdom of God, there is a unique task that each of us has to accomplish. It may be comforting someone just by visiting him, passing on orally or through letter or email the right word which someone needs, helping someone with money or practical assistance, praying, sharing the gospel through our testimony or teaching, sharing in someone else's sorrow, supporting and enabling someone else to carry out his ministry, etc. There are literally millions of things that need to be done. Our own peculiar background may be what

enables us to do some particular thing which someone with a different background may not even recognise as necessary (See 2Co.1:3,4 in this context).

Given a free hand I think all of us would head for the prominent ministries, not only because they are what would satisfy our ego, but also because we may not be even aware that there is need for some of the other things. One way God leads us to these 'special' tasks may be by closing doors in our face. We naturally feel disappointed and perhaps discouraged because some of our dreams have been shattered. But that is because we don't realise that God is closing some doors in order to draw us towards some other doors which we would have ignored.

When God redirects us by such measures it may appear to us that it is a

calamity. But remember God is still in control, and He is silently planning for our welfare (Je.29:11). He will even turn what looks like a calamity to work for our good (Ro.8:28). Our 'bad' experiences prepare us to minister to someone else who is going through difficult times because no one else is sensitive to such things. Closed doors lead us to go in entirely new directions which we would never have imagined before that they existed. But later on we will be able to look back and see how wonderfully the Lord has led us!

Would you like God to change?

"If God is so loving and almighty why does He allow so much suffering in this world? If He loves me why isn't He answering my prayers?" Questions like these are very common, coming up from people when they cannot understand God. We all have many questions concerning God, and especially when we are going through some difficulty such questions take on extra forcefulness. These questions may come up because we are confused, or because we are dissatisfied with the way God is. As His children we instinctively know that we are not supposed to be dissatisfied with Him. But we can't seem to stop such thoughts from coming up.

It is not only about God. Even the thoughts about the people we live with

or deal with can be in the same way. We are unhappy with the way they are, and we wish they would be different. Many people's prayers are full of petitions to God to change these other people. They keep waiting for the change, and after some time they begin to get upset with God for not answering them quickly.

What does God have to say about this? "Be still, and know that I am God" (Ps.46:10). He is the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end, the same yesterday, today and forever, from everlasting times (Re.1:8;He.13:8). Do we really want *Him* to change? Isn't the problem really with us, that we don't understand Him well enough? We don't really imagine that there could be anything wrong with Him where He has to change, do we? *We* have to change in our thinking and our responses. We have to recognise

how God is and change our ways to fit in with His.

It is of course not quite the same when it comes to people. People have their faults, and there is nothing wrong in wanting them to change. It is good and right to pray for them too, though not in a spirit of complaining but love. But while we wait for them to change, don't we need to make some changes ourselves?

Perhaps we need to work at 'accepting' them as they are, *with* their faults, in order to make sure that our response to them remains loving and non-judgmental. This 'acceptance' can go a long way in helping them to change! If they find us being critical or taking a 'holier than you' attitude, will that not drive them farther away?

Many times when our mind is focussed on someone else's faults we become

more blind than usual to our own faults. Even though we proclaim doctrinally that we are just sinners saved by grace, our attitude and behaviour at such times tend to be high minded. Let us work on putting on an attitude of humility, in our thoughts about God and other people.

Would you like God to use you?

God said through the prophet Ezekiel that while the people were turning away from Him into wickedness and oppressing others He was looking for (at least) one man (or woman) who would stand in the gap and build up the wall (Ez.22:29,30). But He could not find even one. Perhaps this makes God sadder than the fact that many are turning into wickedness. Why is it that it is difficult for Him to find people whom He can use in this manner?

Isn't it because it would cost us something to be such people? It might cost us some inconvenience and discomfort, when what we would like is a comfortable and easy life. We may be so busy doing many things which we like that we don't have much time to spend with God or for Him. We like

to make our own plans about how we want to serve God, and He wants us to go another way. It might cause us pain when some people don't understand us, and we don't like that. We may be hesitant to step out in faith when we can't see the way ahead clearly, and we would rather see and understand things first before moving forward. We may not be very comfortable being alone, even though we know God is there, and we would rather be where everybody else is.

Of course we would like the honour and name of being used by God, but we don't like the hard times that come along with it. Is it any wonder that God is not able to find many who will stand in the gap for Him? Pious wishes and emotional consecrations are not substitutes for *taking up our cross daily, denying ourselves and following Jesus* (Lk.9:23).

We would wish that when we have asked Jesus to come into our heart everything should be nice and cosy afterwards. If at all anything that looks like trouble comes our way, we think, all we need to do is to shoot a prayer heavenwards and then it will be just a cakewalk! But the hard grind of daily life tends to make us think, "Hey, this is not what I expected!" That is when we slip out of the 'gap' and seek for a little comfort.

Don't we need to become a little tough if we are to *endure*? Don't we need to mentally prepare ourselves to *work hard* through the little hardships that come our way? Paul's guidelines to Timothy included: 1. Willingness to suffer hardship in life. 2. Not to get over-occupied with the things of this life. 3. To have the express goal of pleasing the Lord. 4. To live according to the laws of God. 5. To be prepared

for hard work. (2Ti.3-6).

Let us learn to be such people.

Pointers along the way #110

Doctrines, doctrines!

A lot of quarrels among the people of God are because of differences in doctrines. One interprets a verse in one way, and another in another way. That is enough for people to stop talking to each other, leave churches, break fellowship, start new churches, etc. But think about it. Can any two people on earth see *all* things exactly in the same way, and can they agree on every point of doctrine? No!

Now doctrines are important. We can't accept just *any* doctrine. If someone brings a *heresy*, we must reject him, and not even give him greetings (Tit.3:10;2Jn.1:7-10). This is for our safety and his rebuke, because it is our doctrines, or what we hold as teachings from the scriptures, that give us direction for our lives.

But there are doctrines *and* doctrines. Not all of them are equally important as far as our *life* is concerned. If you and I differ on the meaning of 666, that is not going to decide which one of us is more spiritual. This doctrine *has* its value, but it is not so important that you and I should part our ways because we disagree about it.

OK, but what about doctrines that have immediate practical applications? Can we afford to disagree about them? One man believes in celebrating special days in honour of the Lord, and another man thinks that all days are equally important (Ro.14:5). One man thinks it is wrong to eat pork, and another enjoys it. What about the way a church meeting (or *service* - see the difference) is to be held? How often should we have the Lord's table (Lord's supper, holy communion, breaking of bread!)? Should women be

allowed to preach? Who should be baptised, who should baptise them, how should they be baptised? Etc.

My question is, can we ever find someone who agrees with us on every one of such doctrines? Perhaps in places where there seems to be a *semblance* of agreement people are not encouraged to think for themselves or allowed to express their opinions!

Obviously our fellowship cannot be based on agreement over all doctrines. If God has accepted you and me and made us both His children, with all our differences in doctrines, shouldn't we accept each other as a brother or sister in Christ? (Ro.15:7). Then what are those doctrines that we have to have as *minimum* on which we need to agree? The answer seems to be obvious - those doctrines that are related to God's nature and character, and our relationship with God as His children.

Can we agree to disagree on lesser aspects of doctrine *without being disagreeable about it*? Of course it is not that we don't have strong convictions about some of them (Ro.14:22). But let us give the others freedom to be different from us and yet accept them in the same way that God has accepted them.

Pointers along the way #111

The new deal from God

God made an arrangement with Israel over the ten commandments, saying that if they did certain things they would get a blessing, and if they didn't, they would be cursed (De.11:26-28). Now we call this the *old* testament (covenant), because this became obsolete and was replaced with a *new* testament (He.8:13). These old and new testaments are not names of two parts of the Bible, but they are really two arrangements God has made with people. The old one was replaced because it was ineffective and powerless to help anybody to become what God wants us to be - *perfect*, like Him (He.8:7;10:1). The old covenant, represented by the Law, could only tell people what they should and should not do, but gave them no power to obey.

Now it is the time of the new covenant

which Jesus made with us through His death (Mt.26:28). We are no longer under the old covenant or the Law. This new arrangement has many differences from the old one, which are important for us to know if we are to understand and experience what all God has prepared for us now. The new arrangement is far *better* than the old in many ways (He.7:22).

The old testament was based on performance. People would receive blessings or curses depending on how they obeyed. The new testament is one of grace, where we are accepted and blessed freely, by grace, when we believe (Ep.2:8). The old testament was written on stone and the new one on our hearts (He.8:10). God now takes away our heart of stone and gives us one of flesh (Ez.36:26). Earlier Israel had to obey God because they feared Him, but now we obey God

because we love Him.

The old covenant had commands concerning external behaviour, and the rewards were also material. Now God looks for obedience from the heart, coming out of love and a good attitude, and our reward is a crown of life, a transformation into His likeness (Mt.5:22,28; Jas.1:12; Ro.8:29). Where holiness concerned places and things in the old covenant, now it is for our body, soul and spirit (1Th.5:23). Where one day in the week and one tenth of our earnings used to be for God - a part of the whole - now *every* part of our life belongs to God (Col.2:16,17; 1Co.3:23). Where priests were a special class of people in the old testament, now all children of God are priests and kings (1Pe.2:9). Now we belong to the Body of Christ where every member has a special function (Ep.4:16). There are many other new

things.

The aim of the new covenant is first of all to provide all of us - irrespective of any differences at the human level - direct access to God through faith without having to go through a priest, and then to transform our lives from the inside to become like Jesus (Col.3:11). Sanctification is a process which the Holy Spirit does in our heart that transforms our heart, attitude, desires, ambitions, etc., and makes us more and more like Jesus. Let us take pains to learn what Jesus has prepared for us, and allow the Holy Spirit to work in us continually.

Pointers along the way #112

Servants of God

When God made a transition from the old covenant to the new, He moved from what was imperfect, partial and

just a shadow to the fullness of what He wanted as a relationship with man. He made the first covenant with Israel over the ten commandments. He knew it was not a good arrangement and that the people would not be able to keep all the commandments perfectly, because He had not yet given grace through Jesus, His Son, and the Holy Spirit had not been poured out (Jn.1:17;Joel.2:28). But *in the fullness of time* God brought forth the *new* covenant which replaced the old. There are many features of this covenant that are far better than those of the old. Here is one of them.

Under the old covenant, only people from the tribe of Levi could be priests who would stand between God and man and offer sacrifices and prayers to God on behalf of men. They had special robes to distinguish them from 'ordinary' people.

But under the new covenant, *all* can know God personally, from the least to the greatest (He.8:11). Through our faith in Christ, God gives us the grace to be His children and 'saints' (Ep.2:19). God has also placed us together in churches (not buildings, but gatherings of 'called out ones'), and the church worldwide is the Body of Christ (Col.1:18).

Jesus has given to the church a few men with special gifts to serve the saints, as prophets, teachers, shepherds, evangelists, etc. (Ep.4:11). While these men provide leadership in particular activities, the leader of the church is Jesus Christ (Mt.23:10). The Bible points out that these men are to help the saints to build up the body of Christ (Ep.4:11,12).

The Bible says that the Body of Christ is built up when each member functions properly and contributes his

part (Ep.4:16). What can we contribute? One of the secrets is given in 1Cor.4:2 which is paraphrased in the Living Bible as "Now the most important thing about a servant is that he does just what his master tells him to" (1Cor.4:2). If what God wants you to do is to cook and feed the children, while somebody else is to teach from the Bible, both can serve God by doing just that!

God wants us to do whatever we do, whether it is eating or drinking or anything else (!), as unto the Lord - heartily, thankfully and to the glory of God (1Cor.10:31;Col.3:17,23). When we do that we are serving God (Col.3:24).

Of course if we are doing whatever we like, not bothering to see if that is what the Lord wants, we are not servants of God even if we do 'spiritual' things (Mt.7:21-23). But when we seek to

find His will and do it, we serve God.
Shall we not do it full time?

Pointers along the way #113

Leaving the past behind

Some of us are slaves to our past. We feel bound down by some bad things we have done or what someone else has done to us. We tend to think that because we have been like *that* in the past, we can never be otherwise. As a result we don't even *try* to move forward. But this kind of thinking is false. Jesus is in the business of making all things new, if we let Him (Re.21:5;2Co.5:17).

"Fornicators, idolaters, adulterers, effeminate, homosexuals, thieves, the covetous, drunkards, revilers, swindlers" - this is a very short list the Bible gives of *bad* people. We can be sure that this is not an exhaustive list! But the Bible goes on to say, "Such *were* some of you; but you were washed, but you were sanctified, but you were justified in the name of the

Lord Jesus Christ and in the Spirit of our God" (1Co.6:9-11). What does this passage tell us? That however bad our past has been, when Jesus takes hold of us He washes us clean and makes us new. So we can begin with a clean record.

We may think that this is fine as far as how God looks at us. But our problem may be how people look at us and how we ourselves feel. What we need to see here is that if *God* thinks of us in one way, *we* can very well afford to think about ourselves like that, and then it doesn't matter what others think. We can deliberately switch our mind to believe what God says and reject what everyone else says.

But we may still think that it is all very well to think like that, but what can we do if other people still treat us in the old way? The answer is, very little. Since we can't really change how other

people treat us, let's stop wishing to, and go forward with *our* lives. Sooner or later the others will notice that we have changed, and *then* they will change the way they treat us.

Some of us are wishing to change what *can't* be changed. We wish we hadn't done *this* or been like *that*. Maybe some events have overtaken us, and we are still thinking we can reverse them somehow.

What can we do about our past? We need to honestly acknowledge it, learn whatever lessons we can learn from it, set right whatever we need to set right and what is still possible to set right, leave the rest to God and go forward. Paul did this about his past (Php.3:13). He acknowledged he had been a blasphemer and a violent persecutor, tried to work all the more passionately to serve Christ and His people, and learned to live with the fact that there

were many things he could not set right.

For some people what can be most difficult is to live with some injustice of the past. But if it is something we *can't* set right, we need to commit that to God and then go forward (1Pe.2:19,20,23).

Why should we let our past spoil our future?

Pointers along the way #114

Oh, those dry times!

If you have been a serious Christian for a reasonable amount of time you would have come across some of those dry spells, when everything seems to be rather low key - feelings, sense of the presence of God, getting something from the word of God, interest in prayer, Bible reading and fellowship with other Christians, sense of commitment, purpose and boldness, etc. And we have wondered what was happening to us.

The fact is, many times we are unable to understand what the matter is! We think, if only we knew *why* things are like this we could do something about them. We ask ourselves, "Is God angry with me?", "Have I done anything wrong?", "Have I missed the way somewhere?", "Has God left me on the shelf?", etc. We may thrash around

with such questions for some time, and give in to one of them out of despair, even though we have a feeling in our heart, "It can't be!"

The experienced ones among us know all about these, and can instruct others about them. But then when it strikes us unawares we are once again sucked into the whirlpool.

What can we do in such situations? Of course, we must first of all check to see if we have gone astray in any way and if we need to set some things right. That goes without saying. But after we have dealt with such things and we are still puzzled, what shall we do? Those are the times when we need to hold on to the bare facts of our faith. They are 'bare' because they lack the thrills of bubbly feelings and congenial circumstances. We look at the Lord and His word and conclude that they *are* true and dependable, and then we

choose to hold on. We conclude that "after we have suffered for a little time" the God of all grace will draw near to us again (1Pe.5:10).

It is not that He ever left us and went away. But we *felt* that way, and it surely *looked* that way. Perhaps our physical tiredness or sickness made us feel that way. Perhaps the anti-climax following some spiritual mountain top experience made us somewhat exhausted for the time being. Think of how God took care of Elijah when he, after the towering experience of Mount Carmel, suddenly felt as though there was no hope. God led him to a time of physical rest and gave him food and drink! (1Ki.19:4-6).

Do we think we are so spiritual that we don't need rest? Do we imagine that the ordinary laws of life on earth don't apply to us? Do we think that if we are serving the mighty God we can take

some liberties without having to face the consequences? God says, "Don't fool yourself! What you sow, that you will reap" (Ga.6:7).

We sometimes forget that we are not angels or supernatural beings who do not need to eat, drink or sleep. We think we can work day and night, fast often, pray long hours, sleep little, and 'burn ourselves out for the Lord' without expecting to experience any burn-out! One day we will have a glorified body, but not yet, brother.

Pointers along the way #115

Reckoning with others

What is our usual reaction when we have a problem with someone? We think about how *bad* he/she is, how unreasonable, how unwilling to listen, how callous, how without understanding, etc. As we think like

this we get worked up, and start talking to others about it - trying to justify our own position and put the blame on the other person. This runs its usual course and ends up in worsening the relationship.

But can't we rise above this type of behaviour that the Bible refers to as that of *mere men* (1Co.3:1,3)?

When we behave in the usual manner what we are really trying to do is: 1) Place the blame on the other person. 2) Try to convince the other person (directly or through others) that he needs to change. 3) Wait for the other person to change. We think that our happiness depends on the other person changing. This is silly because the more we *try* to change the other person, the bigger the problem becomes, and the more frustrated we become.

What did God do when He had a problem with a sinful world? He found a way of reconciling us to Himself. One of the main factors in His approach was to accept us as we were, *not counting our sins against us* (2Co.5:19). If He were to keep sending us prophets to tell us how wrong we were and waited for us to change, He would still be waiting!

By accepting us God was not saying that we or our behaviour were 'acceptable.' It was His mercy and largeheartedness that were being displayed. His Son had to die in order to cancel the punishment that was due to us. But when He did show us mercy and accept us, that broke our resistance and we started loving Him and obeying Him.

What approach can we take? We too have been given a ministry of reconciliation. This means first of all

that we act as God's ambassadors to reconcile people with God (2Co.5:20). But doesn't it also mean that we take the same reconciliatory approach in dealing with others that God has taken with us? In other words, without waiting for others to change, shall we not accept them as they are? When we 'accept' them like that, of course it does not mean that the others are OK or that the problem has gone away. We are just reckoning with the fact that so and so is like that!

The fact that our old approach has not worked shows that we need to find a different strategy. 1) Identify what the real issues are. This means looking at things deeper than what appears on the surface. 2) Understand *why* we and the other person are behaving the way we both do. What is driving us, what are we looking for, what are the specific factors that are causing us problems?

3) Accept the person as he is. Let us stop trying to change him, and just recognise that he is like that. 4) Change *our* strategy in dealing with him.

When we take this approach we are able to see things more clearly and deal with them better.

Pointers along the way #116

Walking alongside to help

When we want to help someone, wouldn't it be good if we can get down to their level, walk along with them as their friend and pass on any help that we can give? Is that how it is usually done? I think many times 'help' is offered as from an expert, a great or powerful man, a donor, etc., to a needy one. Have you thought of how humiliating it can be to the one who receives it? Jesus warned about behaving like 'benefactors' (Lk.22:25).

It is not just about helping. Even in evangelism, if we approach people from a position of superiority - 'believers' talking down to 'unbelievers', 'children of God' to 'children of the devil', 'those who know' to 'those who are ignorant', etc. - do we think we are making it easy for the others to listen? Of course we are

believers and children of God, and we know certain things that the others don't. But let us not forget the fact that if we are any different from the others it is by the grace of God and not because of us being any better or superior compared to the others (Ro.3:27).

When Jesus came to the earth to save us, it is important to note that He came as a Man (who was tempted in all points as we are) (He.4:15). Of course, He was God too, but He did not interact with people around Him as God, but as the Son of Man. In other words, He came by the side of people as 'one of them', even though He was in fact far superior. He was without sin, but He did not behave as a perfect Man trying to help sinful people. This was one reason people felt free to go to Him. They sensed that He would not look down on them or despise them, or

even 'throw the book' at them.

When we talk to unbelievers who are 'walking in darkness', ignorant of God's ways and who are in bondages of various kinds, how do we come across? What do they smell about us? Superiority?

When we meet someone and we understand some of his difficulties, and we know the right Bible verses to share with him, do we wonder first if he would appreciate a preacher or a friend at this time? Many people are turned away, or put off, when they meet a 'preacher' - one who preaches at them. They wish, "If only I could find someone who would listen to me and take trouble to understand me!"

Let us say we meet someone who has problems in his marriage or in bringing up children. We know Bible verses that can help them, of course. We know

what they should have done and what they shouldn't. But if, instead of being preachy, we can relate to them as fellow human beings who are also going through problems (whether they are exactly the same or not), and show our concern and compassion, we can 'win' their heart to be willing to listen to us. Perhaps our relationship may become strong in the course of time to the point where we can share Bible verses too.

Pointers along the way #117

The ten commandments

It is sad to see that even in churches there are many people who believe that the way to reach heaven is through keeping the ten commandments. Some say it openly, and others sort of assume at the back of their mind that the standard of behaviour taught through the ten commandments will ensure them a place in heaven. Of course this standard is higher than that of many people in the world today. But that is not the basis on which God decides whether we qualify for heaven.

Behind this assumption is the notion that entry into heaven is based on our behaviour (or performance). The new testament refers to it as salvation by 'works' in contrast to salvation by grace through faith (Ep.2:8,9). The Bible makes it very clear that *no one* can be saved through works (Ro.3:20).

None of us can get into heaven by being good enough because all of us have sinned (Ro.3:23).

On the top of that, Jesus came and made it clear that God's standards are actually much higher than the ten commandments. If we think we haven't killed anyone, Jesus says that even getting angry with someone is serious enough to deserve hell (Mt.5:21,22). If we look down on adulterers Jesus points out that looking at a woman with desire is essentially the same (Mt.5:27,28). If we get the trend and look at each of the rest of the ten commandments we will see that the real standards of God are much higher than the ten commandments. So much for trying to keep the commandments and get to heaven.

So where is the man who thinks he has kept all the commandments? Liar! (1Jn.1:8,10).

God's way of salvation has been designed in such a way that *no one* will be able to boast before Him (1Co.1:27-29). On the contrary we are accepted when we go to God as sinners deserving no mercy. With no good works or performance record to earn our way, when we go there casting ourselves before His mercy, He receives us warmly! He tells us that our sins have been punished in full, when they were laid on Jesus as He hung on the cross (Ro.5:8). This is grace.

Why is it difficult for us to let go of our sense of righteousness and cling to God's mercy? We think we are not like *those* people, and we think we deserve *some* recognition for our faithfulness, self-denial, etc. We can't bear to think that we are considered 'equal' to all those filthy sinners!

Can we imagine how sinful we would

appear to a holy God who cannot even bear to look at sin? (Job.15:15). Remember how God turned His face away when Jesus hung on the cross with our sins upon Him? (Mt.27:46). When Jesus died all those sins were paid for, and He rose from the dead without those sins on Him any more. God now looks at us who have been washed through faith in Jesus just as though we had not sinned. This is acceptance, by grace, through faith.

Let us never forget the basis of our acceptance with God and not get confused with keeping commandments or any other good works.

Pointers along the way #118

Learning from others

Have you ever had the experience when you learned something precious from someone from whom you didn't expect that sort of thing? I have, several times. I am ashamed to say that I "didn't expect much" from some people, indicating some kind of pride on my part. But God has been gracious to open my eyes to see how precious each one of His created beings is to Him.

"Can anything good come out of Nazareth?", asked Nathaniel, and he was a man without guile! (Jn.1:46,47). We have this despising attitude not only towards individual people but also to communities and even races as a whole. Why do we consider ourselves to be superior? Of course, when we look around at people we do find certain despicable characteristics

in many of them. We can't pretend otherwise. But we too have some things wrong with us, don't we? If we were to compare ourselves with some people and say that we are not like them, but better, don't we also have to say that in certain other things they are better? That recognition should keep us in our place.

I am not trying to take a philosophical approach and conclude that there is good in everyone, sort of glossing over some of the wicked or evil things that there are in some people. I am writing about a practical approach where we do recognise that all is not well everyone we meet, but where we also realise that there may be some things we can learn from them. Sometimes, praise God, the things we learn may come in the form of a challenge for our own life, where we see we need to change. But sometimes we may also

learn to avoid some viewpoints, attitudes or approach that others have taken. But there can be something we can learn.

But I am thinking more about our own attitude that writes off certain people, keeping ourselves shut off to the precious things that we can receive from others. Who do we think we are, anyway? If there is anything good in us that makes us better in any way from some of the others isn't that a work of God? (1Co.4:7). Do we think, God forbid, that there is nothing that we need to learn from the others? Sometimes we may think that we can learn only from 'spiritual' people. But we can become spiritual only if we are willing to learn. The more spiritual we are, the more eager we are to learn, because we know there is so much more to learn than we know. The more mature we are, the more eager we are

to become better, because we know there is so much in us that needs to be changed.

There is no condemnation when we see our faults or lacks, because we know that our Father has accepted us just as we are (Ro.8:1). We don't become any less when we acknowledge our lacks or faults, for the same reason. Therefore let us not shy away from looking squarely at our faults. An objective awareness of our faults and lacks will give us a desire to change, and that will help us to be more willing to learn from others.

Pointers along the way #119

God's promises and grace

We know the story of Jacob in the old testament who wrestled with God and would not let Him go till He blessed him (Ge.32:26). We learn from this that

we have to be tenacious with God in asking Him to fulfil what He has promised to us. If we, like the fox who jumped for the grapes, give up after we have prayed just once, it shows that we don't really care that much for what we ask. But, like many other things in the Bible, it is possible for us to misunderstand this approach and as a result try to misuse it.

I am referring to the tendency to pray for something we would like to have and then to *demand* and insist that God should give it to us. There could be several wrong assumptions behind this. We are mistaken if we imagine that we can ask *anything* we like and demand that God has to give it. It is true that Mt.18:19, Jn.14:14 and 16:23 seem to promise that we can ask for anything. But if we also read 1Jn.5:14 we would get a better understanding, because that verse tells us that we can have

confidence about receiving something from God only if we *ask according to His will*. Sometimes He may give us some things are not according to His perfect will for us, if we insist on them. But then they will actually work against us! (Ps.106:15).

Mt.18:19 says that if two of us agree about anything that we ask, we will get it from the Lord. Some people misunderstand this in such a way that they ask someone, "Could you please agree with me on such and such a thing that I want to pray for?" But in the context of 1Jn.5:14 what it means is that two people sense and agree (Greek - harmonise) in their hearts without any doubt that something is the will of God.

Another mistake is to assume that God is out there to cater to our whims and fancies. We forget the fact that He is God and Lord and that we are only

created beings. Also, even as created beings we are those who deserve the judgment of hell for our sins and whom God has graciously forgiven. We have no claim to any authority over God (!) to tell Him what we want and expect that He should do it for us.

Have you noticed how men who knew God well indicate a measure of uncertainty about how God would respond to people in different situations? (Moses- Ex.32:30, Caleb - Jos.14:12, David - 2Sa.16:12, Jeremiah - La.3:29, Amos - Am.5:15, Zepheniah - Zep.2:3, Paul - Ac.17:27). This is *not* a lack of faith, but a recognition of God's sovereignty which takes precedence over man's plans and desires.

Even what God has clearly promised to give us can be ours only as an act of grace from God. If we recognise this it would help us to avoid fleshly kinds of

'faith,' 'boldness,' and arrogance.

Pointers along the way #120

The risk in trusting

What is it to have faith in God? Is it a belief that God will give us what we need or ask for? To have faith *in God* is to trust Him, to have confidence in Him, and to relate to Him on that basis (He.11:6). If we have such a faith we won't think it is risky to place our life entirely in His hands. But, honestly, do we have that kind of faith?

Do we have any hesitation to place our future in God's hands and give Him the freedom to plan *anything* for us that He sees fit? Perhaps we cringe at the word 'anything'! We think, "What if He gives me some sickness? What if He asks me to marry some ugly, repulsive person? What if He asks me to sell everything and give to the poor? What if He asks me to leave my home and move to some faraway place as a missionary? What if ...?"

Such thoughts are common, and may come to any of us. They are very real to us, and we can't manage to ignore them. But they come up because we haven't got to know God as He really is. We may have been listening to the devil without realising it. The devil is a liar, and one of his goals is to paint God black and to distort our perception of God even when we read the Bible.

The devil tells us that God is a demanding and exacting taskmaster, one who is waiting around the corner to catch us when we go wrong, one who is out to take away all fun from life, one who frowns if He sees us enjoying anything, one who gets a thrill out of seeing us suffer, one who always tries to teach us hard lessons, one who always reminding us about all the sins we have done, etc. But these are all blatant lies!

It is just amazing to see how good, loving, compassionate, merciful, kind, understanding, tender, gentle and gracious God is, while being all-knowing, all-powerful and all-wise too. If we understand how *dirty* and *repugnant* we would appear to His holy and pure eyes, and how He loved us so much in spite of that and gave His Son over to death in order to make us His own, we will begin to see how entirely different He is from the picture the devil has painted for us (Is.1:18).

God tells us that He has got *only* good plans for our future (Je.29:11). How can it be otherwise when His very nature is love? (1Jn.4:8). His wisdom is so perfect that He knows exactly what is good for us and He is also all-powerful to carry out whatever He chooses (Ps.115:3). We are puny little creatures and we don't always know what is good for us. So it is natural that

many times we cannot understand how this or that can be good for us. But we must remember that even when we don't understand it, God is still in control.

When we really know God, we can surrender our lives to God and hand over the control to Him. We will always be safe doing *His* will. There is no risk in it! But if we yield to God wholly like this we will get to see how good He is to us.

Pointers along the way #121

God wants our fellowship

We know God loves us so much because He gave His Son to die for us (Ro.5:8). But what does He want with us after we have repented from our sins, placed our trust in Him and He has made us His children? Many think that He needs labourers to work for Him. "Saved to serve," they say. They say that now that we have been saved our duty is to go and preach the gospel so that other people can also be saved (Mt.28:19,20). Now it is true that the harvest is plenty and the labourers are few (Mt.9:37). But is that the primary reason for His overtures towards us?

Let us go back to the time before Adam and Eve had sinned. Why did God create man in the first place? Why did the three Persons in the trinity of God decide, "Let Us make man in our image"? (Ge.1:26). God wanted

someone like Him to relate to, to have fellowship with. It appears that He couldn't really have fellowship with angels for some reasons we don't fully understand, and He had created them only as 'servants' who could never be children (He.1:5,14).

How can God have fellowship with us? He has created us as body, soul, and *spirit*, and He is Spirit (1Th.5:23;Jn.4:24). But when we are born into this world we are 'dead' in sin (Ro.5:17;Ps.51:5). This means that even though we have a spirit we are dead in our spirit and have no connection with God. When we are born again God's Spirit comes into our spirit and we are made 'alive' (Ep.2:5). Now we *can* have fellowship with God.

We have 'fellowship' with someone when we share things in common - when we are partners with him and

participate with him in some common values, interests, goals, activities, etc. Obviously fellowship can be at very low levels, as when we are in the same class or office, to high levels where we have become virtually 'one' with each other in our mind and spirit.

So how can we have greater fellowship with God? It is by becoming more and more like Him, when we share the same spirit - in our values, in the things we like and hate, in the way we look at people and things, in the choices we make, in the way we respond to situations, doing things in partnership with Him, etc.

God has made it possible for *all* of us to have the highest levels of fellowship with Him (He.8:11). It is not just for so-called 'servants of God.' Don't we all have the opportunity to become more like God in our attitudes and behaviour, and doing what He wants us

to do?

It all depends on *how much* we want. God has given us the freedom to choose either God or our own will. Because it is easier to give in to our will than to deny it and do God's will, most of us actually never get to have much fellowship with God. God's opinion of even some "servants of God" was that they really sought only their own (Php.2:19-21).

But let us understand what a great and glorious possibility God is offering us, and respond to Him.

Pointers along the way #122

Our unique role

We all have heard about Billy Graham whom God has used in turning thousands of people to Him. But how many of us have heard about the person who was used to turn Billy Graham to the Lord? Hardly any. But just think what a crucial role this person had to play in the conversion of these thousands!

Humanly speaking, we all would like to be like Billy Graham - eminent, well known, recognised, appreciated, 'successful', etc. But such people are very rare in the kingdom of God. The kingdom is made of millions or 'ordinary' people like us who are carrying out our roles, most of the time without even recognising how important and crucial our role is in the master plan of God.

The Bible tells us not to make great plans for ourselves (Je.45:5). The greatest 'achievement' we can aspire for is to fit in with God's plan for us. Nothing else we can plan can be greater or better. It is the devil who tells us that if we seek to do God's will we may end up losing all fun in life, He might take us through terrible hardships, etc. The devil is a liar. We must trust God to make the best possible plan for us because He loves us, understands us, and knows us perfectly, and He has all wisdom and power to make things happen for us.

God has not made anyone else who is just like us. The parents from whom we grew up, the experiences of our life, our particular temperament and abilities, and the circumstances in which we find ourselves have uniquely shaped us to be what we are, and we are just the person God can use to do

some particular task in His kingdom. No one else can do what we can do. This is not an expression of pride, but a recognition of how God has moulded us. We are not superior to anyone else but we are unique (1Co.4:7).

Perhaps we imagine that what an apostle, prophet or pastor does is *more important* than what we do. We assume it is a mark of humility to think that we are nobodies in God's kingdom. But that's not correct. When an apostle does what he is asked to do, and we do what we are asked to do, both of us are just carrying out our tasks! The one who plants and the one who waters are equal! (1Co.3:7,8). It is God who gets the glory, and our reward is for carrying out *our* tasks faithfully. There are differences of authorities in the church. Certainly some offices in the church have authority over others. But *all* members

are equally valuable to God.

We are, each of us, *incomparable*! Isn't it foolish for us to compare ourselves with others? Just think. If God, with whom there is no partiality (Acts.10:34), created one person with certain abilities and another with other abilities, isn't it only because He had different tasks for these two persons?

Let us stop trying to be like or to be greater than someone else. Let us rejoice in the special way God has created us and the special task He has entrusted to us, and seek to be faithful with that.

Pointers along the way #123

The things that drove Paul

Paul was an outstanding man and apostle. He personified his exhortation to Timothy that he should pay special attention to himself *and* to his ministry (1Ti.4:16). He was not so engrossed in his ministry that he neglected his personal sanctification, and he was not preoccupied with his own sanctification that he had no thought for others. He has left us a good example to follow (1Co.10:33;11:1).

Let us take a challenge from some of the things that drove Paul.

His personal goals

- *A deep repentance* (1Co.15:9,10). The more he thought of the way he had messed up his life before, the more zealous he was to

be different now.

- *The love of Christ* (2Co.5:14,15). This was what propelled every part of his life.
- *The knowledge of having to give an account* (2Co.5:9,10). Paul had a great balance between the fear of God and the grace of God.
- *To be found in Him, in the resurrection* (Php.3:8-11). He wanted no part of self-righteousness.
- *To the prize of the high calling of God in Christ* (Php.3:14). He wanted to reach the highest level of life that anyone could reach.
- *To be a partaker of the*

gospel (1Co.9:23). He was aware that he needed to experience more of the power of salvation even as he preached to the others.

- *Not to get disqualified at the end* (1Co.9:27). He was very much aware that finishing the race was more important than a dramatic start.

His ministry goals

- *Compulsion to preach the gospel* (1Co.9:16,17). Paul did not consider his ministry as an optional extra he could take or leave.
- *By all means to save some more* (1Co.9:22;10:33). He was always on the lookout for new openings, new

ways, new fields, etc.

- *His ministry to be acceptable* (Ro.15:16). He knew that the only acclaim that mattered was what would come from God.
- *To preach the gospel without cost* (1Co.9:18). Not only to preach 'free' grace but also to demonstrate it.
- *To present every man perfect in Christ* (Col.1:28). Getting men to forgiveness of sins was only the starting point.
- *To cut off opportunity from his accusers* (2Co.11:12). He was jealous for God's reputation that was at stake through his ministry.

I am sure there are many more things we can learn from Paul's example. But even these are enough to point us in the right direction, aren't they? We are all so lazy, indifferent, careless and lethargic compared to Paul. But we don't have to continue to be like that. We too can learn, and we too can change. We may not be called to be apostles, and so our sphere of ministry may be different. But we too can pay careful attention to our personal lives, and we too can fulfil the ministry that the Lord has entrusted to each one of us.

Pointers along the way #124

People are fragile

We have this astounding tendency to be selfish and self-centred, something that we were born with. We tend to think of ourselves first, and of all other people and things only with respect to what they can contribute to *us*! We move forward reaching out towards what we set as our goals, knocking people down who happen to be in our way and not caring how it affects them. Do you think I am exaggerating? Maybe *you* are not so crude as I make out here. But if we are honest we will recognise this *tendency* in us, irrespective of whether we are so crude or not. What God is trying to do through our new birth is to make us like Him (2Pe.1:4). What is the greatest thing about God that stands out in His relationship towards us? He gave Himself for us, the very opposite of self-centredness.

We know how He loved us so much that He sent Jesus down to us. Jesus did not sit up there in heaven and deride us even though we deserved it. He thought about what we were going through and came down to our level, in order to take us to His level. When He moved among different types of people He had a special heart for the weary and the heavy laden (Mt.11:28). He did not condemn the sinners, even though He was holier than all. He did not have an air about Him which made them feel small. He did not preach at sinners who came to Him in repentance and tell them how they ought to have been. He had a feel for our human infirmities. He treated people with respect.

One of the great aspects of God's dealings with us is how much He takes care to see that we are not tested beyond what we are able to bear with

(1Co.10:13). [We may *feel* as though things are too much for us. But that is because we don't remember that when He calculates how much we can handle He also takes into consideration the help we can get from Him (Php.4:13). If we don't seek for His help it is no wonder we can't handle many situations! He works outside of us ordering all things to work for our good, and He works inside us to train us to deal with different situations in the right way (Ro.8:28;Php.2:13).]

Do you remember how God was very considerate about how much the people of Israel could bear once they left Egypt for the promised land? It says that He led them through a long diversion in order to avoid them having to face opposition just after they had come out of Egypt (Ex.13:17). What does this tell us except that He will not allow us to be tested beyond

our ability? He looks after us as gently as a mother with her baby (Is.40:11).

Shall we not take this same attitude towards those are weak? (Ro.15:1). Let us not offend weak ones by flaunting our liberty (Ro.14:15,21;Mt.18:6). Let us not mentally demand that others should live by our standards. If we have to stand up at times 'without compromise' let us do it humbly and graciously. It is so easy to hurt people and put them off, but we know how difficult it is to win them.

Pointers along the way #125

Constantly on guard

The Bible says that those who think they are standing ought to take care lest they fall (1Co.10:12). Why is it that we tend to take no care at times?

We may think that we have reached such a level of spiritual maturity that we can't fall. We get an attitude that we know better than the others and that we know how to tackle temptations (1Co.8:1). We may have had some special experience with God that makes us feel we are not ordinary people. We may think we are some special favourites of God, based on a special ministry, knowledge or experience, and that God won't allow us to fall.

We may believe a wrong doctrine that we are wholly sanctified and that the possibility of temptation has been

taken away.

We may not have failed for some time in some particular area and we may think that we have 'victory' (at last!). It is this that I would like to look at now.

What *is* victory? When we are tempted, if we give in, that is failure, and if don't give in, that is victory. Of course, to be tempted itself is not sin, because Jesus also was tempted in every way that we are (He.4:15). If we have not fallen for some time now, it could mean that either we have been overcoming temptation every time, or that there hasn't been any strong temptation coming our way recently! If we have been having a comparatively easy time recently it doesn't mean we have victory. And, if we have been overcoming temptations every time it doesn't mean that suddenly a more powerful temptation cannot come!

Some people assume a false comfort from the promise of God that He will not allow us to be tempted beyond our ability (1Co.10:13). But we must note the rest of the verse that says that with each temptation He will provide a way of escape. What if we aren't looking for that way or don't choose it at any time?

We mustn't forget the fact that Satan is a master strategist. He may give us a time of ease so that we can be off guard and then suddenly attack us with a temptation. He is also no gentleman. He may choose a time when we are physically or mentally tired to send us a quick temptation. This does not contradict 1Co.10:13, because God is still in control and He will not allow anything to come to us which is too much for us. But *we* may get caught off guard because we haven't been watching.

Jesus tells us to *watch and pray*, and the apostles tell us to be on guard at all time, not only for us but for others too (Mt.26:41;Ep.6:18).. Jesus gives us a special pointer on avoiding discouragement (Lk.18:1). Peter tells us - and this is probably coming out of anguish at the memory of his own fall - to be on the alert at all times because Satan is roaming around looking for someone whom he can catch napping (1Pe.5:8)..

Any one can fall, if he is careless. And we can be careless at any time, no matter how much we have walked with God or known Him. Let us learn to watch and pray, humbly.

Pointers along the way #126

Mary and Martha

Those who have listened to many sermons would remember having heard at some time or other a comparison between Mary and Martha based on the incident when Mary was sitting and listening to Jesus. Martha complained to the Lord that Mary was not helping her in all that she was doing for Him, possibly cooking a meal (Lk.10:38-42). Jesus replied that Martha ought not to get worried and bothered about many things but recognise that the one thing that was important was to listen to God.

Now as in many other cases some people blow this incident out of proportion. Some say that cooking, running around to do many things, etc., are all *unspiritual*, and that only reading and meditating on the word of God, praying, etc., are spiritual. Jesus

didn't say that. What He said was that Martha shouldn't get *worried and bothered* about many things. It also implies that we should know our priorities well and shouldn't get involved in too many things which can drive us crazy. Jesus also made the point that if we would listen to God first before rushing off to do many things, we could be more at rest.

Some others make the point that people like Mary are the spiritual ones, who spend a lot of time reading the Bible, praying, etc., and that those like Martha, who in contrast are very active with doing different things but who don't turn up much at prayer meetings, are carnal. This is very unfair on the Marthas. If we look at the other incident in the Bible involving Martha, we will see what I mean.

When Jesus came to their town after their brother Lazarus had been dead for

four days, it was Martha who went out to meet Jesus (Jn.11:20). Mary stayed at home. Was she upset with Jesus? Or was it just her quiet nature? Anyway, when Martha met Jesus, after she lodged her complaint with Him saying that if He had been there Lazarus would not have died (which Mary also expressed later. v.32), she expressed her faith in Him saying even then He could get whatever He asked of God (v.21,22). She confessed Him as the Messiah and the Son of God, which very few people had clarity on (v.27). So this Martha wasn't so carnal after all!

The reason for quickly placing Marys and Marthas into such 'typical' pigeonholes is that of confusing religiosity with spirituality. Also, we tend to wrongly associate certain temperaments with spirituality. For example, we assume that soft-spoken,

gentle people are spiritual, while boisterous, impetuous people are carnal. Don't forget that Peter who belonged to the latter group became the leader of the apostles.

'Spirituality' is a matter of the heart, in our relationship with God. What we do and how we are outwardly depend a lot on our temperament and also on our spiritual gift. In the kingdom of God there is need for Marys, Marthas and others also! Each one has something to contribute, and each one has gifts and also lacks.

Pointers along the way #127

Owning up

Suppose God were to ask us, "Why did you get angry with John?" our reply may be, "Because he did this or said that to me." We may expand it further by saying, "I wouldn't have got angry if

John hadn't done or said that." What we are essentially saying is that *John* is responsible for our behaviour. But think of it this way. When John did or said something to us, couldn't we have responded in mercy, kindness, calmness, etc.? But we *chose* to respond in anger, didn't we, even though we were not aware that we were making a choice?

Each of us has to give an account of ourselves to God when we stand before Him one day (Ro.14:12). We can't give explanations like the one above and try to justify *our* behaviour. Even every *word* we have spoken has to be accounted for (Mt.12:36). *We are responsible for our own behaviour.*

It is the man who recognises this responsibility and is careful about how he lives who becomes a mature man. He knows where he wants to go, and he is directing all his actions,

including his words, to take him further towards that goal.

But what is our usual tendency? To be *reactive* rather than *proactive*. In other words we let other people and circumstances dictate our behaviour. There are several lies that we believe if we do this.

- That God is so loving and merciful that He won't ask us to give an account. We have answered this earlier.
- That nothing will happen to us even if we do bad things. We are only fooling ourselves. God says that we will have to reap the consequences (Ga.6:7,8).
- That we are forced to respond like that because of other people or circumstances. But our

behaviour is in our hands, and we are really under no compulsions to live according to our natural tendencies because now we have the Holy Spirit (Ro.8:11-13).

- That after we do wrong we can always ask God to be 'understanding' and to forgive us. This is the most dangerous of all these lies because we think that 'grace' is there for us to squander. This can ruin every aspect of our spiritual life (Jude.1:4).

The ability to choose is a precious faculty God has created us with. We have the opportunity to learn to make better choices each day than we have done earlier by improving our understanding of God, man, ourselves,

life, future, etc., by reading God's word and through fellowship with God and man. We have even opportunities to get out of wrong behaviour patterns we have got into in the past when we learn where they will lead to and think of where we really want to go. Isn't this a part of repentance? Let our repentance not be superficial where we just say that we are sorry for our sins. Let us also choose to *behave differently* in the future (2Co.7:9-11).

Pointers along the way #128

Growing into maturity

The Bible says that there is a process involved in sinning. First we are tempted in the form of a suggestion that is presented to us, mostly as a thought in our mind or directly from people. If we recognise this as a temptation to do wrong and then reject it, we have gained victory! But if we yield to that temptation and act according to it, we sin. After that we can't help but suffer the consequences of that sin (Jas.1:14,15;Ga.6:7,8).

This is easy to understand when temptation is about some external action such as telling a lie. But sin can even take place in our thoughts, such as holding on to anger, bitterness, jealousy, greed, lust, etc., which may not result in a wrong action immediately. In such cases sin is to continue with such thoughts or attitudes

without rejecting them.

Ideally when we are tempted we should have the time and the opportunity to think about what is happening and to take the correct decision to reject sin. In many cases we do get such opportunities. But in many other cases it seems that our response to temptation is spontaneous, and we end up doing things we normally wouldn't have liked to do. We don't seem to get the time we need to think and respond. We feel as if we are not responsible for what we have done, even though it is we who did them! (Ro.7:15,17).

A part of the reason is that we have been born *in sin*, with a slant towards sin right from birth (Ps.51:5). We start telling lies even as a toddler without anyone teaching us! The strong selfishness in us is seen even as babies! We really need to be born

again to inherit the nature of God (Jn.3:3,5). When that happens, God *begins* to write His laws upon our heart and mind (Je.31:33), and He continues to do that more and more as long as we grow in Him.

The other reason is that we have learned many wrong ways from our childhood onwards from the people around us and also by our ignorant and foolish reactions to situations. We didn't have much sense when we were children, and we have simply picked up whatever we saw other people doing and also learned how we could get others to do things for us. Even as adults we may have built up wrong behaviour patterns which now hold us captive. All our past experiences are there in our mind, and it is no wonder that our spontaneous response to situations is based on such past experiences rather than what we know

now we should do.

The Bible tells us to be *renewed in our minds*. That is what will take us towards what is mature and perfect (Ro.12:2;Ep.4:23). When we learn God's ways through His word and fellowship with His children, and change our behaviour according to God's word (Mt.7:24,25), our mind will acquire new values and patterns over a period of time and our spontaneous responses in temptations will also become new.

Pointers along the way #129

To be pleasing to the Lord

The greatness of God's love is its unconditional and unmerited nature. He demonstrated it by letting Jesus die for those who didn't deserve His love (Ro.5:8). With that kind of love, He loves us without end (Je.31:3). He

promises us never to leave or forsake us (He.13:5). Even when Israel and Judah went away from Him into spiritual harlotry, He kept waiting for them to return (Is.31:6). In simple words, He loves *all* people, and He continues to love all irrespective of how they behave towards Him. This is because His nature is love (1Jn.4:8). *His love is an eternal desire to do us good.*

But His love only shows His goodness on His side, and tells nothing about us! The fact that God *loves* us does not mean that He *likes* what He sees in us! Can it be that He is sad about some of the things we do?

God loves everyone, and wants to do good to all. But He is not pleased with everyone. The Bible says that He was not pleased with most of the people of Israel whom He had brought out of Egypt and that they perished in the

desert (1Co.10:5). Can we now think that since God has accepted us in Christ as an unmerited favour He cannot be displeased with us? The Bible quotes the above example just to tell us that we should take care that it does not happen to us (v.11,12).

Some people say God loves sinners but hates sin. But we can't really separate the sinner from his sin, can we? God loves sinners in the sense that He desires to do them good, hoping that they would repent and turn to Him (2Pe.3:9). But He is not happy with the 'sinner". We need to understand God's love in that way.

When Jesus was getting baptised in water, the Father said that He was well pleased with Jesus (Mt.3:17). Jesus received the highest certificate of all. In fact the Bible says that Jesus received a name higher than everyone else because He had humbled Himself

the most (Php.2:8,9). Even when it costed Him His life, He said, "Not My will, but Yours, Father" (Mt.26:39). This was how He was pleasing to the Father. This is our Forerunner, our Example, and our Hero, whom we are to follow. Jesus was always pleasing to the Father because He always did the things that were pleasing to Him (Jn.8:29). Paul always tried his best to be pleasing to the Lord (2Co.5:9).

Now the Father is looking for people after His own heart, *who will do all His will* (Acts.13:22). So it is not enough for us to know that God loves us, and to take strength from that knowledge. We must want to be pleasing to Him. It is not enough to tell God that we love Him, and sing songs of praise and worship. We also need to do what He tells us (Jn.14:21). He wants to talk to us all through the day and tell us what is on His mind, so that

we can walk like Jesus walked and become like Him (1Jn.2:6;Jn.5:19). Then He can also entrust us with greater responsibilities (Mt.25:21).

Pointers along the way #130

Getting to know God

Jesus said that eternal life is to know God (Jn.17:3). 'Eternal life' is one without beginning or end, and does not refer to just living forever. Even those who go to hell will live forever, in terms of duration! 'Eternal' refers to the quality of life we now share with God, after we were born again. The more we get to know God, the more we shall experience and enjoy this life.

We know the difference between knowing *about* God and knowing Him personally. God has given us the opportunity to know Him directly and personally, as one of the privileges

under the new covenant (He.8:11). Even though we know Him now as our God and Father, it is only as we spend more time with Him and interact with Him that we get to know Him intimately and deeply.

Is it only by spending long hours in prayer or reading the Bible that we can get to know God? Of course we ought to find as much time as possible for these, even at the cost of giving up some of the other activities sometimes. But for most people free time is in very short supply because of the usual pressures of life. God calls relatively very few people to leave earthly occupations and serve Him full time. But for the majority of us life involves work and many responsibilities inside and outside the house. Does that mean that we cannot get to know God as we ought to?

The secret is to throw away the idea

that only things like reading the Bible and praying are *spiritual*. Everything becomes sacred when we hand it over to the lordship of Christ (1Co.10:31). When we are ready to eat and we give thanks to God for giving it to us and ask Him to strengthen us with it, it becomes an opportunity to talk to God. When we are about to go and meet someone for business and we ask God for grace and wisdom to handle things well, that is another contact with God. When we are perplexed about something and we ask God for guidance, we give God a chance to talk to us. When we do something well, it gives us an opportunity to give thanks to God for His help. When we can't understand what is happening to us or someone else and we ask Him, it is a chance for us to understand His ways and to see what He thinks about such situations.

So it is not just Bible, prayer and church meetings that can help us to know God, but the circumstances of daily life can all lead us to touch God. God tells us to acknowledge Him *in all our ways* (Pr.3:6). What does this mean but to bring God into all of our situations? "Pray without ceasing" does not mean that we have to be always praying but that our prayers should never cease (1Th.5:17). We can take everything to Him in prayer, and also we shouldn't give up (Lk.18:1). "In everything give thanks" also gives us so many occasions to connect with God (1Th.5:18).

So let's not grumble about our lack of opportunities anymore, but learn to seize them. Let us make God the centre of our life and draw near to Him at all times.

Pointers along the way #131

Perfection and perfectionists

God wants us to be perfect (Mt.5:48). He has given us commandments and instructions so that we can become more and more perfect in all that we do, say, and think. When we are born again, we also get a desire in our heart to be pleasing to the Lord in every way.

But some people ask, "Are you real? Can anyone be perfect?" Of course, only God is perfect. But when He caused us to be born again as His children, He has not only forgiven our sins but also started a work in us to transform us into the nature of His Son, Jesus Christ (Ro.8:28,29). This means a transformation of our way of thinking and behaviour (Ro.12:1,2). This process is called 'sanctification' which goes on and on as long as we live.

But as long as we are under this process, we are never going to be

perfect in the sense of having no flaw or fault in us. We are all aware of how we do many things wrong, unknowingly and sometimes even knowingly because of our weakness. The apostle James was honest enough to admit that (Jas.3:2). God has made provisions for us to repent and confess our sins so that we can receive forgiveness and start again (1Jn.2:1). This implies that the perfection God expects from us is not one where we are without fault. He wants us to be mature, and to live in accordance with whatever level of understanding we have at any point in time. As we do this, He will also give us more understanding so that our level of maturity can go up higher.

God wants us to be perfect in His sight, and not before people (Ge.17:1). There is no way we can be pleasing to all people, and if we try we will only

get into a bondage (Ga.1:10;Pr.29:25). Since God looks at our heart - our thoughts and intentions - and not at our outward actions (1Sa.16:7), and since He understands us perfectly, it is actually easier for us to be pleasing to Him!

Are we scared of perfection? One reason may be that we know we are not perfect and we think it is unrealistic to aim for perfection. We have addressed this aspect already. There are some Christians who actually believe that they have already become perfect, wholly sanctified, etc., due to a misinterpretation of doctrine. Let this also not hinder us.

Another reason may be that we don't like perfectionists! The problem with perfectionists is not that they are seeking to be perfect - which is really a good thing for everybody - but that they demand that others should also be

perfect! The more they understand how they themselves should be, they start looking at other people and their imperfections! And then they start telling others how they should be perfect, sometimes with a sincere desire for the others' welfare and sometimes also from a sense of superiority.

If some people are going wrong, that should not prevent us from pursuing perfection in the right way. Let us seek to be more and more pleasing to the Lord. Then we will also be a blessing to others.

Pointers along the way #132

Emotional security in Christ

Even though Jesus has purchased for us *everything* that we need for godly lives (2Pe.1:3), we tend to live impoverished lives here on earth, many times because we are ignorant of the possibilities. One very common but terrible condition we live with is a sense of insecurity within ourselves. We *profess* to be *children of God* but live as though we didn't have *anyone* who loved us or cared for us. The usual reason is that we are looking for *people* to love us, instead of taking strength, courage and boldness from the fact that **God loves us**, and that too with an **everlasting** love (Je.31:3). This means that there is *never* a moment when God's love for us ceases. He continues to love us even when we feel least lovable about ourselves. But even though God has

said that He will **never** desert us nor forsake us (He.13:5), we think many times that He has left us, because we don't seem to be able to feel Him.

Of course, people are very unreliable as foundations for our emotional wellbeing. Even the best of friends may have misunderstandings. Nobody can understand us fully or all the time. Our communications often lack clarity and continuity, and understanding depends on much more factors than communications. As a result, our expectations are often unfulfilled, and we are left with a sense of not having been understood. And, of course, there are also people who seem to be scheming against us as they pursue their own goals.

Aren't we going to have a tough time, unless we move our anchor to Christ and learn to find our security in Him? It doesn't happen automatically when

we come to Him. We have to get to know Him and *learn* to enjoy the blessings of His friendship.

First of all He washes the stains of all our past sins and agrees never to bring them up against us (Je.33:8;31:34). We have to think about this whenever guilty feelings come up concerning anything in our past. Jesus makes the past 'a thing of the past' which is buried in the depths of the sea never to be brought up again (Mi.7:19), and makes *all things new* (2Co.5:17). As far as our past sins, mistakes and follies are concerned, it is just as if we had never done them. That is what 'justified' means.

Secondly He accepts us as we are, as they say, warts and all. We have gone to Him 'just as we are', and He doesn't tell us to first go, change and then come. All He requires from us is to *want* to be different (the simple

meaning of repentance) and to place our trust in Him for our salvation. Doesn't He know about our short temper, lusts, fears, worries, addictions, compulsive behaviour, etc.? Of course He does, and yet He accepts us because He is taking on Himself the responsibility of transforming us.

So what do we do when we find, or someone points out, something wrong or lacking in us? We can *accept* that, without feeling as if the floor has given way under us or that we would like to crawl under the bed and hide! Of course we have faults, and many other faults besides these. But Jesus loves us in spite of them. He has taken us on fully knowing *all* about our faults. They don't surprise or shock Him.

When we face ourselves (and the accuser, the devil) boldly like this, we are secure. Then we can go forward

with the business of transformation,
which Jesus has started.

Pointers along the way #133

Our faith and calling

God's calling for each one of us in the Body of Christ may be as varied as the different parts of the human body. If one is an eye, another is a foot with an entirely different set of functions, interests, burdens, goals, etc. Doesn't this explain why someone else who is also a good Christian does not share the same burden which we have for some particular task? It is unrealistic for us to expect that everyone should understand us or what we are trying to do for the Lord or that everyone else should contribute towards our cause!

Also, we must not be unrealistic and try to take on all the burdens the others are carrying. We must be clear about our own calling. Imagine, for example, if we were to donate to *all* the causes people present to us! Even if it is a matter of spending time on them or

praying for them, surely we can't manage to get involved in everything without sacrificing our own calling. Perhaps when the speaker asks for support for the widows in Timbuktu, what the Lord wants *us* to do may be something about the widow across our street! It's all right if we can manage to do something about *both*. But if we can't, we don't have to feel guilty if we can't contribute towards the Timbuktu fund.

I am not making a rigid rule about this. Perhaps the Lord wants us to become interested in Timbuktu and that was why we were given the opportunity to hear about it. All I am saying is that we must recognise that the Lord has a special task for each one of us and that we must be realistic about our limitations.

It is good to be challenged by a speaker who talks about what needs to

be done about the need in Timbuktu. If this should stir us to consider whether we have been neglecting our own calling, or whether we should consider seeking God to understand what He would have us to do, it has done us good. But we are not obligated to automatically support what the speaker is doing or feel guilty if we are unable to do that.

God tells us to imitate the faith we see in others (He.13:7). 'Faith' involves our trust and confidence in God in a general sense and also strength and boldness to do something particular for God. Faith as in the first part is something we all should have, without which we cannot be pleasing to God (He.11:6). But faith as in the second part varies from person to person. One may have faith to heal sickness, another to remain unmarried for the Lord's work, another to venture out to

an unknown place as a missionary, and another to remain at home and bring up children for the Lord. It depends on our calling. We can't imitate this kind of faith. We can't insist that others should have the same faith, and we don't have to feel guilty because we don't have the faith that the others have.

All of us *do* have a special calling (1Co.12:5-7). We must exercise that. And it is possible that when we are faithful there, God may wish to expand our horizon (Mt.13:12).

Pointers along the way #134

Walking with the Holy Spirit

One of the best gifts that God the Father has for His children is that of the Holy Spirit. He is much more eager to give us the Spirit than parents are to give good gifts to their children (Lk.11:13). The Holy Spirit is the third

Person of the Trinity who has come to this world to be *in* us after Jesus was taken up to heaven (Jn.14:17). He is the Helper (Comforter) and Teacher whom Jesus has sent from the Father to take His place on earth (Jn.14:26;16:7). He will not act on His own, but will speak and do what He sees from Jesus, just as Jesus spoke and did as He saw the Father doing (Jn.16:13;12:49). In this way He helps us to experience Jesus in us. How blessed it is to walk through life with the Holy Spirit as our Guide!

The Holy Spirit not only gives us *power* to be witnesses for Jesus (Acts.1:8), but also *spiritual gifts* to help us fulfill God's purposes and to take part in spiritual battles (1Co.12:4-7;Ep.6:11). When we face the different situations of life involving various types of people and also demonic schemes, it is so good to have the

supernatural power, strength, discernment, wisdom and guidance that the Holy Spirit can give us.

Of course Satan tries to counterfeit the Holy Spirit in many ways (2Co.11:14). But why does Satan take so much trouble unless there is a genuine blessing he wants to keep away from God's people? Our confidence is the promise of Jesus in connection with asking for the Holy Spirit, that the Father will not give a snake to his children who ask for fish (Lk.11:11). We can trust Him for that. Also the Holy Spirit helps us to distinguish between what is from Him and what is from Satan, as we check everything in the light of the Bible (1Jn.4:1).

Many Christians miss this blessing almost in the same way *nominal* Christians miss the experience of being born again. Instead of seeking to be filled with the Holy Spirit and to

experience more of the Spirit's power and gifts in daily life, they live more or less at an intellectual level, even when following the Word of God.

God wants us to *ask* for the Holy Spirit (Lk.11:13). God gives the Holy Spirit to those who obey Him (Acts.5:32). This does not mean a perfect obedience in everything, because none of us would qualify then. But the Greek word used there can also mean "submit to authority." This means that God is willing to give the Holy Spirit to all who acknowledge His authority and express our willingness to submit to Him. Isn't this the secret of how we have a greater anointing?

It is essentially a matter of placing our lives entirely into God's hands, and *trusting* in Him. This implies that we believe that *all* His plans are for our welfare and *nothing* for our calamity, and that He will not put us to shame (or

embarrass us) (Je.29:11;Joel.2:27). Then we can keep our ears open to the voice of the Spirit as He leads us on.

Pointers along the way #135

Sincere and blameless

Let us say we want to be pleasing to the Lord in everything at all times. Does that mean that we are actually *able* to do everything right? Of course not. Many times we are ignorant of what is the right thing to do. Sometimes even when we know what we should do, other people and circumstances make it impossible for us to do it. Sometimes we know what we ought to do but we are unable to do it because of our own weakness or lack of ability. This being the case, does God demand that we should be always doing the right thing? In other words, is God the type of person to require that we should do what is impossible for us at

any time?

The answer is obvious. God is not unreasonable to ask for what He has not given (See Mt.25:26). God does not ask a man with one 'talent' to produce as much as those who had two or four talents. If we are not in a position to do something due to circumstances beyond our control, God does not expect us to do that. That takes away a lot of unnecessary guilt, doesn't it?

But then, what *does* God expect from us? Certainly He expects us to do what we *can*, and when we *can't*, He expects us to ask Him for help. But the bottom line is that He expects us to sincerely *want* to do what is right.

"Now, Israel, what does the LORD your God require from you, but to fear the LORD your God, to walk in all His ways and love Him, and to serve

the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul, and to keep the LORD'S commandments and His statutes which I am commanding you today for your good?" (De.10:12,13). "And what does the LORD require of you but to do justice, to love kindness, And to walk humbly with your God?" (Mi.6:8). Yes, we ought to do what is right in God's sight. But at the least our hearts must be right before Him.

It is very comforting to know, for all those who are seeking to be pleasing to the Lord, that if we are sincere in that desire, God counts us blameless! (Php.1:9,10). God tells us in this passage that in order to be sincere and blameless before Him we ought to abound in love and increase in knowledge and discernment. 'Love' refers to our attitude, and seeking for better understanding and discernment

refers to our desire to become better and to do things better and better.

This is what it takes to be blameless before God. We *want* to do right, and we are constantly seeking to do it better. Come to think of it, *can* anyone do anything better than this?

For God, what we do is less important than *why* we do it. *That* speaks about our attitude and intentions. God who looks more at our heart than what is seen outside is delighted if He sees a heart that is blameless (1Sa.16:7;He.4:12;1Co.4:5). How comforting this is, when we keep finding our words and actions nearly always coming short of what is perfect!

Yes, the challenge for us is to keep our heart always right (Pr.4:23).

Pointers along the way #136

Blind faith?

Jesus said that those who believed without seeing were more blessed than those who believed because they had seen (Jn.20:29). Jesus was not referring to those who came to believe in Him after seeing a miracle and others. He meant simply that those who can trust Him even when they cannot see any tangible proof of His power towards them are more blessed than those who demand that unless they see Him or His miracles they cannot believe.

Faith in God is based on the knowledge of God. We get to know God through His word, the Bible, and through our experience with Him in line with His word. (Of course we can't trust our "experiences" if they are contrary to His word.) If someone says he has faith, and his 'faith' is not in

accordance with what is revealed about God in the Bible, God does not accept that faith. We can't just believe something and call it faith. That would be 'blind' faith.

The Bible says that faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of Christ (Ro.10:17). There are two ways of hearing. The usual way is to hear what someone is speaking, in a physical sense. But what brings faith is what we hear from God in our spirit, something that comes "alive" in our heart. The New Testament uses a special Greek word for this kind of word, "rhema". We receive faith when something becomes "rhema" for us. Then we are sure, certain, and convinced about what we have heard (He.11:1).

But we have a tendency to imagine that we have 'faith' because we very much *want* something to happen. We try to

convince ourselves that it is going to happen, and we may even quote Bible verses to prove to others that we have faith. But if God has not given us that faith, it is no use however we may express it.

Faith is not like a substance that we possess (He.11:1 KJV uses old English) with which we can bargain with God. We cannot decide by ourselves that "we have faith for" something and claim it. We can claim only those things that God promises us in His word or directly to our heart.

When we have faith in God we know that He is a good Father who wants to give the best and He is able to do whatever He wants. So we can ask Him whatever we need. But it will be good to remember that He also knows what is good for us, and then to leave it to Him to decide what to do. *Not my will, but Yours!*

Let us honestly ask ourselves some questions if we have "faith" for something. 1. Has God promised this in His word? 2. Is this in line with Biblical teachings and principles? (If we are thinking of supporting verses, are there other verses *against* what we are thinking?) 3. Does this go against commonsense? (If it does, we need to be extra sure it is from God.) 4. What do mature, godly people have to advise us? 5. Will it bring honour or ridicule to Jesus? 6. Do we have a *good* reason for wanting it? 7. Are we willing to take a "No" from God?

The real me

The godly apostle Paul had a struggle to understand what was happening to him, when he found himself *doing the things he really didn't want to do* (Ro.7:15). All of us who are sincerely trying to live God-pleasing lives can easily identify with him. But we must remember that Paul was one of the first people in the age of grace to grapple with this issue and he had no one to help him out. Now we have the advantage of learning from Paul and others who have gone ahead of us and who have understood many things from God. Even though we cannot avoid the struggle altogether, we are now in a position to understand ourselves better.

What happens when we are born again? We are born of the Word and the Spirit of God (Jn.3:5;1Pe.1:23). God's nature comes into our spirit like a seed

and begins to grow, as we feed it through the Word of God (1Pe.2:2). This new life that has come into us is called the 'new self' which is being renewed for us to become more and more like God in our nature (Col.3:10). In contrast, the 'old self' that we used to have before we came to Christ has been crucified with Christ so that we should no longer be slaves to sin (Ro.6:6).

But this is not the whole story. We find in practice that even though we really have a new self, we are still being tempted to sin, and we are overcome now and then. The reason is that we still have, even after being born again, an element which the Bible calls 'the flesh' (Greek 'sarx') which some Bible versions wrongly translate as the body (Greek 'soma'). This flesh is something that is at war inside us, against the Holy Spirit who is also in us

(Ga.5:17). We can say that the flesh is the seat of all our desires (Ga.5:24ff), because of which we are tempted (Jas.1:14).

We know that to be tempted is not the same as sinning. When a sinful desire rises up from our flesh, whether it is provoked by our own thoughts, the world around us or by Satan, we have the power to choose what to do. We can yield, and sin, or resist, and overcome. Earlier, our old self was on the side of the flesh and we used to sin without restraint. But now our advantage is that the new self in us which is from God is on the side of the Spirit in the fight against the flesh.

Now when we are tempted from the flesh we must remember that *that* is not the real us. Our real identity now is our new self. We can rejoice because in our heart we are one with the Spirit, fighting against the flesh. We can

disassociate ourselves from the flesh, and we don't have to feel guilty and condemned or doubt ourselves just because we are tempted. Our issue is only whether we yield to the flesh or resist it by the power of the Holy Spirit (Ro.8:13).

Pointers along the way #138

Mistakes and failure

"We all make many mistakes," said the apostle James (Jas.3:2).. Mistakes are usually unintentional, which we make due to a lack of understanding or an error in judgment. As imperfect human beings it is practically inevitable that we make mistakes. But if we are wise people, we will *learn* from our mistakes, (and also from those of others), and we try to avoid making the same mistakes again. In fact, someone who repeats his folly is called a 'fool' (Pr.26:11).

Those who have high thoughts about themselves or a perfectionist tendency find it difficult to bear with their 'mistakes'. They are 'shocked' to see that they have made a mistake, and that sends them into discouragement, gloom and depression. Their 'self-image' as a perfect person is shattered! But

sensible people have recognised that they do make mistakes, and even though it is somewhat painful to acknowledge it, they do manage to bear it.

The more damaging situation is if we get overwhelmed by the recognition of our mistakes and conclude that we are a *failure*. This is wrong, even if we have made *many* mistakes. A person is considered to be a failure only when there is no chance of his ever making a comeback. The conclusion that we are a failure is false because we are presuming that we have no chance of recovery or change. We are not failures just because we have made mistakes.

Look at the example of the apostle Peter. As one who sincerely loved Jesus, he was always eager to be in the forefront doing things for Him. But being of a rather impetuous nature, he made many blunders. In the beginning

it was not difficult for him to bear the dishonour of being seen as having made mistakes, and even being corrected in public. But when he denied Jesus publicly three times even after Jesus had warned him about it, he could not take it any more. He thought he was a failure as an apostle. He thought the only thing he could do was to go back to his fishing.

If Jesus was not what He was, this would have been the end of the story for Peter. Jesus had not only prayed for Peter *before* this happened, that Peter should not lose his faith (Lk.22:31,32), but He also went out of His way seeking after Peter. He looked at Peter after the denial, and we can imagine the compassion and tenderness that must have been there in that look, because this was what caused Peter to repent with tears (Lk.22:61,62).. Later, after Jesus had been raised from the

dead, He left special instructions to inform Peter about it (Mk.16:7). Jesus also took Peter aside, and gave him an opportunity to reverse his three denials and to reconfirm his love for Jesus (Jn.21:15-17).

There is always hope with Jesus for those who turn to Him. Jesus can wipe our hearts clean from sin's stains, and set captives free. He can make up for lost time, set us on a new path, and turn failures into success stories, if we continue to trust Him (Col.1:22,23).

Pointers along the way #139

Undeserved gift

There are many differences between the old covenant which God made with Israel through Moses, and the new covenant which God established through Jesus. The letter to the Hebrews emphasises again and again

the fact that the new covenant is *better* than the old covenant. One major difference we can look at today is the way both covenants operate.

The old covenant was a performance based system of blessings and curses. When we read about the different blessings that were offered to Israel if they obeyed the law and the curses if they disobeyed, we can see how the old covenant operated (De.28:1,2,15). The principle was that *we got what we deserved*.

In complete contrast to this, the *new* covenant is one where, instead of getting what we deserve, we get what we don't deserve, as a gift from God. Isn't this an amazing covenant from God? Isn't it amazing that the same God who came up with the old covenant has offered this new one, which is entirely contrary to the spirit of the old covenant? God didn't make a mistake

in the beginning with the old covenant and then decide to do better with the new covenant! There was a method and a goal.

There were two things about Israel when God gave them the old covenant. The first thing was that after having lived in Egypt for 430 years, they had very little idea of what was right and wrong. They needed to be taught something about the standards of God. Secondly, they had just witnessed a great deliverance from Egypt with mighty signs and wonders which made a difference between them and the Egyptians. They may have thought that they were somewhat special in God's eyes, and needed to learn that they were essentially just the same as the others and that the thing that made the difference was only God's sovereign choice.

So God gave them the old covenant

and the law that defined for them boundaries of acceptable behaviour. Through thousands of years Israel learned through their repeated backslidings that they were really no better than the others who did not have the covenant. They learned what God expected from them, and they also learned that they had no ability to keep His laws.

It was then that God came with the *new* covenant. Here is a covenant that recognises our human weakness, accepts us and makes us God's children without waiting for us to qualify for it by good behaviour, and provides for us God's laws in our hearts and the power to keep them (Je.31:31-34). You see, nothing in this covenant comes to us according to what we deserve. It is all a gift from God.

But have we learned the lessons that

Israel had to learn through the old covenant? Or do we think, because we have received things freely, that we can live the way we like? Do we recognise our inherent inability to keep God's laws and so cling to God for His mercy and grace? Have we stopped looking down on those who are not God's children? Have we learned to be thankful to God?

Pointers along the way #140

More blessed to give

Why are so many people willing to give their 'seed' money to preachers? Is it not because they are looking for a great harvest, a hundredfold, if possible? Perhaps they are looking for great returns for their investment, in terms of money, or for other benefits like healing, or miracles. Are they turning to God because they want to get something from Him?

Look at another group of Christians, a much smaller group, who are giving themselves to God, giving their time, energy, skills and money, to serve Him. Not all of these are so-called 'full time servants of God'. Many of them are earning their own living *and* serving God. But they don't seem to be occupied with getting something from God as much as in giving to God. Why do they do this? It's because they *love*

God.

Which of these groups do we belong to?

I am not trying to imply that it's wrong to want anything from God! We *need* God, and we also need His spiritual and material blessings. Jesus Himself taught us to pray for the things we need, and to ask so that our joy may be full (Mt.6:11;Jn.16:24). But He made a distinction between those who followed Him out of love and others who followed Him because they wanted something from Him (Lk.22:28;Jn.6:26).

When Jesus summarised the whole of God's commandments He said that what God really wants us to do is to *love Him with all our heart* (Mt.22:37). What He has towards us is *love*, and what He wants from us is also love. How sad He is when He

finds that what we are really interested in are the things we think we can get from Him!

Do you think that God cares much for those who are selfishly seeking things for themselves? Oh, He loves them, to be sure. He loves everyone, for that matter. He gave His only Son to die for us because He loved us even though we were selfishly seeking things for ourselves. But is He happy with people who claim to have become His children, or think they are His children, because they have uttered the magic formula, "Jesus, come into my heart", and then live as selfishly as they did before?

Perhaps a large number of people are fooling themselves thinking that they have become children of God, because virtually no change has come in their thinking, attitude or behaviour. I am not saying this in a judgmental way.

On the other hand, those who have seen themselves as unworthy sinners and come to Jesus in repentance, and experienced the washing away of their sins by His blood as an unmerited gift of grace from God, are so thankful to Him that they cannot think of anything but about what they can do for Him. Such people learn to give themselves for God, and, paradoxically, begin to experience receiving many fold blessings from God! They experience the truth of what it means to seek God first and how *all* other things will be added to them! (Mt.6:33). (Again, not as a formula for getting all things!)

Pointers along the way #141

Experiences with God

One of the great things about God is His diversity. No two things He has created are identical, and He also employs variety in dealing with people. We people tend to think that the way we have experienced God is the right way and that everyone should conform to it. We also expect that God should deal with us in the same way He has dealt with someone we admire. God surprises us both ways, and continues to be sovereign!

The Bible mentions those who experienced great miracles from His hands through faith, and others who did not receive the miracles they hoped for but held on to God in faith in spite of that (He.11). Which group was greater? I believe it was a sovereign choice of God and neither group had anything to boast about. It is natural

that those who have experienced miracles tend to look down on others who have 'not been so favoured!' But that is a misunderstanding of God's ways.

Those who speak in tongues, those who have seen visions or dreams or received miraculous answers to prayer or supernatural guidance, those who have been miraculously healed, etc. - all tend to look down on those who have not had such experiences. God may speak to us through a vision or dream, but He may also speak to us through His word or directly in our heart. Can we choose which way we would like to hear Him?

Coming to personal experiences with God, have we all had similar experiences? Not at all! Some have come to know God after terrible bondages of sin, and others have come to know their sinfulness in a slower

manner. Some have had dramatic conversions and others seem to have had a comparatively smooth walk into God's kingdom. Some have been drawn to God after experiencing miracles, and others have come to Him because they are convinced of His truths. Some have learned to lean on God because of their problems, and others have so much time and opportunity to travel around and minister to others. Some have learned wisdom through study, and others through their mistakes. Some have received miraculous intervention from God in their problems, and others are struggling without being able to see the end ahead.

Those who are in a relatively comfortable position tend to *judge* those who are having problems as those who do not have enough faith, who must be having some secret sin in

their lives or those who have some generational (or ancestral) curses on them! How mean! If we can't help them, at least let's stop making things more difficult for them.

O that we had a larger heart, to understand more of God's diversity and to be more compassionate and accepting towards people who are different from us and whose lot in life is different from ours! (Ep.1:18,19).

Pointers along the way #142

Facing the consequences

As human beings, a lot of our actions are spontaneous, having been conditioned by our personality make up and past experiences. Given a certain situation our reaction can usually be predicted. But fortunately that is not the end of the story. God has also given us the ability to think about the possible consequences of the actions we are considering, and make choices accordingly. Thank God we have the ability to change our behaviour.

But as people who are born in sin and bound to foolishness (Ps.51:5;Pr.22:15), we tend to ignore what we know to be right in order to choose what appears to give us immediate or short term satisfaction or pleasure.

God is right when He says that we have already *within us* the knowledge of what is good and bad (Ro.1:19). This is our conscience which we are all born with, and which gets much more enlightened through the Holy Spirit once we are born again. But it is possible for us to suppress our conscience when we want to do something that we know to be wrong but which we like nevertheless (v.18).

But we mustn't forget that every choice that we make has its consequences, good or bad (Ga.6:7,8). Bad consequences are something we can't escape, even if we repent later and receive forgiveness. In rare cases God may remove them too along with forgiving us. But at the same time He is also sharp enough to see who is trying to take advantage of this possible show of mercy!

Sometimes we have to learn wisdom

the hard way through having to deal with the consequences of our sins. These after effects of sin can be very painful to bear, even when we know that God has forgiven us. Broken relationships, lost opportunities, damage (sometimes irreparable) done to ourselves and others (our children?), sinful habits that are difficult to overcome, etc., can weigh heavily on our lives. What do we do at such times?

Many of us still refuse to take responsibility for our sins. We don't acknowledge that it is *our* sins that have caused these problems. We blame everyone else but us. We get angry with God for allowing such things to happen to us, not realising that it was we who asked for them by our choices.

What about being honest with God and telling Him how it is *we* who have messed up our lives through certain

wrong choices and actions? This acknowledgment is fundamental to healing. Without this there is no forgiveness also. But when we do this, we hear the Lord telling us that He has indeed forgiven us and washed us from every stain of our sin (1Jn.1:9). He also tells us that He will now cause even the stupid things we have done to work something for our good (Ro.8:28). Our situation may not change immediately, but it certainly changes inside us. We learn some strong lessons on life, and become more humble and more careful with our lives, and also a blessing to others around us by passing along the comfort we have received from the Lord (2Co.1:3,4).

Pointers along the way #143

Faith, and living faith

The apostle James uses strong words to warn us that the 'faith' that we think we have may be *dead* (Jas.2:14-20). If our faith does not work in practice, it is dead. We are 'saved' by faith, and we 'live' by faith. If our faith is actually dead, where is that going to take us?

"Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household" (Acts.16:31). Can there be a wrong way to 'believe'? Yes, if we only accept the truths about Jesus in our mind, that kind of belief will not save us. In that case our belief in Jesus will be similar to the belief we have in any other historical person. We believe such a person lived in a certain place at a certain time and spoke and did so many things. But that does not change our life or behaviour in any way.

James says that in such a case the 'faith' of demons is better than ours! (Jas.2:19). They have had personal experience with Jesus and they tremble in fear before Him. Their faith has at least that much effect!

A living faith in Jesus can come only if we have come to know Him personally. There must come a time in our lives when we recognise ourselves as sinners for whom the only way out is through Jesus. Then we go to Him personally, confess our sins, and receive forgiveness from Him. He comes into our hearts and there starts a relationship that is real and life-changing for us. Then the truths that we have heard about Jesus become relevant for us, and our thoughts, words and deeds begin to take on the character of Jesus.

This kind of faith comes by 'hearing' (Ro.10:17). This hearing is deeper

than physical, and goes into our spirit, where it becomes a life-giving power (1Co.15:45). It is 'living.'

The apostle Jude tells us to build ourselves up in the faith (Jude.1:20,21). Our faith can be nurtured and built up by more of this 'hearing' from God. Reading the word of God ourselves, listening to its preaching, hearing or reading about how others have been blessed through their faith, talking to the Lord in prayer and listening to Him, telling others about Jesus, etc., are all necessary for this.

We must not forget that there are other forces acting against our faith. Satan and his demons work night and day to turn us away from God with doubts and fears. There are so many attractions in the world that move our attention away from God. Our own natural tendencies towards ease, laziness, sinful

pleasures, etc., push us away from God (1Pe.5:8;1Jn.2:16,17). It is a fact that if we are not consciously building ourselves in the faith, we will be unconsciously drifting away from God.

It is only a living faith that will propel us forward for action. A dead faith will cause us to drift along like floating things in the river. Those who seek God consciously are guaranteed glory, honour, immortality and eternal life. But the others are headed for God's wrath and indignation at the end (Ro.2:7,8). Let us consciously press on in our faith.

Pointers along the way #144

Having, and getting more

Jesus spoke about a sure way of getting more, which is quite unlike what many Christians are being taught now a days. He said that those who have will be given more, and from those who don't have, even what they have will be taken away! This is quoted *five times* in the four gospels, three times in connection with the parable of the sower and the different types of ground, and two times in relation to the parable of the talents (Mt.13:12;25:29;Mk.4:25; Lk.8:18;Lk.19:26).

At first glance, this doesn't seem to make sense, giving to someone who already has and taking away from someone who hardly has any. So we conclude that Jesus meant something other than what appears on the surface. He wasn't obviously talking about a

business technique. He wasn't echoing what many people think, that the rich are getting richer and the poor poorer.

Of course, what Jesus meant is that if we are faithful with what we have, we shall be entrusted with more, and that if we are unfaithful with what we have, even what we have will be taken away.

Jesus was talking about more than money. We tend to think in terms of money, wealth, what can give us a comfortable life, etc. Jesus said that if we were faithful with money, He would grant us true riches (Lk.16:11). True riches are what would be valuable in eternity, such as a godly character, divine wisdom, usefulness to God and people in terms of service, etc. If we demonstrate faithfulness in the little things of life (Lk.16:10), God will reward us by entrusting to us more responsibility, more fruitfulness and more usefulness.

In this sense all children of God are not equal. Even though all are saved by grace through faith, God is not able to trust everyone with the same level of responsibility. Some bear thirtyfold, some sixtyfold, and some hundredfold fruit. On the other hand, some even lose what they had already received from the Lord (e.g., anointing), because of carelessness and unfaithfulness.

Is there any greater joy on earth than to be useful to the Lord and to His people? Isn't this much more precious than silver or gold, or fame or name? (1Pe.1:7). Why hanker after *more* money, a *bigger* house or car, a *greater* name, etc.? When we learn to be *more* faithful, we get *nearer* to God's heart, and there we can enjoy pleasures and treasures that we cannot imagine elsewhere (Ps.16:11). Once we have tasted something of this, we seek all the more for more of it.

Faithfulness is more than righteousness. By being righteous we do what is right and avoid what is wrong. But by being faithful, we become better stewards of God's gifts, whether it is time, money, talents, or opportunities. Then our mind will be focussed on what God wants, what would glorify God, what would delight His heart, etc., rather than what we can get from Him. This is the life that would satisfy His heart as well as ours.

Pointers along the way #145

Sin or not sin?

The Bible says that when there is no law, there is no violation. Where there is no law sin is not imputed (Ro.4:15;5:13). In this context we must not think of 'law' as the old testament laws or as the ten commandments, but more generally as knowledge of what is sin. The meaning is that when a man does what he does not know to be wrong, he is not going to be held responsible for that wrong.

But does it mean that when someone does wrong ignorantly, what he has done is not wrong? No! It is still wrong, even if he doesn't know it.

Many people believe that sin is relative, that if we think something is sin it is sin for us, and if we think something is not sin it is alright for us. These are 'new age' philosophies

mostly taken from eastern religions which have a very loose concept of sin. But this is totally contrary to the Bible which teaches us that sin is to go against God's eternal rules of behaviour, attitudes, values, priorities, etc. When we transgress these rules or standards, we sin in God's eyes, whether we know it or not. If we do them in ignorance God may not impute sin to us, but they are sins all the same.

Lev.4 teaches us a principle about what we should do about sins which we have committed in ignorance or unintentionally. God tells Israel that if someone comes to know that what he had done earlier was wrong, he should then make a sin offering for it. What this means for us is that when we realise that something we had done earlier was wrong, we need to acknowledge that sin and ask God for forgiveness. Perhaps there would be a

need to set things right with someone else also. We can't just gloss over our past sins saying that we did them in ignorance.

This self-acknowledgment is very important for us if we are to grow in our spiritual life. As we get closer to God and His light becomes brighter, we are able to see 'sin' with greater clarity. We must then confess those sins that we discover in us and ask for forgiveness and deliverance, so that we can become more holy.

For example let us think about anger. In the beginning we may consider shouting at others or even hitting them physically as 'OK' because we think the others deserve them. When we become convicted about this, we may work on controlling our outbursts, and when we have succeeded in that we imagine that now we have victory over anger. But after some time we realise

that we are still burning with anger inside. Then after we get over that, we discover that it is difficult to forgive them. After some time we feel that forgiving them is not enough but we must be able to pray for them and bless them. This is how we should progress in every aspect of life.

The Bible says that the law was given so that transgressions might increase (Ro.5:20). The meaning is that as we get more understanding on God's standards, our idea of sin will become clearer and finer. So let us get closer to God and become more conformed to His ways.

Pointers along the way #146

Confronting the accuser

As you all know, one of the ways in which Satan attacks believers in Christ is by accusing us of our past. It is not for nothing that he has earned for himself the name, "The accuser of the brothers" (Re.12:10). True to another of his names as the father of lies, not all accusations he makes are true. Many are shots in the dark, by which he tries to make us think that they are true, and then feel guilty. His aim is to make us lose our boldness, and also our hope. If he succeeds, we become weak and powerless and subject to all kinds of further attacks from him.

Remember that all thoughts that come to our mind are not our own. Some of them are placed there by Satan or his demons for tempting or attacking us. They are able to do this since they are spirits. So when thoughts of accusation

come to us, we don't have to accept them all the time thinking that it is our conscience convicting us. For example, the devil may place a blasphemous or dirty thought into our mind and then try to accuse us for having such thoughts. We can learn to throw away such accusations straightaway!

However, some of the accusations are true. The devil may bring to our mind sins that we *have* committed. If we have already confessed them to God, we can reject these accusations as some more lies from the devil, because God *is* faithful to forgive our sins once we have confessed them (1Jn.1:9). Once God has forgiven us, the devil has no grounds on which he can accuse us. If we have not already settled the issue with God, now is the time for us to do it and then tell the devil that it has been done.

This is really a battle between us and

the devil, and we can only win by faith (1Jn.5:4). We can't beat the devil by claiming to be righteous, because he knows all our history and can easily bring up countless number of things against us. But when we stand claiming the death that Jesus has died in our place and by which *all* our sins have already been paid for, he has no answer left.

The devil is a schemer and also very devious in his ways. He has the habit of bringing up accusations again and again, even after we have told him about our forgiveness. He is hoping that we may start wondering if it is true, or that he may be able to trip us up in a weak moment. But if we continue to hold the ground against him, he *will* flee from us (Jas.4:7).

If we are weak, and are not able to withstand these repeated attacks, it might be helpful for us to take a

decisive position against such accusations. Many have found help in writing down the list of the sins they are convicted about, and then writing over that list, "The blood of Jesus Christ has washed me from all these sins." You could burn up or bury that list to indicate that it is now a thing of the past, never to trouble you again.

Praise God we can break completely free from these accusations, and go forward in life in victory and boldness.

Wrong while being right?

Many of us are used to asking ourselves, "Is this right or wrong?" concerning things we are thinking of doing. We may go further by asking ourselves what the Bible says about such things. Then when we find that something is not forbidden, we think it is all right, and go ahead to do it. The fundamental approach we are taking is, "Avoid doing wrong." This is fine as far as it goes. But it doesn't go far enough, actually, when we consider what God really expects from us and also how far we *can* go.

When Paul wrote to the Corinthians in his first letter they were so insensitive that they couldn't even recognise that a man living with his father's (second?) wife was terribly wrong (1Co.5:1,2). But when he wrote to them again, after this man had been disciplined and

come to repentance, he told them about a higher plane of life. This is to *live for God*, rather than merely to live in a way that avoids wrong (2Co.5:14,15). We are to be so controlled by the love of God that all our thoughts, words and actions are directed towards pleasing God, doing His will, and glorifying His name. When we move up to this plane, the question we ask ourselves is no longer, "Is this right or wrong?", but "Is this pleasing to the Lord? Is this what God wants me to do? Will this bring glory to the name of Jesus?" etc.

When we think about it this way, we can easily see that a lot of things that may be 'right' will also get discarded! This what Paul meant when he said that even when something may be legitimate or permissible according to the standard of right versus wrong, it may not be *profitable* or *edifying* (1Co.6:12;10:23). How foolish we are

to stay at the kindergarten level of right and wrong when we can go on to higher classes that will bring us closer to the heart of God!

Another question we can ask ourselves is, "Will this give a good example for others to follow?" More and more people these days are only looking out for their own interests, and it is very challenging for us to take on the extra responsibility of caring for the impact our choices can have on others. Paul says, "Let no one seek his own good, but that of his neighbor" and also, "Each of us is to please his neighbor for his good, to his edification" (1Co.10:24;Ro.15:2). We don't want anyone to fall following our example, and we want others to be encouraged to follow godly ways (Ro.14:21;1Co.11:1).

Think of the way we spend our time, energy, money, etc. Couldn't we spend

them in a more profitable way? If only we can stop pacifying ourselves by saying, "There is nothing wrong with this," and go on to operating in the higher plane of "Is this pleasing to the Lord? Is this what God wants me to do? Will this bring glory to the name of Jesus? Will this be a good example to the others?" etc., our lives will be much more exciting, satisfying and useful to God and man. Perhaps we will no longer spend time or money the way we have been doing so far.

Pointers along the way #148

Peace from Christ

Many people in the world are pursuing after peace of mind and heart, and many claim to have got it through meditation, physical and mental exercises, etc. On the other hand Jesus promises to give us peace, and yet *not* as the world gives (Jn.14:27). He didn't teach His disciples some new techniques by which they could get this peace. They just received it from Him by faith. Are these two different types of peace? Yes, very much.

Peace in this world is something we can have when there is no war, turmoil, trouble, problem, tension, stress, etc. In order to enjoy such peace, we need to move away to some tranquil surroundings, preferably with some soft music playing in the background, and get away from all that is bothering us. We relax our muscles and let go of

all the tension there. We put away from our minds all thoughts of events and people that have been troubling us, by making our minds blank or focussing on some peaceful subject or object. The good thing about this kind of peace is that it helps us to get rid of some of the stress that we have piled up in our life and gives us a fresh start. But the bad news is that we do have to get back to our problems, and if we have not learned any better coping mechanism, they can get back on our head again!

But Jesus gives peace, not as the world gives. He said that we are not going to be able to get away altogether from problems because they are a part of this life (Jn.16:33). Wasn't He the ultimate realist? He also said that in addition to the usual problems that people face in this world, we would also have some special problems

because we belong to Him! The world would *hate* us because we belong to Jesus (Jn.15:19). In fact some of our worst enemies could be from our own family! (Mt.10:36). Some of us would be put to death, like most of the apostles were (Mt.24:9). A time is coming when we won't be able to buy any food because we don't have the mark of the antichrist (Re.13:17). And *yet* we can have peace - in the midst of these problems!

God will prepare a feast for us in the midst of our enemies. Our cup of peace and joy will overflow even then (Ps.23:5). The peace that Jesus gives is not dependent on the absence of problems or their avoidance, but something He gives us supernaturally that we can experience in spite of the problems. How else can we explain Paul and Silas singing hymns in jail with their feet in stocks, and Peter

sleeping soundly when his execution was planned for the next day? (Acts.16:24,25;12:6).

Relaxing, working it out with exercises or games, taking a break and getting away from it all - all this is fine as far as it goes (1Ti.4:8). We need these to handle stress. But let us not forget the peace that only God can give. We receive it by faith when we love His laws and work righteousness, place our trust in Him and learn from Him, and let our minds to dwell on Him (Ps.4:8;55:18;119:165;Is.26:3;32:17;Mt.11:29).

Pointers along the way #149

The ultimate deliverance

Theologians say that the root of all sin is selfishness. We want things, pleasure, honour, etc., for ourselves, and therefore we tend to seek after

them irrespective of whether God would be happy with the way we seek them or not. We put God aside whenever we choose our own way. A genuine conversion effects a drastic change in this self driven approach to life to where we begin to seek what is pleasing to the Lord. We are so overwhelmed by the love of God for us in forgiving our sins and accepting us that we are willing to do anything to be pleasing to Him (2Co.5:14,15). It doesn't mean that we become totally unselfish when we are born again. We begin on that way, and our growing in grace and in sanctification (which means being set apart for God and becoming like Him in a lifelong process) essentially amounts to being increasingly delivered from self-centred lives.

From being self-centred to what? Being God-centred, of course! Look at

what a man like the apostle Paul found as the ultimate goal. He considered everything else as worthless compared to *knowing Christ* (Php.3:8). What he meant by 'knowing Christ' was much more than even knowing Him as his Saviour. He was thinking about 'being found in Him,' 'having His righteousness,' experiencing the 'power of His resurrection' and even the 'fellowship of His suffering' (v.9,10). This desire drove him to be pleasing to Him wherever he was (2Co.5:9), to be content with humble means or wealth (Php.4:11,12), to count it as a privilege to suffer for Christ in taking the gospel all across the world (1Co.9:16;2Co.6:4-10), etc.

We may not all be called to be apostles or to have prominent ministries. So if we are saved from self-centredness how will it look? We can see the secret from the way Jesus lived. He is the

ultimate example!

What was the motive that drove Jesus as He lived on earth? We know that He came down to earth to die for us because He loved us. That was the ultimate thing that He accomplished. But what was it that characterised all that He did or said during His life on earth? First of all, He said that He had come down to earth to do His Father's will (Jn.6:38;He.10:7). All that He said or did was the will of the Father. Secondly, His desire was that the Father may be glorified in everything. When He knew that He was going to be killed, He chose that path joyfully because that was the way to glorify the Father (Jn.12:27,28). When He prayed with the disciples He rejoiced that He had glorified the Father so far in accomplishing His will (Jn.17:4). He asked the Father to glorify Him (Jesus) through death and resurrection, so that

ultimately the Father could be glorified (v.1).

Our own ultimate deliverance is to have as our goal in life to glorify God, through all that we say and do. This means that the desire to glorify God overtakes our inclination to seek things for ourselves. Isn't this what we should pursue after?

Pointers along the way #150

Criteria for success

The world counts a man successful if he has amassed wealth, gone to the top rungs of his career, made a name for himself, displayed distinctive abilities, etc. But is this how God evaluates our lives? We would instinctively say, "No." At the same time, these things are not wrong in themselves. The problem is that we could miss God's criteria while we are pursuing these

goals. Many Christians are pursuing this type of success, even in Christian ministry, as if they are the only criteria for success. Impressive speakers, writers and singers, pastors of large churches, evangelists bringing in thousands, founders of large organisations, etc., are all admired as great successes in the church. They *are* successes. But are all the rest automatically less than successful? It is the leaders who are seen and heard, and get the acclaim. But what about the followers, who did the hard work, prayed for the leaders or supported them financially? Does God have any success criteria that are equally applicable to leaders and followers?

Look at the parable of the talents, where the master gave one man five talents, another two and another one. One point is that is that the master expected output from these men only *in*

proportion to what they were given. The successful 'leaders' are there partly because of their outstanding gifts which they received from a sovereign God (1Co.12:5,11). What about the thousands of *ordinary* Christians who have been given only one talent each? Should they be counted as failures or as those who couldn't make it? (Mt.25:26). Oh no! So what are the criteria God uses for success? What kind of people are they to whom the Lord will say, "Well done," or "Approved"?

Certainly absolute output is not one of God's criteria. An evangelist who wins a million souls may get the same appreciation from the Lord as a housewife who brought up a few children for Him! It is a matter of ability and opportunity. When Jesus was publicly acclaimed by the Father at the time of His baptism, He had not

yet done any great deeds! (Mt.3:17).

Let me suggest two criteria - faith and faithfulness. Great faith can take two forms, in this context - one to trust God for great things, and the other to hold on in faith even in adverse circumstances. The Roman centurion and the Canaanite woman had faith of the first kind (Mt.8:10;15:28). The three friends of Daniel are typical of the second (Da.3:17,18).

Faithfulness means to bring out the best result out of what we have been given. In the parable of the talents both the five talent man and the two talent man received the same appreciation from the master, because of their faithfulness with what they had. When Jesus talked about bringing out thirty, sixty and hundredfold harvest, it talks about grades of faithfulness (Mt.13:8).

Shall we stop comparing ourselves

with others and focus on having great faith and being faithful?

Pointers along the way #151

Learn, change, learn

There can be no significant progress in any area except through change. Yet it may be true that one thing that blocks our progress is our unwillingness to change. Certainly we would like *others* to change, especially in their dealings with us, and we would also like our *circumstances* to be different. But how about *us* changing - in the way we think, speak, behave, react and respond? It looks as if this thought doesn't even occur to many people.

God wants us to grow and become mature (Mt.5:48). When we grow and become stronger in our relationship with Him, we also become able to deal with ourselves, others and our

circumstances in an increasingly better way. We know this needs a lifelong commitment to this goal and a relentless seeking after God, because there is so much in us that needs to be changed or transformed.

Yes, the others need to change too, and it would become more comfortable for us if they do. Our circumstances could be much better too, to put things mildly. We can, and we need to, do our part in contributing towards this. But surely there are limits to how much we can do, because the others don't want to be changed (they are just waiting to change us!), and circumstances are not all that easy to change because there are many other people who are involved in them. Many of us think that if only we could change just this one - whether it is a spouse, job, house, locality, looks, etc. - we would be happy. How many people become

frustrated waiting for this miracle to happen! Waiting like this, we miss the thing we *can* do to make ourselves happier. That is to change ourselves, our attitudes, approach, responses, etc., in order to deal with ourselves, others and our circumstances better.

A growing life is one where we learn, change and continue learning. The more we resist change, either because we can't see that we need to change or because it takes effort to change, we not only hinder our own progress, but also makes things worse for ourselves. Consider marriage where both spouses need to accept the other and make many adjustments to live together. If either of them refuses to make changes we can imagine how problems will multiply.

When there are things outside of us that we can't change, we may give in to frustration, complaints, grumbling,

backbiting, sulking, fuming, etc., and make ourselves miserable as a result. But once we recognise that we can't change the situation, isn't it much better for us if we can find ways to make our happiness in spite of the situation? How can we do this? By thinking about what good God is going to bring out of this (Ro.8:28). Even if we are unable to figure this out, we can continue to hold on in faith, like Abraham did (Ro.4:18,20). This will bring about a change of attitude, and ultimately it may even change our situation. Even if the situation does not change, at least we shall come out of it as better people.

Pointers along the way #152

Will the Lord leave us?

One of the greatest promises of God is that He will never leave or forsake us (He.13:5). Yet most Christians go through times in their lives where they wonder if God has indeed left them. When calamities fall upon us, when we can't get any answers from God, or when the guilt of some sin haunts us, it is natural that such doubts come into our mind. Look at what happened to Job when he lost all his children and his wealth in the same day. See how David was perplexed with God when his enemies seemed to have got him under their power. Jesus Himself, who was tempted in all points like us, cried out, "My God, why have You forsaken Me?" (Mt.27:46).

But in none of these examples had God forsaken them. But it surely *appeared* to them as if He had. The nearest that

God came to forsaking someone was in the case of Jesus, when the sin of the whole world was placed upon Him on the cross. But even here, it was communication and fellowship that were broken between the Father and the Son, and that too temporarily. Almost immediately after Jesus felt like this, He was able to commit His spirit into the Father's hands (Lk.23:46).

We may also *feel* at times as if God is not with us, and our reason also may come to the same conclusion. But can God leave us or forsake us after having promised clearly that He would never do it? Certainly not. This is the certainty that we must hold on to, when we go through such times of doubt.

We know that our feelings do not always reflect reality but only how we *perceive* things to be. Our reason also can be misled due to misunderstanding

or lack of sufficient information. It is safer for us to trust in God than in ourselves or other people. Of course what God has said He will do, and He never says anything carelessly.

When we can't understand what is going on in our lives, we must believe that our Heavenly Father knows every detail (Job.23:10LB). If we place our lives in His hands we will be safe. He knows what is best for us, He is almighty to do whatever He pleases, and no man can stop Him. After a period which God determines, He will reveal Himself to us again and help us to understand what He was doing all the time (1Pe.5:10).

If it is guilt that is troubling us we must remember that Jesus will not refuse *anyone* who goes to Him (Jn.6:37). Even if we have fallen again and again, we can believe that His blood is sufficient to wash all our sins. All we

need to do is to confess them to Him in repentance (1Jn.1:9;2:1,2). God may discipline us when we need to become serious in our life (He.12:6). But He will never forsake us. There is always an open door for us to go back to Him.

At the same time we must not forget that it is possible for us to go away from God, if *we* choose. We can choose to go after our desires and pleasures and leave God behind. But even then God waits for us to come to our senses and return to Him (Lk.15:20).

Pointers along the way #153

Thanksgiving from the heart

Some years ago I read in a book about a woman whose son was a drug addict. The author was telling her to praise God for her son, saying that as she gave thanks for the way things were, God would save her son. My first reaction was shock, wondering about how we could praise God for a drug addict. Later on I understood that the author meant well, even though he had erred on the details.

Of course we can't thank God for drug addiction, or for a son we see as a 'drug addict.' First of all God was not responsible for the son being a drug addict, and secondly we can't praise God and give Him glory for a bad situation. This kind of trying to give thanks in everything (1Th.5:18) is an example of literal interpretation without understanding the spirit. As a

result our praise becomes mechanical and not from the heart. We are also dishonest with ourselves, because we are saying we are thankful to God when we are not.

God looks at the heart (1Sa.16:7), and He wants those who worship Him in spirit and in truth (Jn.4:23). He is not impressed with nice choral music or loud and rhythmic 'praise' songs, unless they come from the heart. He finds great delight in people who are thankful to Him, especially when they are passing through difficult times. This is what scores over Satan who claims that people are only clinging to God because of the benefits (Job.1:9-11).

If thanksgiving has to come from the heart there must be an attitude of thanksgiving in our heart. It is natural that we don't feel thankful when we are facing difficult situations. But that is

only because we are focussing on those situations and not on God. When we consciously shift our focus to God, and recognise Him as being present in our situation, our attitude begins to become thankful. Then we can thank and praise Him meaningfully. Choosing to praise God even when we don't feel like it is good. But focussing on God will make it easier and meaningful.

Let's go back to the example of the drug addict. We recognise God as the One who created this boy, not as a drug addict but as someone with great potential. We praise Him for His love for this boy even though he is caught in the snare of drugs at the moment. We recognise that God is fully in control over this boy's life and can deliver him and change him as we pray for him. We thank God for Jesus who has already paid the price for the boy's redemption, and for the hope that at the right time

God would help him to come to the knowledge of the Saviour. We acknowledge that there is nothing impossible for God, and we submit humbly to His leading.

When the focus moves on to God, and when we think of His love and mercy towards us and what He has done for us and prepared for us, our heart gets filled with thanksgiving, and then praise is no more mechanical.

When we choose to praise God in the midst of our problems Satan is put to shame, and God opens the way for our victory over our situations too.

Pointers along the way #154

The blame experts

God warns about people who preach nice and comforting messages to everyone even when what is needed is some strong medicine or surgery, because that is what would make them popular (Ez.13:10). On the other side, there are also many self appointed prophets who go around placing the blame on poor suffering people when something bad happens to them. They don't realise that they are heaping additional burdens on people who are already bending under the load of their pain, sorrow, perplexity, guilt, etc.

These prophets proclaim, "There must be some sin in your life." If they were real prophets like Nathan, they would have told these people what specific sin they had to set right, instead of throwing a general blame in their face. Do they think that bad things happen

only to bad people? As a result of these mindless accusations even sincere people harass themselves, examining themselves from every angle for sin that is eluding their notice, ending up with confusion, hopelessness and guilt.

"You don't have any faith. That's why God is not answering your prayers," say these prophets, with an air of having revealed some great mystery. If they didn't have faith, would they have gone to God in prayer? Didn't Jesus say that even a little faith was enough to move mountains? (Mt.17:20). It is not the quantity of faith that matters but who we have faith in and if our faith is based on God's word (Ro.10:17).

"There must be a curse on you!" This itself is like cursing, placing them in an extremely difficult position, because they can tie themselves into more and more knots trying to remove the noose

that is choking them. Few people know that no curse can bind them unless they really deserve it (Pr.26:2). Even if we deserve it, the good news is that Jesus has already taken our curse on Him so that we can be free, freely (Ga.3:13). God has also declared that we don't have to bear punishment for the sins of our ancestors (Ez.18:2,3,20).

"It's because you have left the church." For some people the ultimate sin is to leave a church group, because they believe theirs is the Body of Christ and you lose your relationship with God if you leave it. Many 'prophets' constantly warn their congregation about the frightful things that have happened to those who left their church earlier. Quite apart from the wrong doctrine, what a sad way this is to hold on to people in a church!

"You haven't been making a positive confession." O what a terrible God

these prophets worship, who sends calamities on people when they slip up with words! They forget Job, David, Jeremiah, etc., who expressed their anguish to God sincerely and were *honoured* for it!

The list goes on. All these experts of blame and accusation are callous and heartless, not willing to lift the burdens of people with one of their fingers (Mt.23:4). They turn their knives in the wounds, hurting and causing more damage. When will we learn? If we can't help, at least let's not do harm.

Pointers along the way #155

Respect for other faiths?

Truth is getting compromised more and more, as time goes on. Many compromise it by mixing it with error so that while the final message has a semblance of truth it actually leads people astray. One example is in the use of the word 'God' and 'faith' in Him. In the world that worships a variety of gods, including inanimate objects, animals, people, demons, mythological beings and abstract concepts such as 'force', 'influence', and 'power', the Christian concept of God as a Person who is present everywhere, all knowing, all powerful, holy, loving, and the *only One* is offensive to many. One reason why people don't like Him is because He is holy and they are held accountable to Him (Ro.14:12). The second is that Jesus claimed to be the *only way* to God

the Father, thereby negating every other claim to godhood (Jn.14:6;Acts.4:12). But is this a point on which Christians can afford to compromise, by agreeing with the 'opposition' or keeping quiet?

It isn't enough just to have faith. It's also important to ensure that what we believe is true. If we believe in, worship and follow a "God" and we finally discover at the end that we were mistaken, wouldn't that be the biggest mistake that we could have made? That is, if God is as Christians believe He is, and He has revealed Himself and His love to us through His Son Jesus and requires each of us to give an account of ourselves to Him on the final judgment day, can we afford to make a mistake about our faith in God?

Of course every man has the right to choose for himself what he wants to believe. We *respect that right*. We

cannot force anyone to agree with us or follow us. But at the same time, we can't be expected to *agree* with everyone else about their concept of God, or *respect* them. For example, we respect the right of people to believe that the moon is made of cheese. But we would not respect that belief.

At the same time, just the fact that we believe in the *true* God does not make us superior to others who believe differently. We know that it was God's mercy to us that caused us to believe, and that we are no different in ourselves from others. What makes us different is *Christ in us*, working in us to make us more and more godly in our character and behaviour. (It goes without saying that if there is no difference in these, we need to examine the reality of our faith). One of the things that people need to see in us is humility, that accepts others for

what they are, and shows them love and kindness as much as we are able.

We can't get to know God by our own thinking, because He is the One who created us and is thus far beyond our understanding. But God has revealed Himself to us through the Bible. Once we humbly surrender ourselves to Him, He also gives us understanding and experience that strengthen our faith in Him. Then we are convinced that what the Bible says is true and that God has inspired the words of the Bible.

Pointers along the way #156

Love, hate, like, dislike

Sometimes in our attempt to follow the scriptures we tend to be unrealistic to the point of being naive. It is good to believe what the Bible says, even when we can't understand it fully,

because we can't expect to understand with our small mind everything that God has written there. At the same time, when general experience does not match with what we think the Bible is saying, don't we need to question whether we have misunderstood the scriptures? We are not trying to question the Bible itself, but just trying to see if *our* understanding is correct.

One example is where we try to imagine that the other people are *better* than us, based on Php.2:3. Sometimes we have to force ourselves to hold this view even though there is strong evidence to the contrary staring at our face! The problem is because of the King James version which uses the word 'better' in this verse. But NASB and CEV use "more important", and the Message Bible says, "Put yourself aside, and help others get ahead." Doesn't this make better sense?

A similar problem exists in the case of loving and hating people. We tend to think that 'love' and 'hate' are stronger forms of 'like' and 'dislike.' So if we don't like someone, we think we don't love him. But the Bible commands us to love one another, and we have a struggle trying to love someone we don't really like. But this is not what the Bible wants us to understand.

The Greek word used in Jn.13:34 is 'agapao.' 'Agape' is used for God's love for us, which He shows us even when we don't deserve it. The Bible says that God demonstrated His agape love for us in that He let Christ die for us even when we were sinners (Ro.5:8). What do we see here about His love? It is an overflow of the goodness of His heart and not dependent on the state of our lives or our response. Even though we were His enemies, as sinners, He intended to

do us good, and desired that we should get to experience His salvation.

Do you think God *liked* the way we were living, our behaviour, attitudes, etc.? He is so holy that He *hates* sin. He didn't like what He saw in us, but still He *loved* us with an unconditional love. He didn't want us to suffer in our sins, and He Himself suffered in our place so that we could come to experience forgiveness and deliverance from sin. Charles Finney, in his 'Systematic Theology' has described love as benevolence that desires the highest good for others.

Think of someone we don't like. We can still love him with agape love, can't we? We can desire *only* good for him! Of course this assumes that we have forgiven him and hold no desire for vengeance. Even if he hasn't done anything wrong to us and it is just that we don't like him, we can still wish

him the very best. This is the beginning of agape! How we express this love depends also on him and is not entirely up to us (Ro.12:18). But we can love him from our heart, pray for his welfare, bless him, etc.

Spiritual laziness

We are all lazy in many ways. We like to get things without making any effort. We want good results without any hard work. Therefore it is no wonder that a gospel of grace has its own appeal to us, because it sounds like everything is being given away free! In order to counter a tendency towards legalism, we are told again and again by the preachers that salvation is a *free* gift of God, and there is nothing we can do to earn it. That *is* true. But if we open our lazy eyes and look at ourselves we can also see that many of us have misused this 'free gift' or missed what true grace can do for us.

Let's have a check on ourselves. When we came to trust in Jesus, was there a painful element of repentance as we considered our past? The Bible says that when there is true repentance,

there will be sorrow over having wasted our life in sin, and an earnest desire to make things different now (2Co.7:10,11). Or did we just walk in with a smile and receive salvation as if we were being given an award? If we missed this repentance, there is a strong chance that the salvation we have is not the real thing, or at least it is very much watered down.

If we have come with repentance and received salvation with overflowing gratitude, what happened to the 'earnestness' afterwards? Have we settled down to a routine, a life of duty, where we make minimum efforts to read the Bible, pray, 'go to church', etc.? If that is so, we are certainly missing out a lot on what the Lord wants to do for us.

God works with us according to a principle. "Ask, and you will receive. Seek, and you will find. Knock, and it

will be opened to you" (Mt.7:7). "Give, and it will be given to you" (Lk.6:38). "Sow sparingly or bountifully, and your will also reap accordingly" (2Co.9:6). All this is telling us the same thing, that even though God has planned great and glorious things for us, we are not going to get anything till we *reach* for them. This is not about *works*, but how we receive our free gifts!

God wants us to enjoy intimate fellowship with Him (1Jn.1:2,3). He wants to share many secrets with us that most people have no clues about (Je.33:3). He wants us to stand in His council and know what He is planning to do (Je.23:22). Truly we can't even imagine what all good things He has stored up for us (1Co.2:9). How do we get near any of them if we aren't even asking, seeking or knocking?

Perhaps we have deceived ourselves

into thinking that God has given us many promises and that we will automatically receive them. But receiving even what is promised is not automatic. God wants us to *ask, seek and knock*. That's the way it works. Even when God has spoken and given us His words of promise that *must* take place, we have to *ask* before they can be fulfilled (Ez.36:36,37).

Let us wake up to receive our inheritance. It is time to seek the Lord. Let us seek Him while there is still time.

Pointers along the way #158

Favourite subjects

God is so big that we, as small created beings, will never be able to know everything about Him. But our privilege is to keep trying - to know Him a bit more today than we knew yesterday. That's what He likes. He takes great delight in revealing Himself to those who seek Him, because He knows that the more we know Him, the more intimate our fellowship will be with Him. It was like that with Moses, because he had grown to know God's ways intimately, while most others only saw God's external acts (Ps.103:7).

Sometimes we get stuck in our ways. When we suddenly see some part of the truth that we had never seen before, we become so fascinated with it that we begin to think and act as if nothing else matters. Obviously the thrill of

receiving a new understanding is so strong that we can't think of anything else. For example, when we get to the experience of being born again, an entirely new world opens up for us, and everything else gets forgotten. But then is that the end of it? When we cross the milestone of water baptism, experience the filling of the Holy Spirit, speak the first few words of an unknown tongue, see a vision or a dream, etc. - every step is overwhelming! It is all very good as long as we keep going forward, from faith to faith and grace to grace, experiencing more and more of the closeness of God. But sometimes we get stuck, like the needle in a gramophone record, producing the same sounds again and again as the record goes round and round.

Many have their favourite subjects. That is their speciality. Whenever they

meet someone, the discussion turns to this particular subject. Whether it is about the interpretation of some verse, some special experience, a certain emphasis of life, some doctrinal controversy, a certain way of doing things - the list can go on - they can speak of practically nothing else. Even if they talk about something else for a while, very soon they come back to their favourite subject.

Now it is only natural that our latest experience thrills us and stays uppermost in our mind. But we must not forget that the wisdom of God is manifold (Ep.3:10) (with many folds?), and that when we unfold one there are many more folds to see yet! We must also keep in mind that while we have just opened up one fold, our brother may be opening up a completely different fold at that moment. Let's not waste time arguing

with him. Given enough time, he will come around to the fold we are familiar with. And if we are willing to be humble, we may also be able to get to the fold which he is excited about just now!

It may be that God allows many different groups to exist so that each group may contribute a bit to the total process of unfolding (Ep.3:18). We would imagine that in an 'ideal' church, there should be a perfect balance of all truths. But this ideal is approximated only by the universal church and certainly not by ours alone. Let us recognise our smallness and be willing to learn from the others.

Pointers along the way #159

God can, but will He?

Certainly God can do all things. He knows all things, and He can do just whatever He wants. He is *God*. But will He do all the things that we ask for? Some people proclaim that He will, thinking that Jesus has said as much (Jn.14:14), even though neither they nor anyone else has ever experienced it. The answer seems to be simple. He will not do anything wrong even if we ask for it, and He will do only what is good for us. Sometimes He may just give in to our persistent demands, and let us suffer, just because that is the only way we will learn (Ps.106:15). As a rule He will answer our prayers only if they are according to His will (1Jn.5:14).

But many of us are mixed up. We believe we have faith to receive what we ask God for, because we believe

God *can* do it. We then expect to receive what we ask for. When we expect to receive what we ask for, we think that is yet another mark of faith. This is faith in God as a Person, and in His ability (He.11:6). But we can't still be sure He will give us our request unless we know it is His will.

When we have faith in God, and we know that what we are asking is His will, we can have confidence that He will answer us. We know what His will is, if it is clearly promised in the Bible, if it is meant for people like us and we fulfil whatever conditions are attached to that promise. But not everything we ask for fits into this class. In that case we have no assurance that we will receive it unless we have an additional factor in our faith. That is when God has spoken to us in our heart that He is going to do that for us. Faith comes by hearing God

speaking to our heart (Ro.10:17). Then we have an assurance of receiving the things we hope for (He.11:1).

Why we do we claim we have faith for something when we haven't heard from God? Maybe we have seen or heard other people claim to have faith and receive miracles from God, and we like to imitate them. Someone said this is like the Egyptians trying to cross the Red Sea following the children of Israel. That ended in a catastrophe (He.11:29). Perhaps we like to think of ourselves as great men and women of faith and we jump ahead before God has called us. But perhaps it is just that we are not able to distinguish between faith in God, and faith for miracles which is a gift from God, given to some as a ministry, and given to others on occasions.

It is tragic if we imagine we have faith and refuse ordinary means available

with us, whether it is medicine for healing or other human help for different situations, and suffer as a consequence. If God hasn't spoken to us and shown us His will in some particular situation it doesn't make us any less spiritual, because that is *His* sovereign choice. What we have to make sure is that we believe *He can* if He wants to. We can ask in hope, even if we don't know His will, because God is a good Father. If we don't get it, that's also fine, isn't it? (Da.3:17,18).

Pointers along the way #160

A false sense of security

In the beginning we *struggle* through to understanding, believing and receiving the security and rest that God offers us through faith in Jesus. But when we do come to that security, we face the danger of becoming complacent and careless. We get attacked by Satan in

both states. He tries his best to hinder us from getting to enjoy the rest Jesus offers us (Mt.11:28). When we do experience that rest, he slips in a false sense of security that makes us lower our guard. Then we become an easy prey for him.

When we feel secure we think that now nothing can touch us. We may not consciously think like this because we would recognise it as pride. What we actually think may be that *God* will take care of us, He will not allow us to fall, He will fulfil His promises, etc. Since we had difficulty earlier when we were struggling to believe in His promises, when we have believed and come to rest we think that everything is going to be different now. We have recognised our own inability to keep ourselves, and have learned to place all our confidence in God's grace (1Pe.1:13). Now we think that as we

trust entirely on God's grace, we will not fall.

There can't be anything wrong in trusting entirely on God, can it? How can anyone who puts his trust in the Lord be put to shame? (Isa.49:23). Hasn't God said that He is able *to keep us from falling*? (Jude.1:24).

God is true, and His word is reliable. Then how *can* we fall, even after placing our whole trust in Him? But we *do* fall, don't we?

We have forgotten one thing. God hasn't taken away the free choice He has created us with, even when we have placed our whole life into His hands. He does not take over absolute control so that we automatically do His will, even if we ask Him to. He dwells in us, plans for us, watches over us, takes care of even the hair on our head, causes all things to work for our good,

and warns us when we tend to go astray to the right or to the left (Isa.30:21). But He still gives us the freedom to do what we choose. We have the power to ignore His voice, disregard His warnings, disobey Him, or to turn completely against Him. We have this power at all times. We never become so spiritual that we are unable to sin against God.

If we recognise this power of choice, we will be careful to exercise it in the right way. We will not expect that we will be automatically doing God's will. We still have to make our choice to do His will, at every point.

If we are ignorant of this, Satan can knock us down easily because we are not vigilant and alert. Even when we think we *are* careful, he can work on our mind slowly so that we begin to backslide without realising it. The only way then is to recognise our precarious

position as we travel through enemy territory, be on the alert (1Pe.5:8) and to constantly cry out to God for grace (He.5:7). When we do this, He *is* able to keep us from falling.

Pointers along the way #161

The danger of false surrender

Sincerity of heart or good intentions cannot guarantee protection from deception. God tells us to be alert, because the devil is out to get us (1Pe.5:8). He tries, of course, to get us to sin. After we fall he tries to lead us into condemnation, discouragement and hopelessness. He also tries to deceive us into believing what is false, about God, His ways, ourselves, others, etc. He is extremely good at this, being possibly the cleverest of all created beings (Ez.28:12), and having had thousands of years of experience. He is

the father of lies (Jn.8:44), and he tries to deceive us by mixing lies with truth. One of the ways he deceives sincere Christians is through a false surrender.

Sincere people who want to be radical in obeying God, and especially those who believe in being *led by the Holy Spirit* (Ro.8:14) become susceptible to a special kind of deception. Such people have *surrendered* their lives entirely to God. They have understood that God wants them not to lean on their own understanding but to trust in the Lord (Pr.3:5), and they have decided to deny themselves, carry the cross and follow Jesus (Lk.9:23). The danger is when they translate all this to mean that they give up their power to reason, evaluate and choose, and allow themselves to be 'led'. Deceiving spirits will be only too glad to lead such people astray.

If we surrender ourselves in this way,

we may begin to act upon impulses, feelings, thoughts that come up suddenly, Bible verses that flash into our mind out of nowhere, etc. We may think that if we don't obey them immediately, we might lose the opportunity, or make God angry with us. If our commonsense raises its head, we would quash it by thinking that we must not lean on our own understanding. We may also have a feeling that God is calling us in a *special* way which others cannot understand, and think that we have to pay that price for following Jesus. But if we start along this way we will ultimately make fools of ourselves, ruin our testimony and lose out with God also.

Our ability to reason and 'judge' is one of the good things God has created us with. We are not to set that aside. A spiritual man is to judge all things

(1Co.2:15). He uses natural and spiritual abilities together (v.13). Our reason is to be used properly, subject to the overall authority of the Holy Spirit. Even when we listen to 'spiritual' preachers, we are to judge whether what they are saying is from God (1Co.14:29;1Th.5:20,21). When verses come to our mind, examine if they are appropriate for us.

Since *we* are accountable to God, God wants *us* to be in control of our lives. We are to be subject to the word of God and the Holy Spirit, but *we* are responsible for making the decisions. When we subject ourselves to elders it must still be by our choice and not by being forced.

Be especially careful when there is a pressure on us to act, and when we are being tempted with thoughts of being someone special.

Pointers along the way #162

Faith, and what we say

We know that faith is what is needed to establish a relationship with God and to become His children (Jn.1:12). We also know that this faith does not mean just to subscribe mentally to a set of doctrines. The apostle James takes a lot to trouble to explain that a living faith is one which produces practical changes in our behaviour, attitudes, values, etc., in such a way that we grow up to become more and more like Jesus (Jas.2:14-26).

However, having been born again through grace and by faith, it is still possible that we limit God in giving us His promises and helping us to grow spiritually when we negate the faith that is in us by careless use of words. To take an example, consider God's promise that He will cause all things to work together for our good (Ro.8:28).

We think we believe this, and we even preach about it. But then comes a time when we face one of those tough situations of life, and we say, "I think it's going to turn out badly for me."

We believe that God has promised us never to leave us or forsake us (He.13:5). But then something terrible happens to us, and we say, "It looks like God doesn't love me anymore. He seems to have left me all alone." We preach that God will never allow us to be tested beyond our ability (1Co.10:13). But then we say, "This is too much for me!"

We don't mean to say such things. But we are under severe pressure, and we give in to our feelings and say things that are really contrary to what God says. What this shows us is that either we really don't believe in our hearts what we profess to believe, or that we have not learned how to exercise our

faith.

If we have said something foolishly, don't think there is no hope now. God is large-hearted and merciful. See the example of David (1Sa.27:1).

The Bible says that we believe in our heart, and we confess with our mouth, and *that* results in salvation (Ro.10:10). Obviously, if we believe in our heart but confess something contrary with our mouth, we block our progress, don't we?

Think of another situation, where we confess with our mouth what we really don't believe in our heart! We *want* to believe what we say, and we *hope* that it will happen because we confess it. But we can't make things happen just by saying something. God can do that because He is almighty. Also, there is never an inconsistency between His heart and words. But if God has given

us faith in our heart and *then* we confess it, it will happen, because God is the One behind it.

We get faith by hearing God (Ro.10:17), when God speaks to us through the written word of God, or through the Holy Spirit working in our heart. When we have heard God speaking to us like that, we have boldness, and then we can confess it with our lips and receive what God has promised. But if God has not spoken to us, but *we* decide we want to get something from God, we can confess with our lips the whole day and we will get nothing but a hoarse throat!

This doesn't mean that we shouldn't ask and hope for an answer when we haven't heard God specifically. He is a good Father, and longs to give us more than we can ask or think. But don't expect that He *has* to do whatever we

ask Him.

Pointers along the way #163

Two kinds of favour

Christians are generally aware of 'grace' defined as 'the unmerited favour of God'. We are accepted by God 'just as we are', when we go to Him in repentance and trusting in the price Jesus has paid for our sins (Ep.2:8,9). We don't deserve it, and we can never do anything to earn this favour from God. But we mustn't think that this is the only dimension to God's dealings with us.

Some people, extrapolating on this understanding of grace, imagine that since all of us are accepted by God in the same manner, we are all equal in His eyes. No, there is a difference. We are all accepted on the basis of grace as a free gift, and there is nothing any of us can boast over another person. However, now that we have been accepted by God, there is going to be a

differentiation based on how each one of us makes use of this grace. Jesus talked much about this, about someone producing hundred fold returns for the seed that was sown in his life, while others produced only sixty or thirty fold (Mt.13:8). He also mentioned about someone who had received a talent from the master and had not bothered to produce any return at all! (Mt.25:18). So God does take note of these differences among us.

Paul mentions about how he had worked with the grace he had been given, with more vigour, zeal and diligence than others (1Co.15:10). He was humble enough to recognise that he had nothing to boast for this, and that he was just making use of the grace that was given to him. Paul was not aiming to get a better reward or greater name than everyone else, but it was His love for Jesus that energised him

(2Co.5:14,15). Compare this to our own life and see *our* attitude and diligence in this regard!

When God once looked all around at the people He had created, He saw wickedness and corruption everywhere. But Noah found favour in His eyes, because he was righteous and blameless in God's eyes and walked with God (Ge.6:8,9). *This* was not an unmerited favour! Noah deserved it.

Of course, in a sense even here there was an element of undeserved favour. All have sinned, including Noah, and come short of God's glory (Ro.3:23), and in that sense *no one* deserves any favour from God. All we really deserve is death and separation from God, and any good we receive is an unmerited favour from God. But at the same time, God does recognise faithfulness.

Is this an Old Testament concept that has been overridden in the new covenant of grace? No. Actually even under the old covenant, people were accepted by grace on the basis of faith - we just have to read He.11 to see this - even though it was not so obvious because Jesus had not come yet. God accepted their sacrifices and offerings looking ahead at the true sacrifice from Jesus that was going to replace them all.

We are all not going to be the same in heaven; some will shine brighter than others (1Co.15:41,42). Some will have greater authority than others (Lk.19:17).

Pointers along the way #164

God with us and beyond us

Who was Cain's wife? We really don't know. We can guess that it must have been one of his own sisters who was born to Adam and Eve. But God hasn't said anything about this in His word, like many other things He hasn't told us about. Now what if we get upset because we can't get an answer to this question and conclude that God's word is not reliable? There are millions of things about which God doesn't give us an answer. But are we going to reject God because of that?

It is actually very silly if we think that we ought to understand God fully and clear all our doubts before we can believe in Him. We forget that He is *God!* How can we *ever* expect to understand Him with our limited brains? He is far above and beyond us! And even when we get to heaven, there

will be *lots* of things we won't be able to understand about God.

How much rest we can have on this earth if we understand and reckon with this simple fact that we are not God, we will never be God, and that as a result we will never be able to understand Him fully. If we know this truly, we will stop beating our heads against the wall unnecessarily and getting upset because we can't understand something about God.

On the other hand, there *are* many things we can know about God, His character, His ways, His love, mercy, kindness, compassion, etc., for us, and the fact that He is *with* us. The more we know Him, the more we trust Him. One thing builds on another. This helps us to get to the place where things we don't know about God don't trouble us anymore.

Besides, how does it really matter to us who Cain's wife was? Knowing it wouldn't really make the least difference to us. What about the real issues of life, about sin, our sins, how we can be saved from them, how we can get to know God, how we can have a relationship with Him, etc.? Those questions have answers in God's word, don't they? The Bible itself says that God has given *all* things that pertain to life and godliness (2Pe.1:3). We may wish that He could have given us some more answers to the questions that puzzle us. But He has given us what we really need, and then we can get nearer to the other answers little by little, as we meditate on His word, ask God to open the eyes of our understanding (Ep.1:17), depend on the Holy Spirit and also receive help from other brothers and sisters in Christ. That is part of our spiritual growth, isn't it?

Fools say there is no God (Ps.14:1). Even intelligent people become fools in this way. And then they think they are being very clever in asking questions about Cain's wife, etc. The fact is that they don't know the first thing about God and who they are in comparison. There is no use trying to give them answers because they will only come up with more questions. Only when they begin to think about how BIG God is, and how small they are, can they begin to receive any true instruction.

Pointers along the way #165

Keeping our heads high

One of the aspects of the image of God that He has created us with is that we can make our own decisions. That is why God expects each one of us to give an account of ourselves to Him (Ro.14:12). Philosophers can argue about this and say that we are not always able to make our own choice because many times it is forced upon us by other people or our circumstances. But we still have a choice to decide how to respond to them in our heart, if not in our action. Theologians may further say that this power of free choice has been distorted by the Fall and now we all have in us (in our flesh) a tendency towards sin (Ro.7:20,21). Yes, but as the Holy Spirit is seeking to restore us to the image we were originally created to have, we have to also learn

to exercise this power to choose for ourselves.

We must remember that this is an age where there is so much of manipulation all around us, from people seeking to make us do what they want. Advertisements seek to pressurise us to buy things we really don't need, and to adopt lifestyles we can't afford or which are not good for us. The media, which is being controlled more and more by Satan tries to convince us that evil is good and in style (Is.5:20).

Even in churches and Christian preaching and writing, people try to manipulate us to do things for *their* gain. We tend to assume that the interpretation some preachers give us regarding doctrine must be right because we are impressed by their strong human personalities or persuasive speech. (But the sensible folks at Berea went and checked their

Bibles to see if what Paul preached was right (Ac.17:11)). We dare not question what some 'prophets' speak, even when something inside us rings a warning bell, because we are afraid of going against God. (Please see 1Co.14:29;1Th.5:20,21)).

We don't have to say "Amen", repeat what the preacher says, raise or clap our hands, stand up, go forward, dial the number on the screen or make a pledge, just because the preacher tells us! Let us make our *own* decisions, and that too consciously and deliberately. Let us not allow anyone else to push us around or manipulate us. If we have any doubt about some 'miraculous' thing that is happening in front of us or the preacher is telling us about, let us 'wait and see' rather than allow ourselves to be forced to make quick decisions against our better judgment. (It is usually Satan who threatens us

with dire consequences if we don't act quickly, because the Holy Spirit will only encourage and exhort us rather than pressurise us.) Let us not assume that every miracle or supernatural thing is from God, because Satan and his demons can do false wonders and signs (Mt.24:24). Just because a teacher talks convincingly, let us not be quick to accept his interpretation without examining it ourselves. Let us keep a safe distance from preachers when we recognise that they are after our money or our support, and not our welfare or the glory of God.

Pointers along the way #166

The enemy of love

Usually, when a boy and girl "fall in love", they are looking for something from the other. Generally speaking, for the boy it is sexual attraction and for the girl it is a desire for affection and security. In a society with loose morals, the girl gives her body thinking that she will gain affection from the boy, and the boy shows affection looking for her body. They both fool each other thinking that they are 'in love'! Romantic songs proclaim, "I can't live without you" because each one is looking for the other to fulfil some need in their own lives. Of course this is not love. It is a wolf in sheep's clothing, selfishness dressed up as love.

When God loves us, He demonstrates it through *giving*. His supreme act of love was when He gave His Son Jesus

to die in our place so that we could be saved (Jn.3:16). And now that we have become His children through faith, He works in us and around us to do good for us (Ro.8:28;Php.2:13). His kind of love is self-giving and not self-seeking.

The reason why our kind of love fails is that we keep expecting to *receive* from the ones we 'love', instead of learning to *give*. Even in marriages where the couples have been deeply in 'love' before they got married, relationships fail as the wolves slowly shed away their sheep's clothing. When selfishness begins to come out into the open and each of the couples finds that the other one is not meeting their needs, 'love' fails, and perhaps hatred begins to take its place.

Real love is something we have to learn and grow into. It takes time, perseverance and self-denial. It is not

something we can 'fall into' or experience on 'first sight'. Even marriages which begin with sudden infatuation have to grow into self-denying love if they have to survive. Instead of looking for something for ourselves from the others, we have to learn to value the others for themselves and keep desiring to do something for them. 'Expectations' and 'demands', and 'self-interests' are the enemies of love.

God's love is genuinely interested in our welfare (Je.29:11). He won't withhold anything good from us, even when He has to deny Himself and suffer for it (Ro.8:32). He wants to pour this love into our hearts through the Holy Spirit (Ro.5:5). But we cannot have this love in us if we are not willing to deny ourselves. Selfishness is the enemy of love (1Co.13:5). When we are acting out of selfishness we cannot make way for

love.

'Denying ourselves' does not mean that we ignore our own needs, suppress or repress them. That would be unrealistic and unhealthy. But what we need to do is to put the others first (Php.2:3 NASB). When we love the others, and demonstrate this love in self-denying ways, that will prompt them to love us too.

It may happen in this sin-filled world that people continue to be selfish even when we show them true love. That calls for a higher form of self-denial. But let that also not stop us from loving them.

How do we know we love God?

When we are moved with emotion as we join in worship, singing stirring songs and praying fervently, it is natural for us to think that everything is right between us and God. Especially if we mean what we say, and we know we are sincere in our desire to 'live for God' or to 'serve God', we think we *know* we love God. Certainly these are indications of our love for God.

If we come up to the level described above, we can say that we don't fall into the category of people who merely say things with their lips which they really don't mean in their hearts (Is.29:13). Our religion is not one of external rituals but something that has touched and changed our heart. We

know God, we know His love for us, and we love God. And we *are* sincere in what we say in those songs and prayers. But is this enough to pass God's test?

Peter was also like this, when he made loud boasts about how he would never leave Jesus even if it meant death for himself (Mt.26:35). He meant what he said, he was sincere, and he said it out of love for Jesus. But he failed Jesus when the test came, and denied Him when he was put on the block.

One man who passed God's test was Abraham who was willing to sacrifice his son Isaac in order to obey God. It was then that God declared that He *knew* Abraham really loved Him (Ge.22:12). Actually the word God used here was 'fear' and not 'love'. God said that now He knew that Abraham feared Him. Abraham was not being fearful of God. It was the Old

Testament way of saying that Abraham valued God so much that he was willing to lay down his son for Him. That is love, isn't it?

Jesus said that we ought to love Him more than our earthly 'loves' if that was to be counted as love for Him (Mt.10:37). He is so much more worthy than anyone else or anything else, that nothing less than a supreme love for Him can be counted as being real. And this kind of love is ultimately tested in our obedience to Him (Jn.14:21). When we have to obey Him, we have to make a choice between what He says and what we are tempted to do, and that is what demonstrates what or who we really love.

Jesus talked about us 'hating' our own life, as a mark of being His disciple (Lk.14:26). In the context of Mt.10:37 we can understand that this is another

way of saying that our love for Him ought to be stronger than our love for our own life. What Jesus called 'our life' is more than our physical life. Every time we 'do our own thing', we live our own life. Isn't this the ultimate test of our love for God, when we have to choose between what God wants and what we want?

Where do we stand, when we look at love like this? We face this choice countless number of times in a day, ranging from small tests to big ones. I know we may fail at times. But when we know what love for God really means, let us not be satisfied with mere words, but learn to love God as He ought to be loved, in truth and in deed.

Pointers along the way #168

Insight from perplexities

When we find ourselves in perplexing circumstances, we can sit and complain against God and man, or get some more insight into God's ways. It is easier to complain than to seek God. But if we do that, we not only miss what God would have taught us, but also make it more difficult to bear our circumstances! Seeking, knocking and asking take effort, but that's the only way we can receive! (Mt.7:7). One of the reasons for not receiving what God wants to give us is that we don't ask (Jas.4:2).

Think of the questions people like Moses, David and Jeremiah have asked God. They may appear to be irreverent or unbelieving. But remember that these were godly people who were honestly perplexed with the things that were happening to them.

They asked God how He could allow certain things to happen to them, almost implying that it was wrong on God's part to have done what He had apparently done. But they were not really finding fault with God. They were sincerely perplexed about the things that had happened to them which were contrary to what they believed about God. Instead of scolding them for daring to ask Him such questions, He answered them and gave them more insight! (Ps.103:7).

Sometimes we act so 'reverential' towards God that we become downright hypocritical, and dishonest with ourselves. Instead of saying what we really feel inside, we make pious prayers that seem to reflect our faith! But it is not faith if what we say with our lips is not what is inside our heart (Ro.10:8). Sometimes we think we must say only 'positive' words, and our

words contradict reality. Does God want us to confess that we are healthy when we are sick, or does He expect us to say we are sick and ask for healing?

God's word is so rich with meaning that there is always more to it than we know already. When we seek God to know why our experience is contrary to His word, He gives us more understanding on His word and His ways. For example, when God's word says that there is no condemnation to those who are in Christ and we feel condemned all the same, shouldn't we ask God what is really happening to us? If we tell ourselves that we have no condemnation while we are really feeling condemned, don't we need to sort it out with God? If He confirms that there is no need to feel condemned, that's fine. But can we skip asking God?

Of course we can't treat God cheaply and speak whatever comes into our mind. There has to be reverence and awe as we stand before Him. But at the same time we need to tell Him what is troubling our mind, just as children with their father.

Think of how Jesus asked the Father why He had been forsaken. Jesus didn't try to hold on 'bravely' to the promise that God wouldn't forsake Him. He was honest. We don't know what answer He received, but whatever it was, it helped Him to give His spirit to the Father's hand in trust. May we learn to seek God likewise, in honesty and sincerity.

Pointers along the way #169

Conscious of our dependence

We are dependent on the Lord even for the very breath of life. We see many people on our right and left pass away from this life suddenly, reminding us that life on earth is very uncertain. The Psalmist said that all flesh is like the grass that is here one day and disappears soon (Ps.103:15,16). Accidents and sicknesses can suddenly change our plans. Disappointments and frustrations mark many of our days. There are people who betray our trust and others who scheme against us in secret. Who can be sure what a day can bring?

One thing we can do is to brood over such things and become gloomy, depressed, hopeless, cynical, callous, etc. That is certainly not going to make things better, but will drive us further into despair. The other thing we can do

is to draw closer to the Lord and find shelter under His wings (Ps.61:4). He does not promise us a bed of roses or to take away all the hardships of life. But on the other hand He does promise that even when we go through the water or the fire He will be with us (Is.43:2). He will see to it that none of these things overwhelm us. Even when our enemies scheme against us, God will will cause us to receive a blessing - a feast - from His hands (Ps.23:5;Ro.8:28). He *comforts* us with His protective presence with us so that we can feel secure (Ps.23:4).

The knowledge of God that we can get through the hardships of life - *as we hold tightly to Him* - is of such precious value that God thinks it is better to let us go through suffering and gain it, than to let us have an easy life and miss it. The Bible refers to it as going through suffering to glory

(Ro.8:18). But we are all in danger of missing the glory, because when suffering comes we respond by complaining and turning *away from God* instead of drawing closer to Him.

The Lord tells us to draw near to Him so that He can draw near to us (Jas.4:8). He *tells us* to draw near to Him, but He won't draw near to us before we draw near to Him. This is because He doesn't wish to intrude upon our free choice. But when we do draw near to Him, even if it is in panic, fear, doubt, distress, sorrow, pain, etc., He will come close to us and comfort us.

One way that can help us to remember to draw near to Him is to develop the habit of telling ourselves how dependent we are on God. When we make our plans, when we tell others what we are going to do, when we set out to do something - we can say or at

least think of the phrase, "God willing" (Jas.4:15). This will remind us of our dependence on God and help us to draw close to Him.

Some people think that this is a lack of faith, and that we ought to affirm things through our words in order to express our faith. It is silly to say "God willing" if we already know His will. But many times we don't. What greater expression of faith is there than to acknowledge our utter dependence on Him and to submit to His sovereign will?

Pointers along the way #170

Reality check

We human beings are quite good at deceiving ourselves. The Bible says that the heart is more deceitful than anything else (Je.17:9). We can make ourselves believe what we want to believe. Especially when we don't like what we see in ourselves we would like to make ourselves believe that we are in fact better or greater than we really are.

Let us just look at some circumstances in which we may deceive ourselves.

Let us say we have understood doctrines better than many people around us. As a result we frequently find ourselves being in the right when we look at others who are wrong. This tends to make us think that *we* are better than the others, forgetting that it is only our doctrines that are better!

There may still be a big gap between what we believe as doctrines and how we are in our practical life. Don't we need a reality check?

Or, we are in a good church with great preaching and lots of activities. We feel quite great when we stand in the midst of the others and join in worship, thankful that our church is so good. But does it follow that just because we are in a good church *we* are spiritual? We need another reality check.

Perhaps our pastor is a great man of God, and his sermons are *so* touching! We know him personally and he has come to our house and blessed us! Does association with a great man make us great? Reality check!

We say we have one or two spiritual gifts. When we 'minister' others are blessed! Do spiritual gifts make anyone spiritual? Or is it spiritual *fruit*

that make us spiritual? (Mt.7:22,23).

We are very active in Christian work, giving of our time and energy, and people may think much about us. But isn't it possible that we are hollow inside (1Co.13:3)?

Perhaps someone prophesied over us that we are someone special for God. Even assuming that it was genuine, think of King Saul or Judas, for example, who started with a great calling!

We can look back at some fantastic experiences we have had in the past, perhaps? We saw a dream or a vision or heard God speaking to us, or we have experienced a miraculous healing or answer to prayer. Do such experiences make us special, or are these merely signs of *God's* kindness? There may be other circumstances that tend to make us think that we are

someone special or great.

What is the basis of a good reality check?

What is really important is what *God* thinks about us, whether we are special or great. And what makes anyone special in God's eyes depends on his *life*, depending on how much he has taken part of the spirit of Christ. Jesus certainly appreciated great faith. But great faith leads to great lives, which can be seen, heard and touched by others around us (1Jn.1:1,2). That is the ultimate reality check.

Let us not deceive ourselves. Reality may hurt, but it is the truth. It is better to go through a painful surgery now than to suffer eternal loss. Just as we change our physical lifestyle when a medical test shows something wrong, shall we not mend our ways when the reality test of our lives gives a

warning?

Pointers along the way #171

The warning to Baruch

Baruch was an assistant to the Prophet Jeremiah, who wrote down on scrolls what Jeremiah dictated, and read it out in the temple and before the king. He may have had a scholarly mind and skills because Jeremiah entrusted him with noting down the words of God.

But apparently Baruch got a shock when he faced opposition from the king and other high officials for standing with Jeremiah and writing down his words (Je.45:3). He thought that God was not being fair to him, considering what he was doing for Him.

But God understood the root cause of Baruch's problems. He told Baruch through Jeremiah, "But you, are you seeking great things for yourself? Do not seek them; for behold, I am going to bring disaster on all flesh" (Je.45:5).

Do we hear this warning from God now and then? If we do, it shows us that we have not become totally dull of hearing, because this is something we need to hear often.

There is a saying in the world that people are generally seeking after one or more of three things - money, fame or pleasure. Even though we have been advised to seek God's kingdom and His righteousness first (Mt.6:33), and we know that we cannot serve God *and* money (or fame or pleasure) at the same time (Mt.6:24), we are drawn to these things in our heart many times. We know that the Bible says that all these worldly lusts will one day pass away (1Jn.2:17), just like God told Baruch. But yet we are tempted.

These lusts do not disappear even when we are seeking to serve God! We don't have to look at examples among Christian leaders but we can see in our

own lives how we are tempted to seek money, honour and pleasure also while we are serving God. The warning to Baruch specially refers to seeking honour (while he was serving God as a scribe for Jeremiah).

When we do well in Christian service, in whatever form, it is almost inevitable that we also become well known. People begin to appreciate what we are doing, and perhaps they tell us so too, or even praise us. We feel like basking in that glory, and think of the 'sacrifices' we have made in order to come to this place!

But that was not how Peter reacted when people admired him for healing a lame man. He told them immediately that it was not he who had made that man well, but Jesus (Ac.3:12). Paul cried out in horror that people should think that he was any greater than any other man because he had healed a man

in the name of Jesus (Ac.14:15). These apostles had the spirit of Christ in them who Himself had always sought to give the honour to the Father for what He did and said (Jn.5:30).

It may not be always possible to say such things openly. And it is not that we shouldn't feel thankful that God has blessed us. But shouldn't we always have the attitude in our heart of acknowledging God? If there is anything good in us, or we can do anything good, hasn't it come from God? (Jas.1:17). We ought to remember this constantly. Or are we perhaps secretly seeking great things for ourselves?

The mechanics of backsliding

Backsliding begins in the heart. If we think of it as going back to a 'worldly life', it would be like ignoring physical symptoms till we need surgery. Just like surgery is more painful, expensive, takes more time for recovery and leaves scars behind, backsliding which has come to the second level is more difficult.

Backsliding is a cooling down of the heart's fervour – in terms of love for God and men and also in terms of love for righteousness and hatred for sin. When things are fine between the Lord and us, these are the things that are on fire. We love God with all that is in us, and we are as concerned for others as we are for ourselves (Matt.22:37,39).

God's nature in us gives us a burning desire for holiness (Heb.1:9). Backsliding is when this fire begins to cool down.

It happens that for many of us, there has never been such a fire in our heart even though we have placed our trust in Jesus and are born again. In many cases this is because we have not yet experienced a 'full scope conversion'. Perhaps we have not heard the gospel properly and have only responded partially. For example, we have experienced a miraculous healing in our life and as a result we have come to place our trust in Jesus as the true and living God. But we have not understood much about sin, repentance, forgiveness, etc. God may have accepted us with a large heart, because He will never reject anyone who comes to Him (Jn.6:37). But we have not experienced a full scope

conversion yet. We may not be able then to detect backsliding of the heart, because our heart has not been hot in the first place.

Let us look at how this cooling off happens.

An attraction for the old pleasures

The devil reminds us about the sinful pleasures we have given up. After the children of Israel left Egypt, they longed for some of the food items in Egypt (Num.11:5). When we see some of our old friends enjoying themselves without any punishment from God, or when we are going through a rough time in our own life, we feel foolish to have given up such fun.

A weariness with continued self-denial

Denying ourselves constantly in order to obey God has made us 'tired' and we

look for relief by relaxing some of our standards.

A lack of trust in God's promises

When we don't get answers to some prayers, we begin to place less confidence on God's promises, and we begin to pray less.

A neglect of God's warnings

We have experienced God's mercy and patience so much that we think that His warnings don't really apply to us.

Disobedience to the Spirit's warning

As we neglect to obey the promptings of the Spirit, our sensitivity in spiritual things goes down.

As a result of all these, we begin to desire the things of the world in our heart. We begin to imagine how nice it would be if we could have the greatness and pleasures of this life.

Soon the direction of our life itself changes.

But all this begins secretly in our heart (Pr.4:23).

Pointers along the way #173

Generation to generation

Every generation hands over the baton to the next, and disappears after some time. This is the way God has planned for us in our life on earth, and we need to be able to face it gracefully. If we keep the right perspective with regards to our role in the continuing cycle of life, much heartache can be avoided (Ps.90:12).

When we are born into this world, we are under the care of our parents for a long time. Our parents make tremendous sacrifices to bring us up and take care of us. But a time comes in our life when we have to stand on our feet and make our own decisions. This becomes especially true when we get married, *leave* our parents, and begin to *cleave* to our spouses (Ge.2:24). Without imagining that we know better than our parents, but

recognising that they have a lot more experience than we, we still need to make this transition. Knowing our own lack of experience, we continue to look for advice from others including our parents.

This can be a painful process for both our parents and us, as both they and we have to let go of the psychological and social bonding that has been there between us. But this is as necessary as having to cut off the umbilical cord between the baby and the mother at the time of birth. We are naturally afraid to let go of the security that we used to enjoy of being under their protection, and they feel deprived of someone they have taken so much pains to care for. This is not easy to understand or accept unlike in the case of the umbilical cord.

As the cycle of life goes forward, there comes another time when we have to

let go of our children and they start their independent life. It is not easy to let go because we sincerely fear that they would get hurt without our protection. We may also feel insecure ourselves about the support that we might need from our children in our old age. But just as we received the baton from our previous generation, we have to hand it over to the new generation.

Cutting the umbilical cord can be done swiftly and once for all, but not so with this letting go of psychological and social bonding. This has to be done gracefully as well as tactfully. We must not let the anticipated pain hold us back, because this pain will lead to peace and understanding in the long run. The break need not be swift or harsh but stretched over a period of time, especially if the other side is not willing to let go.

Children need to love and honour their

parents. "Leaving" does not mean ceasing to care or shirking responsibilities, but only recognising and honouring the new realities and priorities.

Unwillingness for the hand over from generation to generation causes suffering for everyone. Parents clinging on to control amounts to a violation of boundaries, and children may feel frustrated because of the interference. But recognising that the transition is inevitable and for everyone's benefit, let us handle it wisely and graciously.

Believes all things and judges nothing?

A literal interpretation of the Bible without thinking about what is written can cause much practical damage. It may appear to be radical to say that we accept what the Bible says just as it is written. If this means that we don't try to make our own interpretation contrary to what the Bible says, or go beyond what is plainly written, it is fine. But if it means that we apply this as a rule which excludes thinking about what it really means or questioning ourselves to see if we have understood it properly, it can be dangerous.

The Bible says that love believes all things (1Co.13:7). Does this mean that we should never question anything? Actually the Bible says in another place that it is only the naive who believe everything! (Pr.14:15).

Obviously we can't take this verse about love literally, but we need to understand what it really implies. It may include things such as believing good things about people unless there is evidence to the contrary, hoping the best for people even though currently it is not going well with them, etc. This is the understanding we get when we think deeply about the meaning of the verse, which would not have been possible if we had tried to believe the verse just as it is written.

Many people think of "Judge not" (Mt.7:1) as if we should not analyse anything, or think or discuss about anyone in order to reach some conclusion about him. Jesus Himself said that we *should* judge righteously (Jn.7:24). It is clear in this case also that Jesus was implying something other than the plain meaning of the words "Judge not". I think He meant

that we should not pass opinions about others in a condemning, despising manner, as if we were perfect ourselves (Mt.7:3).

These are only two examples of how unrealistic our understanding of Scripture can be, if we do not make the effort to question and analyse what we believe. We become gullible, accepting every new teaching that comes up just because it is preached in a convincing manner (1Ti.1:7;2Ti.4:3). Satan uses "Judge not" and "believes all things" to keep us away from developing discernment.

What happens when we make such literal interpretation of the words of the Bible is that we think we are being very faithful to it. But when this is an unrealistic interpretation, we are actually not able to practice what we preach! But we continue to proclaim what we think we believe even though

it is not true in practice in our life, because we think we dare not question the word of God. Isn't this hypocritical, even if we are very sincere and our intentions are good?

God has given us the Holy Spirit to lead us into all the truth (Jn.16:13). When we go wrong in our understanding, He gives us a warning in our heart. It is good for us to pause there and try to see where we are going wrong. In that way we shall be protected from errors, and also be led into more and more of the truth.

Pointers along the way #175

The problem of Doubting Thomas

The apostle Thomas was not around when Jesus appeared to the other disciples after His resurrection. When they told him about it, he was

sceptical, saying that he would first see Jesus before he would believe it (Jn.20:24,25). Soon afterwards, Jesus appeared again, and He rebuked Thomas for his unbelief (v.27). This is how Thomas got his nickname as "Doubting Thomas".

Why did Jesus rebuke Thomas in this way? To understand this, let us look at another place in the Bible where an angel rebuked Zacharias (Lk.1:20). Zacharias and Elizabeth were an old couple who did not have any children, when the angel Gabriel came to Zacharias and told him that he was going to get a son. Zacharias found it difficult to believe, and got rebuked for his unbelief.

But amazingly, Mary, who became the mother of Jesus, who has similar doubts about how she could conceive as a virgin was not rebuked at all! (v.34).

The answer may lie in the differences in the context. Zacharias was an old and experienced priest of God, and he should not have doubted God when He sent an angel to speak to him. Mary was, on the contrary, a very young woman who did not have that kind of experience with God. She could be excused for having that kind of a question. But Zacharias shouldn't have reacted like that.

Wasn't it the same with Thomas? Having lived with Jesus for three and a half years, heard Him, seen Him and even worked with Him, Jesus expected him to trust Him. Jesus had told the disciples earlier that He would rise from the dead. Of course they did not understand at that time what He was saying, but after He had risen and the other disciples told Thomas about it, he should have believed, shouldn't he?

But to understand this incident as a

warning against a questioning mind is not right. I see some people saying that we must 'just believe' and not be a Doubting Thomas. One aspect of the image of God which we are created with is the ability to reason things out. In one place in the Bible God Himself exhorts us to go to Him and reason things out (Is.1:18). Isn't there a great importance given in the Bible for discernment? Will discernment come without the effort of reasoning things out? (He.5:14)

We have to admit that this is a time when deceptions are increasing, along with false signs and wonders. False teachers and prophets are also abounding. Don't we need to be discerning in our mind and heart in order to protect ourselves from being led astray? Let not a wrong understanding of "Doubting Thomas" keep us from developing discernment.

Pointers along the way #176

A successful man

All people want to be successful in whatever they do. There is nothing wrong with this, and God Himself wants us to succeed. But most often the success we seek for is in front of people, to get their recognition and applause. It is also related to comparison with others, so that we feel good when we are one notch better than the others. But soon another person comes along and outperforms us and our world comes crashing down!

We also tend to think of success in terms of 'quantity' most of the time. Our house must be bigger than all others in the neighbourhood, our clothes more expensive, our achievements more in number, we must be more widely known, etc. Someone has said that if one takes such considerations Jesus

was virtually a failure in His time. He was hardly known beyond the small region of Israel, He had only eleven followers, He didn't leave any institution or monument behind, He had written no book, etc. Yet now we know that He was the most successful of all people who ever lived.

From God's point of view, a successful man is one who accomplishes what He had sent him out for (Jn.17:4). For Jesus, this meant, for example, that He should train just eleven people who would train others after Him (v.20). That was His task, which He accomplished faithfully. He didn't have to get worried because the Pharisees were converting more people, because He had to do only what He had been asked.

God gives us abilities to accomplish what He has purposed for us, and He also gives us opportunities. If we think

any of these is limited in our case we must also remember that unlike what the man with the one talent thought, God doesn't expect anything more from us than what He has provided for us (Mt.25:26).

Success comes with faithfulness on our part. Depending on how earnest or lazy we are, our output could be thirty, sixty or hundred fold with however many talents we are entrusted with (Mt.13:23). And there is also the possibility that if we prove faithful with the little that we have, we might be given more responsibility to work with (Mt.25:29). Further, if we cleanse ourselves, God can also entrust us with more important tasks (2Ti.2:20,21).

What God tells us we should do in order to be successful is to take care to abide by every word that He has given us (Jos.1:7,8). If we take care to stay within the limits of His laws and

boundaries, our success may not be as impressive to the world as that of others who resort to all kinds of devious ways to attain success. But we will have the Lord with us and His rewards in eternity if not here. Many who are successful in the world and even in Christian work get there by careful manipulations, scheming and planning, flattery, stepping over others, using exaggerations and falsehood, seeking out powerful people who can work for them, etc. Is such success of any value in the final analysis?

Who is the final judge of our success? Is it not worth it all to hear from the Lord on the final day, "Good and faithful servant!"?

Pointers along the way #177

God who never changes

We know the verse that says Jesus is the same, yesterday, today and forever (He.13:8). But if we expect that He will always deal the same way with us as He has done with someone else or ourselves some time in the past, we will get disappointed. That is not what the verse says. God's dealings with us may change, depending on several things like what we really need (according to God's wisdom), the particular stage of our spiritual growth, how much God thinks we can bear to be tested, etc. So what was good for someone else may not be what we need, nor is what was good for us last year the best for us right now. What the verse says that Jesus, as a Person, remains the same.

In other words, His *character* is always unchanging. He will never stop

being loving, compassionate, merciful, tender, patient, kind, trustworthy, true to His word, dependable, etc. He will always love truth and hate sin. There will never be any trace of deceit, crookedness, vengeance, malice, selfishness, etc., in Him. He is also absolutely righteous, just and holy, hating hypocrisy and guile, but forgiving freely who repent and go to Him.

When we get to know what kind of a Person God is, we also get to see that what we experience of Him is largely dependent on us. If we seek Him, we shall find Him (Jas.4:8). We can be as close to Him as we really want to be. But if we deny Him He will also deny us, even though He will delay long in patience before He actually does that (2Ti.2:12). If we try to play games with Him, He can play smarter with us (Ps.18:26).

While this is generally so, there is also an unpredictability and inscrutability about God and a mystery about His dealings with us. There are so many different facets to God's nature and depth to His character that we as human beings can never fully know what He would do at any time. From our point of view this can be quite frustrating, and this is the cause for many to give up their faith in Him. But if we hold together both sides of the truth, that He is unchanging in Himself and also that He will never cease to surprise us with His ingenious ways to do good to us, we can learn to survive. We can survive those periods of life when He *seems* to be far away, if we remember that it only *seems* so, and that He is very much there with us even though we cannot see Him.

Sometimes it does look as if He has turned against us, by the way things are

working for us. But the actual fact remains that He is still for us and with us. He has not changed, even though our circumstances, our experience and the explanations from our mind appear to tell us the opposite. Job thought God had become his enemy, and even Jesus at the peak of His sufferings could not understand what the Father was doing to Him. But when the time of testing is past and we are allowed to look back, we see God's hands and purposes. Let us store up this knowledge to help us in our next time of testing.

Pointers along the way #178

Power is of God

Sometimes in a euphoric mood that follows the recognition of the authority that God has given us as His children, some of us tend to forget what we are, where we have come from and what we will be, and imagine foolishly high

thoughts about ourselves. Some preachers have proclaimed that they are 'gods' or 'little gods', and some have even gone to the extent of saying, "When I read in the Bible where he [Jesus] says, 'I Am,' I just smile and say, 'Yes, I Am, too!'"

Now most of us may never say such things. We know we are not God, or even gods. We *are* children of God, by *His* sovereign choice of grace (1Jn.3:1). God has created something new in us, and we have been born again in our spirit (1Pe.1:3). However, we are created beings with plenty of limitations in every direction. We cannot create anything like God can, and we cannot do anything supernatural *without* God. We are not God.

Yet it is true that God has given us exceptional authority *in Jesus' name*. We have been given authority over *all* the power of Satan and his demons

(Lk.10:19). We have authority to forgive sins (Jn.20:23). We may bring healing or even raise people from the dead. But in all these cases, the authority is in the name of Jesus and not in ourselves. It is as if we are cashing cheques that Jesus has signed.

Then again, while we have been given such authority, we don't have the *power* in ourselves to do any such thing. We are like traffic policemen who have the *authority* given to him by the government to stop a heavy truck on the road by putting up his hands, but has no *power* even to stop a car physically. In other words, our authority comes from God (the government) by being His children, but our power is only that of a frail creature.

Suppose this traffic policeman goes into a hospital and tells a surgeon how to do his job, he would not be taken seriously. That is because a hospital is

outside the policeman's domain of authority. We too have our domain of authority given to us by God. That is called 'the will of God'. When we pray *in Jesus' name* but according to our own will, there is no authority for that prayer. Actually, to *pray in Jesus' name* does not mean that we just add the words "In Jesus' name" at the end of our prayer, but that we pray according to the will of God. When we pray according to God's will, *then* we get what we pray for (1Jn.5:14,15).

So we have no power to make anything happen, by our prayers, words of confession, fasting, or anything we do. Only God has that power. He can say, "Let there be light", and light will come. But however forcefully or positively we may speak anything, nothing will happen, unless God asks us to speak those specific words. When we speak what God tells us, then

it is *according to His will.*

Pointers along the way #179

A weak man's covenant

God made a covenant through Moses, and then replaced it with a *new* covenant through Jesus (He.8:7,13). It was not an afterthought on God's part. He had not made a mistake with the first covenant and then tried to correct it with the new one. He had planned them both to come one after the other in phases, because there was something He wanted to teach us through these phases.

The first covenant was characterised by the ten commandments, with their "You shall" and "You shall not". God made the covenant saying that if Israel obeyed the commandments He would bless them, and if they disobeyed them they would be cursed (De.28:1,2,15). The history of the people of Israel shows that they failed miserably to keep their part of the covenant. In a

sense, the purpose of this old covenant was to show Israel (and us) that no one is really able to find acceptance with God by trying to keep all of God's commandments (Ro.3:20). All come short.

The old covenant was an interim measure till the people were ready to receive the new. The Bible says that it served as a tutor till the heir became of age to receive his inheritance (Ga.3:24). Now God made the new covenant for people who had failed to keep the first covenant (He.8:8,9). It means that God made this covenant knowing fully well that people are not able to keep His commandments. In other words, if we recognise that we can't manage without God's help we are ready for this covenant! This is the lesson that God tried to teach through the failure of the old covenant. He takes it on Himself to equip us to keep

His commandments. He will give us new hearts and write His laws upon them (v.10).

When Jesus made this covenant, He shed His blood for our sins. He suffered and died in our place. When we come to Him in repentance and faith, God washes away our sins and accepts us as 'righteous'. This does not mean, as some people imagine, that since Jesus has kept the commandments we don't have to keep them. That is not true. He has paid for our sins and taken away our judgment. But now He enables us to keep His commandments by giving us a new heart that loves His commandments and also strength to keep them, so that it would be no longer a burden for us to keep them (1Jn.5:3). Now we don't have to keep the commandments *in order to find acceptance*, but we keep them because we love God (Jn.14:21).

The good news of the new covenant is not only that God will be merciful to our sins (He.8:12), but also that He will write His laws on our hearts (v.10). Remember this is for those who have failed! We don't have to be handicapped by our past failures and think that we may as well give up! This is the covenant where *God* will work in us both to will and to do what pleases Him (Php.2:12,13). How much we will receive will depend on how much we want, how much we believe and how much we seek Him.

Pointers along the way #180

When we can't understand

There is no Bible scholar who understands it all, or who can be absolutely certain about everything he understands. Many times it is not just that we can't understand something, but also it looks as though something in the

Bible can't be true when we look at our experience. This poses a dilemma to those of us who believe in the inspiration of the word of God (2Ti.3:16). We know it *has to be* true, but we aren't able to figure out *how* it could be true. Some people take a strict posture and refuse to face up to the sense of unreality that strikes them on their face (Ro.3:4). Their sincere desire to glorify God is clear, but it doesn't stop the sense of unreality that gnaws inside them.

I am not thinking of problems which can be attributed to errors in copying from old manuscripts or in translation, which are comparatively easy to understand. But think of how God is declared to be a *a very present help* in times of trouble, when we can't see Him anywhere (Ps.46:1). If we call on His name He has promised to answer us, and we can't seem to get any

answer (Ps.91:15). Such occasions seem to strike at the very roots of our faith. It looks as if He has failed us at the very time when we needed Him the most. We *know* it can't be so, but we just can't seem to understand what is happening.

One comforting thing is that even the godliest of persons, who lived closely with God, have had many such experiences, *and* come through! So it is not that just because our faith is being tested we have to give up. But at the same time these occasions are not easy to handle at all. Most often they call for much struggle, seeking God and searching our hearts. We learn many valuable lessons through such experiences and our faith comes out stronger (Jas.1:2,3,12).

Another way to approach this is to stoically say that after all we are only human, and we can't be expected to

understand it all. This is fine as far as it goes. But it doesn't go far enough. This can satisfy us if we are sitting in an armchair and writing essays, but not when we are in the midst of spiritual storms.

Perhaps we can learn something from the way we learn subjects like maths. We begin by counting, and then go on to arithmetic, geometry, algebra, trigonometry, calculus, and so on. Each lesson is based on what we have already learned and become certain about. If we find calculus difficult we don't begin to question our multiplication tables!

Even in our spiritual battles, when we can't understand something that is happening to us, we don't have to think that what we have learned earlier is wrong. We don't need to question if there *is* a God, etc. We can tell ourselves, "OK, I can't understand

what's going on. But I *know* God loves me. I *know* He has forgiven me, I *know* I am His child, I *know* He will bring me through", etc. "I don't know many things, but *this* I know!"

Pointers along the way #181

Moving through life changes

Among all the created beings, man has the longest period of dependency on his parents. This is because man alone is created in God's image, and he needs a lot of development in body, mind and spirit before he can really 'stand on his own feet.' He needs not only physical nurturing from the parents, but also psychological and spiritual help to guide his paths towards stability. Psychologists have identified that we go through several crises in life as we transit from one phase of development to the next one. Think of an infant becoming a toddler,

then going to school and college, starting work, getting married, parenting children, watching them leave home, retirement, etc. Each transition involves changes in our mental makeup, from what we have got used to in the past stage to what is required in the next. The longest transition period is the teenage years when children grow up into adulthood. Each transition brings a change in responsibilities and requires learning new techniques. We need to mentally and emotionally adapt ourselves to new circumstances and situations.

There is a crisis in each transition and adaptation is painful, because we have to give up some pattern which we have got used to and we felt safe in. Change requires effort, gives us more responsibility, and also poses a risk of making mistakes. Wise people know that these changes are inevitable, and

learn quickly to adapt to them. But many problems develop when we fail to adapt ourselves mentally, even as our bodies and circumstances go ahead without waiting for us! Things become more difficult for us if we demand that *others* have to make the changes and not we!

God's provision for us in this matter is that He has given us His word as a manual of wisdom and knowledge, the Holy Spirit as our resident Teacher and also many around us who have gone on in life before us and who have valuable lessons to pass on to us. We can also learn much from observing others. But it is one thing to understand what changes need to be made, and another to actually make them.

No one has gone through life without making mistakes. Just as a baby learns how to walk with a few falls, we also learn many times through mistakes. The

fear of making mistakes should not stop us. We can learn from them and do better next time.

Life is hardly ever 'fair' to us! We suffer not only from our mistakes but also from those of many others. But one thing that can comfort us is that there are many others also who are facing situations like us. God will also make sure that we are not tested beyond our ability, by controlling what others can do to us and also by giving us extra help when we need it (1Co.10:13). Without letting ourselves get hindered by attitudes of complaint and resentment, we need to work out *our own* salvation (Php.2:12). In this context this means that irrespective of what others ought to do, we should concentrate on making our own adaptations.

As we get past one transition after another, we can also help others who

are finding them tough. This makes our own struggles worthwhile (2Co.1:4).

Pointers along the way #182

The power of repentance

We know that both Peter and Judas felt bad after their denial and betrayal of Jesus. Both felt great remorse, but only Peter repented. To feel remorse is to feel bad about the wrong we have done. But repentance is much more than that. It is to feel so bad that we determine not to do it again (2Co.7:9-11). We mustn't assume just because we feel bad about something wrong we have done, that we have repented.

One of the reasons why we don't make as much progress as we could is because of a lack of genuine repentance. When we fall we feel bad. We may even confess it to God thinking afterwards that we have been forgiven (1Jn.1:9). But isn't it possible that we have just glossed over our sin, and tried to take advantage of the mercy of God!

When we truly repent, we will want to set things right. We are sorry that we have failed the Lord and we don't want to let that happen again. When we confess our sins, we also tell Him how sorry we are that we have grieved His heart and brought dishonour to His name before people, angels and demons. We earnestly ask Him for help - wisdom and grace - so that we can overcome when we are tempted the next time. If we have hurt others by our sin we want to make amends as far as possible. This may mean an apology and making up for any practical loss we have caused to them.

God knows it when our repentance is real and not just from our lips (Is.29:13). Even though we can't fool God, we can easily fool ourselves. One of the reasons why we continue to fool ourselves is that God doesn't punish us as soon as we sin (Ecc.8:11).

We feel everything must be fine. But the fact that we are not getting to experience a more intimate fellowship with God, being changed more into the likeness of Christ, becoming wiser in our dealings with ourselves and others, getting better understanding of God's ways, etc., could indicate that something is blocking our progress. This 'something' could very well be a lack of true repentance.

One healthy step on the path of spiritual life is to repent when we recognise that something that we have done in the past was wrong. It doesn't matter if it was done years ago, everyone has forgotten about it, it has now gone beyond correction or we think there is no practical gain in going over it at this point. However we may think about it, repentance is still *the right thing to do* regarding sin (Mt.3:15). A genuine act of repentance

helps us to humble ourselves in the sight of God (Jas.4:10), draw near to God (v.8), seek for mercy and grace (He.4:16), set our affection on things above (Col.3:2), renew our determination to change (2Co.7:11), etc. Will not God then begin to exalt us (lift us up), draw near to us, give us greater strength for the future, etc.?

Isn't it also good for us to take time now and then to sit quietly before the Lord and to humble ourselves in an attitude of repentance? Won't our 'worship' also become more meaningful along with repentance?

Pointers along the way #183

Acceptance and growth

A sense of rejection is one of the most powerful factors that hinder personal, social and spiritual growth. We crave for acceptance. But since most people

offer only a performance based acceptance, our self esteem remains very unsteady as long as we lean on that. Those who suffer from severe rejection resort to all types of psychological escape routes to try and preserve their self esteem. They dare not look at any fault or lack in themselves for fear that it might lead to a crash of their self esteem. They justify themselves, fix the blame on others, pull down others in order to look better in comparison, divert attention, etc., in order to avoid having to look at their faults. But the question is how we can grow if we cannot first see a need for growth, and how we can see our need unless we face up to our lacks or faults.

To the backsliding people of Israel, God's instruction was, "Only acknowledge your sin" (Je.3:13). That was to be the starting point for their

recovery. To encourage them to do that, God kept telling them about how He really loved them and what all He wanted to do for them. He knew that only if they were convinced that they were 'safe' in His love they would open up to Him. That is what we can bank on - His mercy, forgiveness and acceptance - when we go to Him.

God's acceptance is unique, because He is infinitely God! There is no one else who is infinite in mercy, kindness, compassion, patience and love, and who can accept us *just as we are* (Is.1:18). God will be unflinching in His acceptance even when He sees us fail, even though He does not accept our sin or say that it is fine. We human beings find it difficult to love the sinner while hating his sin. God has to give us His grace to do that. But for Him it is automatic because that is His nature!

God's acceptance of us is unconditional (Je.31:3;He.13:5). The sacrifice of His Son takes full care of our sins, so that this acceptance does not get shaken by our sins (Ep.1:5,6;1Jn.2:2). It is not that we can therefore take sin lightly (Ro.6:15). But the more we experience true grace the less we want to sin. Logic cannot fully explain how this can be, but still this is one of the glorious truths that we can enjoy by faith.

When we go to God after we have fallen, we wonder how He could love us when we know our sin has grieved Him. But God does that. The best of people will disappoint us because they will find it difficult to accept us if they know we have sinned. Therefore we prefer to wear a mask and pretend that we are good. But with God we can be open and still be certain about His acceptance. This is something we

receive by faith, and then we become more convinced about it through experience. The more we get to know this, the more free we are to acknowledge all our sins and needs before Him, to get forgiveness and cleansing. In this process we become closer to Him, trust Him more, and also sin less and less. That is growth.

Thinking through temptations

Our mind is the battleground where temptations are fought through, and our thoughts are what are exchanged in the battle. The attack comes in the form of thoughts that are propelled by the desires in our flesh (Jas.1:14). These thoughts may come from our own mind as a result of associations with similar situations in the past. They may be ideas that are whispered into our minds by Satan or his evil spirits in the same way as he did with Jesus (Mt.4:3), or they may come from other people. When this attack comes, the temptation begins.

At this point it is still only a temptation and not sin. Just because we have been tempted, we have not become defiled. Jesus was also tempted in all points and that did not make Him a sinner

(He.4:15). It becomes sin only when we yield our heart to it, by doing what the temptation suggests or by enjoying the sinful pleasures we get by letting imaginations run in the direction of the temptation (Jas.1:15). But if we stop the temptation right there, and refuse to yield to it, we become victors in the battle.

Most temptations are simple in nature, enticing us to do something that we know to be wrong. To sin is to do it, and to overcome is to resist doing it. But there are also temptations that are not so straightforward, where we are not sure what we should do. In such cases we may need to spend a long time waiting on the Lord, seeking to know what He would have us to do. When Jesus prayed three times in Gethsemane asking the Father whether He really wanted Him to go to the cross or there was another way to

achieve the Father's goal without having to go through the suffering, it was this kind of temptation. The agony of this temptation was so great that Jesus sweated drops of blood during the process. It is comforting for us to know that even though Jesus took so long to decide or prayed the same prayer three times it did not amount to sin.

Another kind of temptation is where we know in our heart what is right and wrong, but we are too weak to reject the sinful suggestion straightaway. The attractions are so great that we waver in making a decision. We keep hoping that perhaps it would be all right if we give in, trying to justify ourselves or imagining that God may agree to it just this time. We know deep in our heart that it would be wrong to give in, but we are not spiritually strong enough to quit on the spot. Of course this is not

the best way to deal with temptations, but this is a part of growing up. I suggest that God would consider it 'not sin' as long as we are fighting against the temptation, and that it would become sin only if we give in. He knows that we are weak, and that we are struggling with the temptation. It is this struggle that marks the strength of temptation.

Our ultimate goal is to overcome in temptation. Even if the battle takes long and we are tossed to and fro, our final victory will be sweet. Even if we lose some battles, we should aim at winning the war.

Pointers along the way #185

Love that harms?

Much has been written about how the world has given such undue attention to erotic love that for most people the

word 'love' has come to be associated only with that kind of love. But the fact is that even the ordinary love between people is misunderstood so much that much harm is being done in the name of love.

Think of parents who 'love' their children and give them whatever they ask for, because they don't want them to cry or throw tantrums. These parents think that it is love, when actually the children are fooling them into giving them what they want. Instead of training the children to say 'No' to what is bad for them, the parents are strengthening the children's selfishness and guile. What about giving children 'freedom' to develop their own personality, without guiding them or drawing boundaries for them? These children who are born in sin like all of us can only become more established in sinfulness.

When our 'love' for someone becomes strong, we don't realise that our expectations from them also become stronger. We feel that since we have given them so much love they are obliged to do things for us in return! We may even make sacrifices for them hoping that this would obligate them to do things for us too. Sooner or later we would become disappointed because no one can meet all our expectations. It is fine for us to love them, but it is not love to demand love in return. There is a freedom and spontaneity in genuine love.

Why do we feel jealous when our 'best friends' become friendly with someone else also? We seem to think that our friends have to love us exclusively and have to be available at our beck and call.

What is the common factor in all this kind of love? Selfishness. This is the

very opposite of what real love is. If we really love someone, we will be always seeking to do what is good for *him*, rather than for ourselves. God so loved the world that He *gave* in order to do *us* good (Jn.3:16). And what a lot He gave, so that we could be saved from our sin and hell and enjoy our life with Him forever! But just think how the very opposite of love is masquerading in the name of love and fooling a whole lot of us!

It is unnatural for us to think of others as being more important than ourselves (Php.2:3). By nature we all seek our own (Ro.3:12). That is why this kind of love that would lay down one's life for others is something that we can receive only from God (Jn.15:13;Ro.5:5). But God can help us to partake of this love if we let Him, and we seek for it. When we acknowledge how selfish and self-

centred we are, and seek God to transform us, He will begin to work in us. Little by little we receive new attitudes and affections.

It is not that we will cease to be selfish and become loving altogether. Selfishness is so rooted in us that we will finally be free only when we receive our glorified bodies in heaven. But let us keep seeking God and going in that direction.

Whatever happened to conviction of sins?

We may be quick to acknowledge that we are not perfect, and some of us may even appear to take some pride in it! But if this truth has really hit us we would not be so quick to proclaim it. Then we would be unhappy to realise that we are doing many things wrong, and that in many cases we don't even know whether we are doing right or wrong. It affected Paul so much that he felt wretched (Ro.7:21-24). He was not satisfied because he was the top apostle of those days who was setting up many churches, writing parts of Scripture, doing fantastic miracles, etc. He felt wretched because he was doing many things wrong. But his wretchedness was not the kind that discouraged or depressed him. Knowing he was imperfect and that he

was only going to be imperfect while on earth he pressed on to perfection (Php.3:13;Ac.24:16).

It is easy to see that we will not really go after becoming more and more perfect if first of all we are not aware of how imperfect we are and secondly if that does not bother us. In a sense we are forced to admit we are imperfect because there are many around us who inform us about that! But it is not sure if we feel wretched about it.

A great change has taken place in Christianity in our days so that to feel 'wretched' is not acceptable now. We are so constantly being reminded about how there is no condemnation for us now, how we have been accepted by grace just as we are, what our position in Christ is, how unconditional God's love is towards us, etc., that there is practically no place for conviction of sin! Certainly we need that emphasis.

But any acknowledgment of 'need' is considered to be 'negative' and to be avoided at any cost! We are, they say, to preserve our sense of acceptance by rejecting all thoughts that even hint that we might be lacking something! Many preachers have stopped talking about hell, judgment, repentance, etc., because they would not like to hurt anyone's fine feelings! As the Bible says, an enemy has done this.

When we do wrong we should feel bad about it, shouldn't we? We should not be pushing aside such feelings of conviction before we have dealt with our sin by confessing it to God and setting it right with people (1Jn.1:9). God's unconditional love for us does not mean that He is blind to our sins. His acceptance does not mean that He tolerates sin. God hates sin, even if it is His beloved children who are committing it. The wages of sin is still

death, and if we do not claim forgiveness by acknowledging and confessing it to God, it will still separate us from Him (Ro.6:23;Is.59:1,2).

On one hand we don't want to get discouraged and feel hopeless because we have fallen into sin. On the other hand we don't want to treat it lightly (Ro.6:15). We must protect ourselves from falling into either of these two cliffs and learn to walk in the middle. We need this balance in doctrine as well as in experience. Let us press on even while acknowledging failure.

Pointers along the way #187

Responding to criticism

Our built in psychological response to threatening situations is to either fight or flee. If we think we can manage to overcome whatever or whoever is

causing us problems we choose to fight, and otherwise we flee. This fighting or fleeing is basically aimed at preserving our status quo. We don't like to be forced to make any changes in our life and so we respond in ways that can hopefully avoid changes.

For example, when we face criticism we try to defend ourselves by insisting that it is not true or justified, or by saying that the critic has more things to deal with in his own life. This is 'fighting.' We don't want to take that criticism and we are doing all we can to deny it. On the other hand if the criticism strikes us to the core and there is no way to deny it we can get into a depression over it and pity ourselves. Both times we are refusing to face the criticism and see if there is any need to make changes to our life.

We Christians who acknowledge that we are sinful and imperfect should

deal with criticism differently, shouldn't we? We say we want to become more and more like Jesus and admit that we are far from that goal. But what we do in actual practice is to try and avoid every chance of finding out what exactly is wrong with us and what we can do about it.

Is this because admitting our faults might take away or crack the foundation of our self-righteousness on which we are resting? If recognition or admission of our faults or lacks can cause our self esteem to crumble we must realise that our foundation of grace is very weak or absent even if we profess the doctrine of grace in theory. Let us take a look at one incident in the life of Jesus.

Shortly before His time for betrayal and death Jesus took a basin of water and a towel and proceeded to wash His disciples' feet. The Bible says that

He did this "knowing that the Father had given all things into His hands, and that He had come forth from God and was going back to God" (Jn.13:3). In other words He knew who He was, what His relationship was with the Father, and what His task was. He was sure of Himself. This permitted Him to have enough 'margin' to step down and humble Himself before the disciples without any threat to His self esteem.

When we find it difficult to admit our faults it shows that we are not secure. Hasn't God accepted us just as we are, 'warts and all,' when we put our trust in Jesus? (Ro.5:8). Aren't we His children? When He chose us before the foundation of the world He knew what sinners we would be. Is any sin that we see a surprise to Him? Isn't the blood of Jesus sufficient to forgive the sins of the whole world? (1Jn.2:2). Then why are we afraid that admitting some sin

might shake the foundation of our salvation?

But when we know with what large heart God has accepted us, we are also able to honestly accept our failures and go on to change our ways (Je.31:3).

Pointers along the way #188

Learning things first hand

Psychologists have discovered that we learn most of our behaviour patterns in our childhood itself, by observing our parents or others around us. Since we do not have much sense in those days to judge things for ourselves, we simply imitate what we see, and these become deeply ingrained in our psyche. Unfortunately, even for those of us who can think that we have had the best of parents the fact is that they, just like us, were imperfect people, who did not always know the best things to do or tell us. And others who have had a troubled childhood have much more baggage from their past. Isn't it necessary for us to think for ourselves now, understand whether we are behaving in the best possible way, and make changes wherever necessary?

Certainly times have also changed from the days of our parents, and what was 'good' for them is not necessarily what we can do now. I am *not* talking about the eternal truths, values and principles that we have from the Bible, but practical things of daily life. We know that our music, clothes, hairstyles, etc., are different. Also our jobs are different, as are vocabulary, communications, money transactions, travel, food habits, etc. Each of us has to keep adjusting ourselves to the changing times, within the boundaries of godly values, if we are not to be out of sync. Though 'change' always takes thought and effort, it is something we cannot afford to neglect.

The parents' hearts may ache to see their children take different paths than what they are used to. But godly parents will rejoice when their children come around to the place of

maturity even if they have had some struggles on the way (3Jn.1:4). Wise parents will allow their children to be different, as long as they know that the children's hearts are right, even if their heads may be a bit confused for a short while as they struggle with the choices.

Think of the situation in churches too. Each of us has to learn for ourselves what it is to trust and follow the Lord. It is not good for us to accept what someone else teaches without examining and understanding it for ourselves. A wise pastor will encourage individual development of those in the church (and also as a group) because they know that when they grow up they would be assets to the church.

Going along with the crowd without any thought as to what God wants, is what most people choose as a compromise, because this saves them

the trouble of thinking for themselves. For those who commit themselves to obeying God in everything, life can become a big struggle at times because we are unsure of what we should do. But this struggle pays much at the end because we become wiser and more mature as we exercise discernment (He.5:14). The testing of our faithfulness will lead us to the 'crown of life' (Jas.1:12). Such people learn how to stand on their own feet with God and walk with Him, and not be dependent on others. Finally they will be able to help others too.

Pointers along the way #189

The rod and the staff

God hasn't compared us to sheep without meaning. Sheep are some of the dumbest animals on earth who keep going astray. They get a sniff here or there, and off they go. They can also

eat without control till they die. How like us! God says that we *all* go astray like sheep (Is.53:6). Perhaps we can say that all of us, like sheep, *keep going astray*. We stray from our resolutions, and we overindulge ourselves so easily (Ro.7:15). Isn't it good to have our Shepherd around, who watches over each one of us individually, and warns, corrects and brings us back to the right path when we go astray?

Our Shepherd has both a rod and a staff. With the rod He disciplines us. It may be a warning tap, or it may be a severe scourging, depending on how far we have gone astray. He does this in real life through giving us a warning in our spirit or a word in our mind (Is.30:21), or through adversity of some kind that forces us to stop and consider where we are going. When we come across some adversity in our life let us

seek God to see if He is trying to get our attention or say something to us, before we start resisting the devil! Someone has said that adversity is like God shouting to us, when we have not listened to His whispers.

We don't naturally like the rod, because it is painful. But the more we understand the love of God behind it, the more we will be at peace with it and the more we can handle it in a mature way. Think of what would have happened if the Lord had not stopped us in our track!

Sometimes we may think that our punishment is more than we deserve. We may also think that we have learned our lesson and still the punishment is lingering. First of all, discipline is not the same as punishment. The punishment for our sin is death, and that is not what the Lord is giving to us. He is disciplining us

through hardship and sometimes through having to reap the painful consequences of our sins, so that we would learn to treat sin more seriously in future. This is the same reason why discipline lingers on, till God thinks that we have been trained enough (He.12:4-11).

The shepherd's staff is used to pull back sheep that are going astray and also to lead them in the right direction. Aren't we happy that our Shepherd also uses His staff with us? Sometimes He closes doors that would have led us in paths that He has not planned for us (even though they may be right for others). We may think that closed doors are signs of God's displeasure. But when we are able to look back over the years how glad we will be to see that God prevented us from going in those directions! In the same way, sometimes He opens special doors for

us that few others are walking into. That is because He has different plans for us.

"Your rod and Your staff, they comfort me" (Ps.23:4). Isn't it truly comforting to know that God is always there with His rod and staff to protect and guide us? Even when we think we are walking through the valley of the shadow of death, this knowledge really comforts us.

Pointers along the way #190

These Christians!

Some 'great' men of the world have said, "I admire Christ. It's Christians I can't bear with." Or, "These Christians talk great things, but their lives are nowhere near." Of course it is a rebuke at us Christians, meaning that we are not good representatives of our Lord. Each of us bears the blame because the world has been disappointed with us many times, to see us behave just like or sometimes worse than non-Christians around us. Every genuine Christian is burdened with the knowledge that our lives are always coming short of what they should be (Ro.7:15-24). But at the same time we must also remember that when these 'great' men make statements like these there is usually more behind it than what appears on the surface.

Even though it sounds as if they admire

Christ, they are not willing to receive Him or accept all that He did or said. They are in fact rejecting Him by saying that even though they like certain things that He did and said, they don't like some other things He said. For example very few are willing to agree that Jesus is the *only* way to the Father (Jn.14:6;Ac.4:12). If anyone believes this, it would revolutionise his life and perspective altogether. Those who 'admire' Christ don't want to admit that they need to be born again (Jn.3:3,5). They think that they are already good enough. In many ways like this, these people do not want to 'accept' Christ for what He claimed to be. They admire His words and acts of love, mercy, kindness, non-violence, self-sacrifice, etc., but they do not accept Him as the Son of God or the only Saviour of the world. It is really not the Christians who have put them off, but Christ Himself!

The claims of Christ prick their conscience. They don't want to face up to the pain of acknowledging that they are sinners who need a Saviour. They don't want to give up some of their sinful pleasures or sinful means of gain. Rather than admit these facts they have found themselves a respectable excuse!

Yes, we Christians have our faults, many of them. But we are individually responsible for them. No one can blame Christ for everything that His followers do wrong. If anyone wants, he himself has the opportunity to follow Christ and demonstrate a better life than what other Christians have managed to! Instead, people are using the faults of frail human beings like us as an excuse for rejecting the Son of God who lived without any fault!

On the other hand, these critics fail to take into account the innumerable

examples of Christians who have blessed the world around them with their lives! In fact, one of the reasons why many people have come to Christ is that they saw and marvelled at the lives of some of His followers. Even societies where Christians are a minority have been much blessed through the sacrifices of these Christians. Let us Christians continue in such good works. One day the world will acknowledge our God who gave us such hearts to love Him and our neighbours (Mt.5:16).

Pointers along the way #191

Natural vs. spiritual needs

We all have both types of needs, natural and spiritual. But since we are living on the Earth with earthly bodies we tend to be more aware of natural, earthly needs than the spiritual. Spiritual needs have far deeper roots.

If they are not met, they can affect even our earthly lives and not just our life after death. For example, if we hold resentment in our heart towards someone it can cause us physical and mental harm too, like ulcers, migraine, arthritis, insomnia, etc. On the spiritual level we stand the risk of not getting our own sins forgiven (Mt.6:14,15). This can affect not only life after death but also the blessings from the Father here on Earth.

But as materialism takes a stronger hold on the people of the world, it also tends to influence the way we Christians live. Our prayers tend to focus on our material and physical needs. If we look at the prayer requests pouring in we see that 99% of them are about earthly needs. Now it would be altogether wrong and unrealistic to say that we should not pray about our natural needs. Jesus recognised that we

have need of them (Mt.6:32). He also taught us specifically to pray for our daily bread, which represents all the things that we need for our life on Earth (v.11). On the other hand Jesus mentioned that 'life' is more important than food and clothes (v.25). We can understand it from what He said about the folly of having great wealth in the world (and all the fame and pleasure associated with it) and losing out on our soul (Mt.16:26). It is a matter of what is more important. We have to be concerned about our natural and spiritual needs, in the right proportion and with the right priority (Mt.6:33).

Our being consists of our body, soul (consisting of our mind, will, feelings and personality) and spirit, with the spirit being the deepest part of it. If our spirit is healthy and prospering, certainly it will bless our soul and body too. How foolish it is to take so

much care of our body and neglect the root issues in our spirit! Many people are now becoming health conscious and take much pain to eat and exercise well. Many are also looking to self-help gurus to learn about managing their thoughts and feelings and becoming 'successful.' Relatively fewer people, even among Christians, are taking care of the health and prosperity of their spirit.

Many Christians seem to think that once they have accepted Jesus as their Saviour they have a ticket to heaven. Then they work out for themselves a 'minimum' plan involving church attendance, reading the Bible, giving money, etc., and think that once these requirements are settled they can focus on their earthly lives like everyone else! What about growing in the spirit, being filled with the Spirit, bearing fruit, receiving and ministering

spiritual gifts etc.? In this way we not only become better people but also more useful to others. Isn't it every Christian's heritage? Won't it also bring a blessing to our natural lives (Pr.3:7,8).

Pointers along the way #192

Living in fear?

Calamities! This is what we hear about from all the media reports, and it is no wonder that we are tempted to get scared of what can happen to us. We figure out that if such things are happening constantly our turn cannot be far away. But this logic is all wrong because we have not factored God into our picture. He has promised us that even if calamities are striking all around us, He is going to protect us (Ps.91:1-7). He is making a distinction between us and the people around us, because we have made Him our refuge (v.9). Many things may happen to others, but He will see to it that nothing touches us. We can believe that.

Jesus said that many calamities are going to take place in the world in the end times, and that people are going to get scared of what is likely to happen

to them (Lk.21:26). But not we, because we have the Lord as our refuge. *We don't have to fear* even when all we can see on the TV and in the newspapers is one calamity after another. God says that even if *ten thousand* may fall at our side we don't have to be afraid. That's because God has made us His own, and has taken the responsibility of watching over us without even dozing off a bit (Ps.121:4)! Jesus said in connection with the end times that not even a hair on our head will be harmed (Lk.21:18).

How does this actually work, especially when we know Job and other godly men in our days also who have actually suffered calamities? Didn't Jesus also say that in this world we would have trouble and that some of us may even get killed for His name (Jn.16:33;Lk.21:16)?

The fact is that trouble is the exception rather than the rule. As a rule, God watches over us to protect us from all harm. But once in a while He allows some trouble to come across our path in order to test us or to train us (Jas.1:2,3;1Pe.1:6,7). Satan has to get permission from God to touch us. But God keeps His hand on the control so that things do not become too hard for us (1Co.10:13). Even when He allows us at times to suffer hardship, He will make sure that it will finally produce some good result for us (Ro.8:28). Even if we feel that the floods are getting to go over us or the fire is becoming too hot, we can be sure that He is there with us, holding us in His arms and keeping everything under control (Is.43:12). When we go through tough times along with Him, He will cause us to become more like Him and have better fellowship with Him.

But times of special hardship are usually rare for children of God. He watches over more lovingly and carefully than any earthly father. God does have some special people like Job who are taken through real trouble. But that too happens only for a finite period. We can look to the future with confidence in our Father. He is planning for our well being and prosperity and not for calamity (Je.29:11). We don't have to live in fear as if some calamity is just around the corner! That kind of idea is from the devil, and he is known to be a liar. When God is with us, why should we fear?

Pointers along the way #193

**Only a righteous life can
make us happy**

We may go to one extreme or another, because it takes determination and

effort to keep ourselves balanced. One of the positions we tend to take is that of rejoicing so much over receiving salvation as a free gift of God that we don't like to hear about living righteous lives. We tend to name that as 'going back under the law.' Living right is not the same as living under the law. Living under the law means a way of life where we believe it is by living in obedience to the law that we qualify ourselves to be acceptable to God. Of course, *no one* can really qualify like that because everyone keeps failing (Ga.2:16;Ro.3:10). On the other hand, just because God has graciously accepted us 'just as we are' we can't live carelessly and still be pleasing to the Lord (Ro.6:15).

God points out to us 'believers' (children of God, saints!) that after having once taken the children of Israel out of Egypt and given them all kinds

of fantastic blessings including food from heaven, water out of rock, shoes and clothes that never wore out, protection from all diseases and victory over all their enemies, He was displeased with most of them (1Co.10:1-5). In fact, only *two* out of the hundreds of thousands who came out of Egypt finally entered the promised land! God was angry with the rest, telling them that they would never be able to enter that land.

This shows us that there is a difference between being forgiven our sins and being accepted by God as His children, and being pleasing to Him. How can we be pleasing to Him? Is it not by giving Him joy as He watches us living in accordance to His ways? (3Jn.1:4).

We are really not going to be happy if all our life we are repeatedly falling into sin and asking for forgiveness.

Yes, we can still try to turn our attention towards grace and to rejoice in the richness of God's mercy and largeness of heart. But deep in our heart the roots of sin will be continuing to be strong, and fruit will be appearing now and then. When sin comes forth, it produces *death*, first in us and then also in the people we deal with (Jas.1:15). *That* is not going to make us happy, will it? Our sinful deeds will also produce consequences, and also lead to more sinful deeds from us as well as others, and all this is only going to make us more unhappy.

On the contrary, think of how *blessed* we can be when we walk in God's ways? (Ps.1:1,2). Think of how close and intimate we can be with God when we walk with Him (Jn.14:23;Ps.16:11). He will bless us, teach us, guide us and transform our lives. We will become such a blessing

to people around us too that our happiness will abound (Jn.15:8).

Our life is meant to go from grace to grace and from glory to glory, like the sun going up from dawn (Pr.4:18). Grace has brought us freedom not only from the guilt of sin but also its power (Ro.6:14). Let's not miss what Jesus already prepared for us (He.4:1).

Pointers along the way #194

Listening to God!

Many Christians are used to reading the Bible daily. Some follow daily reading plans and rush through trying to finish their portion for the day. If we read like this it is not sure that what we read even gets into our head! The goal seems to be to ensure that we have finished our duty. Some take more time to read slowly, or read smaller portions, pausing to meditate on what they read. This is certainly much better than the first approach. But it is still not clear that apart from better understanding in their minds they have been able to 'hear' anything from God. A mental exercise, even if we use concordances and commentaries, can at best feed only our minds. Isn't something more necessary for our spiritual life?

The word of God is *living* in that it is

able to set up a live communication channel between God and us, entering into the deepest parts of our being (He.4:12). The aim of reading the Bible is not just to acquire knowledge, but to hear God speaking to us by making His inspired words come alive. It is when these words come alive in our spirit that we receive nourishment and every other help that we need for our lives (2Ti.3:16,17). For this to happen we must be sitting quietly before the Lord in a seeking and expectant attitude (Lk.10:39,42). It is therefore good to begin by quietening our mind, praising and thanking God for His mercies, and asking Him to open the ears of our spirit that we might receive what He has prepared for us.

God may, of course, speak to us at other times too. Sometimes He uses His written word to communicate to

us, by reminding us of specific words from the Bible which are pertinent to our situation (Jn.14:26). Remember how Jesus was able to use the right word from the Scriptures to deal with different situations?

God speaks to us many times by placing ideas in our mind which we may not even recognise as coming from Him. Sometimes we realise on looking back how it was the Lord who gave us those thoughts. Slowly we develop the ability to 'recognise His voice.'

God may also speak to us directly, as a Father to His children, about many other things that are necessary for our practical life. He may not always use Scripture to do this but may use ordinary words as in a conversation. Many Christians do not consider this possibility, limiting themselves *and God* only to words of the Bible. But think of how Jesus and the disciples

lived. Think of the number of occasions when they heard God speaking to them about practical steps of life, quite apart from quotations of Scripture! God has opened up this possibility for the least among us, so that each of us can now have fellowship with Him (He.8:11).

Of course there is possibility for error. We may imagine that God has spoken to us when He has not. The devil and the demons are trying to counterfeit the voice of God. We have to keep checking what we seem to hear with the spirit of what is written in the Bible because God will not contradict Himself. What we need to do is to develop our ability to recognise God's voice, as we read His word and as He speaks to us using His word at other times (Jn.10:4,5). We should also be honest enough to admit it when we make a mistake.

Pointers along the way #195

When sparks fly

The Bible calls people 'fools' who get angry and quarrel easily (Pr.12:16;14:17;29:11). It says that keeping away from strife is an honour for man (Pr.20:3). Our struggle, generally, is to be able to control our temper and to avoid quarrels. But sometimes we also do the opposite. Thinking that we are avoiding a quarrel we sometimes miss making our stand clear or bearing a Christian witness.

Wisdom is to know when to speak out and when to keep silent (Ec.3:7). It is folly to always quarrel, and also to keep quiet when we need to speak out. Let us look at the second aspect today.

We are all so different from one another as people, with different opinions, understanding, upbringing,

abilities, temperaments, etc. As a result, inter-personal relationships give us some of the toughest challenges in life. But on the positive side, it is interactions with different types of people that enrich our experience and enjoyment of life. They enable us to see things from different perspectives, and that broadens our outlook. We are helped to see where we have been narrow minded, prejudiced or blind to reality. That is why the Bible says that iron sharpens iron (Pr.27:17).

When iron sharpens iron, a lot of heat gets generated and sparks may fly! But that is a passing phase! Ultimately the pieces of iron get the proper shapes that add to their value. So it is with us.

If we are scared of the heat or sparks, we will choose to lie down quietly in our own places and avoid interacting with the others in ways that may cause sparks. This causes us to miss the

education that we could have received from others with different views, and we also miss out on the opportunity to contribute something for the others' good. Many married couples follow this approach and think that they are bearing with their spouses, instead of expressing different views and coming to a mutual understanding of life. Many people think they are 'pursuing peace' with the others and let hurts and wounds fester deep inside.

Perhaps we Christians keep our mouth shut when people are discussing religion or philosophy thinking that we don't want to cause an uproar by claiming that Jesus is the only way. Of course there are times when the wise thing is to keep quiet because there is no point raising such subjects in hostile situations (Mt.7:6). But think of the other times when we can put in a word for Christ.

If we manage things wisely, heat may come and sparks may fly for the moment. But after things settle down we would have left some lasting impression on the others or gained the final victory. Think of how 'fearless' Jesus was when He dealt with the Pharisees and religious leaders who were opposing Him. Many sparks came out, and even big fires got started. He was not personally ruffled by them, He never got angry because someone did something to Him, and He never lost control even when He was angry with someone who was doing wrong (and it was going to hurt them).

Pointers along the way #196

Salt, light and political correctness

A guy who stands at the fork of a road and tries to tell those who want to speed along with the crowd on a wide, smooth road that they are heading for a disaster (which they can't see), and tells them to choose instead a narrow, rough road will certainly not be popular. But that is what the 'gospel' essentially says! (Mt.7:13,14). The gospel is not just about promises for a nice life but it also contains warnings about the consequences of wrong living. How can we consider warnings as gospel or good news? It's good news that we can now be saved from those calamities that we would get into if we don't take the offer of salvation from God. But the fashion of the day is to be politically correct, not to hurt anyone's feelings, not to mention

anything negative, not to imply that anyone could be wrong about anything, etc. Be happy and positive, by ignoring all the bad news and avoiding thinking about consequences!

What happens then? People are told about Jesus who is meekly knocking at their door and they 'accept' Him as if they are doing Him a favour! They are told that He accepts them 'just as they are' and they don't see any need to make any changes to their lifestyles. They are not sinners any more, but 'saints,' and 'sin' is an unwelcome word. What do they get saved from? Not sin, or from the perverse generation (Mt.1:21;Ac.2:40), but from hell and the guilt of sin. Obedience to God's commandments is irrelevant, because we are not saved by works! It is not politically correct to use the name of Jesus in public, and it is utter heresy to claim that He is the only way

to the Father (Jn.14:6;Ac.4:12)! We mustn't tell anyone that what he is doing is not right and that it will destroy him, because we must respect his individuality and personal freedom!

We Christians seem to be more vigilant against appearing to be narrow minded than against sin or compromise. We try our best to fit our gospel to public opinion and mood, and to make our presentations in the language and style of the world, rather than show the world what a difference there is between the life that God offers and what there is in the world! We have become 'large hearted,' tolerating all forms of behaviour!

No wonder our salt seems to have lost its flavour and our light is hidden under a basket (Mt.5:13-15). We are scratching our heads to figure out what has happened to our Christian witness.

We ask why we don't seem to have the power and the anointing the early disciples had.

Actually we have nothing to be ashamed about anything that Jesus has said. We don't have to take an apologetic position in explaining the truth because it *is* the truth even if no one accepts it. People may scorn, laugh or mock us, to their own harm and ultimate shame. But God has given us the flavour and the light that have saved us and now can save the others. Let us not be cowed down from standing for and proclaiming the truth in its full form, so that 'as many as received' can be saved.

Pointers along the way #197

A question of identity

Having been born into this world as individuals, some of us have a tough

time finding our place here. We are forever looking to see what our role is, whether at home, workplace, church, society or other places. We constantly come up against the other side of reality where we are just a small part of a 'bigger picture'! We sort of lose our individual identity and become just numbers or job descriptions. It is not only teenagers who ask themselves questions such as "Who am I?", "Why am I here?," "Where am I going?", "What am I supposed to do?", etc. This so called identity crisis robs us of our confidence and holds us back till we are able to figure out who and what we are.

Generally speaking it is seen that men and women handle this differently. Men think more in terms of what they can accomplish and women in terms of how much they are loved and valued. Even when they think of the possible

impact of their actions on others, men tend to consider the possibility of others thinking more or less highly of them, and women about whether this would cause others to love them more or less. However differently men and women seek for support from the others, it does turn out that most people *are* seeking for support from other people in order to enhance their sense of self worth. This causes us to live in fear of others, to pamper to the wishes of others in order to ensure our happiness, and to feel devastated if someone disappoints us. The Bible calls it a snare to live in fear of man (Pr.29:25). Placing our dependence on people can be very unreliable because the best of people may not understand us at times or be available when we need them. That is why the Bible tells us that it is better to trust in the Lord (Ps.118:9).

When we come to the Lord, we are no longer numbers or ministry descriptions. We are individuals who are special to Him, with each of our names written on His palms (Is.49:16). He values us and takes care of us like the apple of His eyes (Ps.17:8;Zec.2:8). He has even numbered the hairs on our head (Mt.10:30). In order to save us, Jesus would leave all the others and come looking for us (Lk.15:4). It is with the Lord that we can find our security, and it is our knowledge of Him that gives us our identity.

We know that as individuals we are all different from one another. God has created us with different abilities, and He has allowed us through different individual situations in life to train us, in order to fit for our contribution to this world and His kingdom in a way that only we can. The more secure we

become in our relationship with God, the more we can be ourselves in relation to other people too.

Many times we, especially married couples, tend to demand that others should be like us, and we try all kinds of things to mould them into our image. If only we would stop clinging to one another to meet our needs! If only we would find our self worth in God! Then we can also give space to others to be themselves!

Pointers along the way #198

Frugality is out of date!

Look around and we will find everywhere a trend for more glamour and glitter. Packaging ordinary items with fancy appearance is one of the secrets of the marketing world. Fully functional gadgets, cars and houses are exchanged for fancier versions. It's no

wonder expenditure keeps going up! At the same time millions are suffering from famine and ill health, and millions of middle-class people are running out of money in the second or third week of the month! Yet, if one talks about cutting down expenses or being careful with spending, he will be viewed as someone who has come from the middle ages!

What should be our attitude to this, as those who know the Lord? Can we take the attitude that the money is ours (after we have given to the Lord) and we can spend it the way we like, as long as it is not for sinful things? Should we just be thankful that God has given us many things to enjoy (1Ti.6:17)? How much should we care about our being our brother's keepers?

Jesus mentioned about spending money as a testing ground for Him to see if we could be entrusted with spiritual

valuables (Lk.16:11). We may not normally realise there is a connection between the two unless someone points this out to us. But we also have examples of people who started their ministry with great anointing and as their lifestyles have become extravagant lost out on anointing even though they retain the form (2Ti.3:5).

The second point is that even after having given to God the remaining money is not ours (Lk.16:12)! God did not assert this standard in the Old Testament, where the tithe was all that was demanded from people. But now after having been bought with His blood, our bodies, time, money, and abilities belong entirely to the Lord (Ac.20:28;1Co.6:20;Re.5:9).

Faithfulness with money means spending it according to the will of God, for the glory of His name (1Co.10:31).

Each of us has been given different amounts of money, and God looks at how we spend it (Mt.25:15). We are not talking of asceticism, community sharing, or insisting on same standards for everyone, but of each one spending with a good attitude in submission to God. If we examine ourselves we may find that we can avoid certain expenses or manage with less. Instead of trying to be legalistic about this, let us just ask ourselves some questions when we are thinking of spending money for something.

1. Do I need it?
2. Can I manage without it?
3. Can I afford it?
4. Is it a righteous transaction?
5. How will it affect my Christian testimony?
6. How will it be as an example for

others?

7. Would I like to do something better with this money?

8. Can I do with a cheaper option?

9. Should I give the money instead to someone who needs it?

10. Will I have enough money left for unexpected needs?

11. What do experienced Christians think about this?

12. Should I spend it now or wait till I am clearer?

13. What do I sense God is trying to tell me?

Pointers along the way #199

The Age of Complaints

An Age of Complaints is dawning, and we are already experiencing the beginnings. The world is going through increasingly difficult times. If it is not increasing temperatures or chaotic weather patterns, it is increasing prices, decreasing availability of food and energy, unpredictable stock markets, the fear of job lay-offs, higher rates of family break-ups, increasing violence and terrorism, newer varieties of diseases and increasing costs of medical treatment. What do we do when any of these hits us personally? Complain! We complain against people, government, *and* God. We think all these others should have done something so that we didn't have to go through suffering.

The Bible says that when the end time plagues come over the world, people

will complain against God and blaspheme, and not repent (Re.16:9,11,21). We see even now that all around us men are complaining practically all the time. When we live among such people we also pick up the refrain of complaining. We think we have a genuine reason to complain. We forget temporarily, till we go again to the praise and worship meeting, that we are to rejoice in the Lord *always* (Php.4:4), give thanks in everything (1Th.5:18), etc.

We don't realise that there is something evil about a complaining attitude. We know about the people of Israel who were being taken out of slavery in Egypt to the promised land. Even after experiences of supernatural deliverances and provisions of food and drink, they *complained* when they faced some difficulty or didn't get the kind of food they had in Egypt. The

Lord was angry with them and sent fire and plague to punish them (Nu.11:1,4). We who think that we have a genuine reason to complain do not understand why the Lord should be so angry with it. But we are warned not to grumble, lest we should suffer like the Israelites (1Co.10:10).

Our complaints demonstrate our unbelief. While we proclaim loudly that God is our loving Father who takes good care of us, our complaints show that we think He should have done something to protect us from what is bothering us. There is some disconnect between our doctrine and practice. The signal we are giving out to angels and demons is that we are actually unhappy with God. This is while God is seeking to demonstrate to the Devil that there are some people like Job who love Him even in the midst of difficulties.

But don't we feel that our practical experiences actually call for complaints, and we really can't understand why God is treating us like this? Wouldn't it be hypocritical just to keep mumbling, "Praise the Lord" when our heart is not in it?

The answer is to express our thanks to God *with meaning*. We need to watch out for the attitudes of complaints that are trying to take over our heart, and replace them with thanksgiving. We need to meditate on God and His ways and develop the habit of giving Him thanks, and counter the spirit of complaining that is coming over the rest of the world.

Pointers along the way #200

Prophets and prophecies

With the charismatic movement has come a wide awareness of the gifts of the Holy Spirit, even among denominations that do not officially acknowledge them. One good thing that this accomplished was to throw open 'ministries' to the common believer who had not belonged till then to the 'priestly' or the 'servants of God' class in different groups. But what we see now is a proliferation of people taking up ministries of their own. It is clear from looking at the ministry scene that not all these ministries have been sent forth by God. Of particular interest is the gift of prophecy which is being exercised by many Toms, Dicks and Harrys, spiritually speaking.

When the Bible says, "All can prophesy", it is only in the context of a church meeting where opportunity is

being given to different ones to share what the Lord has laid on their hearts or revealed to them for the benefit of the others (1Co.14:29-31). This 'all' refers to those who have something prophetic to share with the church, and the instruction here is with reference to each one having to wait for his turn. But the Bible says very clearly in another place that *all* are *not* prophets (1Co.12:29)! Even though all the members of the Body of Christ have some gift and function given to them by God (v.6,7), it is clear that very few are prophets by calling. It is fine if we are to seek to share words with others to build them up, comfort, or exhort them (1Co.14:3,1). But this does not mean that we get into the office of prophets by doing so. Only those who have been called by God can take on that responsibility.

God warns us in His word about *false*

prophets on one hand, and also about others who imagine themselves to be prophets and bring forth their own words, pretending or imagining that they are words from God (Je.27:15;Ez.13:9). Such people are 'prophesying' to impress the people present, to enhance their reputation, to enlarge their empire, to make money, to prove their gifts, to improve their self-image, etc. God has not sent them.

Why do people go and listen to these people? It may be because they themselves do not know God well, they are not sure of what the Bible says, they are scared that they might end up disobeying God, they are overawed by someone who speaks in the name of the Lord, etc. As a result they go astray.

It does little harm to the hearers if the 'prophets' speak generally of God going to bless people (unless what

God wants to warn them about is really the opposite!). But when the so-called prophecy becomes directive, practically forcing people to go against their better judgment in relation to marriage, job, relocation, etc., the results can be very drastic, as we are unfortunately seeing many times these days.

God's instruction is for us to judge what even recognised prophets speak, leave alone the pretentious ones (1Th.5:20,21). We must not forget that it is we are ultimately responsible for our choices.

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

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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.