



the
PRACTICAL
CHRISTIAN
life

— JACOB NINAN —

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(Revised June 2018)

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Cover design by Pramod Simon Ninan

Published by:

Comfort & Counsel

69 Hutchins Main Road,

Bangalore 560084,

Karnataka, India

All quotations from the Bible are taken from the New American Standard Bible (NASB) unless noted otherwise.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Why one more book on the Christian life? All through the many years since I became a Christian, I have been reading books on the Christian life, since it was my desire to live the kind of life that the Lord Jesus Christ wanted me to live, for which He had to give His life. Different books look at different aspects of this life. But looking back now, especially after many years as a Bible teacher dealing with misunderstandings about the Christian life, and as a Christian counsellor trying to help people deal with their practical difficulties, I have come to see the need for a different type of a book.

Most books on the Christian life define what God has prepared for us and what He has already done to make it available to us, from the teachings of the Bible. That is fine from that point of view! But when it comes to us actually living that kind of life, we also need to understand *how* we can get to experience in our practical life what God has already prepared. Many teach simply that since salvation is by grace (undeserved favour from God), we can just receive this life *by faith*. They say that it would be *legalistic* for anyone to demand that we ought to do anything from our side to receive this life. On the other hand, there are others who teach that it is only *by obedience* that we can get to experience the life that God has prepared for us. Both groups are wrong in assuming exclusivity to their approach, but there is truth on both sides! When the Book of Hebrews describes why the people were not able to enter the Promised Land, which is a picture of us experiencing the life of God, it says this. “And to whom did He swear that they would not enter His rest, but to those who were *disobedient*? So we see that they were not able to enter because of *unbelief*” (Heb.3:18,19). In almost in the same breath, the author talks of disobedience and unbelief, as if they were synonymous!

Actually unbelief led to disobedience. What we can learn from this is that we ought to have faith *and* then obey what we believe in! In this book we seek to address both.

Another thing that many Christians differ on is how they read and interpret the word of God. Most serious Christians agree that the Bible is one of the most precious gifts from God to man. He inspired the authors to write the books of the Bible in such a way that He was able to convey what He had in His mind for our teaching, reproof, correction, and training in righteousness so that we may become fully equipped for life (2Tim.3:16,17). The Bible is our ultimate point of reference and authority when it comes to our understanding of God, His dealings with man and what He has in mind for us. But it becomes obvious that *how* we interpret the Bible is extremely important for us to understand Him accurately (2Tim.2:15). In order to be able to interpret the Bible passages rightly and to avoid errors, there are a few guidelines we ought to adopt. As I go through this book I try to identify the right understanding of the doctrines from the Bible and also to point out common errors people get into. (Please see more details on this subject at the [Appendix – Interpreting the Bible rightly](#)).

You will notice as you read this book two sides of the coin – what God has prepared for our Christian life, and also how we ought to respond to what God has prepared for our salvation. When Jesus said on the cross, “It is finished,” and died, it meant that all that *God* needed to do to provide us salvation was accomplished and completed. At the same time it is clear from the word of God that there are things *we* need to do to receive and experience that salvation to the full. Salvation is given freely by God and there is nothing we can do to *qualify* to receive it. At the same time, we do not experience it automatically but only as we respond to God in the right way. *Justification* is something we can experience instantaneously when we go to God in faith, but *sanctification* is a lifelong process by which God transforms our life as we cooperate with

Him.

Many times when the Bible tells us about what God has prepared for us, the language implies that they have already been accomplished. The fact is, they *are* finished – from God’s side and point of view. But it does not mean that they have automatically become true for us *in our practical experience*. For example, from God’s side we have been already sanctified (1Cor.1:2;6:11;Heb.10:10). But we are yet to experience the fullness of that sanctification and we are to pursue after it (1Thess.4:3;2Tim.2:21;Heb.12:14)! Since God’s word says something has been already done, some people make a mistake by asserting that it is already true in their lives, even though it is obvious that they have not yet come to the fullness of that experience. When our practical experience does not match with what the Bible seems to say, it is not right to pretend our experience is in line with the Bible! That is not how we glorify God by trusting in His word, because there are other words also that He has given! It is dishonest, and it does not please God at all! To be honest is to say that God is going to fulfil what He has promised in His word, that our experience has not reached there yet, and then to take all the steps that God has shown us in His word in order to go towards that fulfilment.

On one hand, when our experience does not match with what we think the Bible is saying, it would certainly be wrong to go with our experience and discredit the Bible. But it would also be wrong to assert that what the Bible says is true in our life when it is not so. God wants us to have ‘truth’ (reality) in the innermost part of our being (Psa.51:6). When we find a mismatch between what the Bible tells us and what we really experience in our lives, the first thing we need to do is to check if we are doing anything wrong because of which our life is not in line with the Bible. But after that it would be also good to see if we have interpreted the Bible in the right way.

In *The practical Christian life* we want to be honest about our

life, facing the truth about our experience squarely. We want to understand what the Bible really promises us as Christians, and we also want to see honestly if our practical life agrees with it. We want to learn what we should do when we see all the discrepancies in our life with respect to the word of God. We certainly do not want to pursue after some unrealistic standard of life, but at the same time we also should not give up or lower the standards below what God's words promise us. As you continue reading, ask God to speak to you through the working of the Holy Spirit in your heart and mind.

Another practical thing to remember is that God has some specific ministry or ministries planned for each of His children, and He gives us spiritual gifts according to our calling. It also happens that the way we live and the priorities we show in life will also depend on our calling. For example, a Bible teacher spends more time studying the Bible and reading Christian books, and an intercessor spends many hours praying for others, and they are not necessarily the pattern for people with other callings. What we say here in this book is about the common factors in every Christian's life and not in any particular calling.

With this introduction, and a prayer to the Lord, let us get on to the main part of the book.

CHAPTER 2

WHAT HAPPENED AT THE FALL?

By ‘the Fall’ we refer to Adam and Eve’s disobedience to God in the Garden of Eden. But the incident was not just about a simple matter of disobedience. It is good for us to understand what all transpired there, because we are all suffering now from the consequences of that Fall.

Created Innocent

When God created Adam and Eve, physically they were already at the stage of a full grown man and woman. However, they were innocent like babies because they had not done anything right or wrong (in fact, not yet tested).

At this time they had perfect communion or fellowship with God. They felt totally accepted and loved by Him, and they could walk in His presence freely, enjoy His company and sense that He too enjoyed being with them. They also had a carefree life because they felt no lack physically, psychologically or spiritually, and their work in the garden posed no challenges to them, as everything worked smoothly.

They had perfect fellowship with each other too. Though they were naked, they felt no embarrassment, just like small children. They rejoiced in each other’s presence with total trust and confidence.

The Test

God wanted man to love Him by choice. Such a love could only be seen when man chose Him even in the presence of other alternatives. This was the reason why God provided a test for Adam and Eve. He placed two special trees in the middle of the garden called the ‘tree of life’ and the ‘tree of knowledge of good and evil’ (Gen.2:16,17). Then He told them that they could freely take and eat from any tree in the garden except from the

tree of knowledge of good and evil. If they chose to disobey Him and ate from that tree, the result would be immediate death.

The Temptation

Satan was furious against God for throwing him out of heaven when he had tried to exalt himself, along with a third of the other angels, and now he turned all that anger against the man and woman God had newly created. He adopted the form of a serpent in the garden and came to Eve, asking her if God had forbidden them entirely from eating from the trees of the garden (Gen3:1).

This was aimed at getting her into a conversation and also to bring in a sense of incredulity towards God. Eve clarified that the restriction only applied to one particular tree in the middle of the garden (v.2,3). When we notice that she did not call the tree by its name – the tree of knowledge of good and evil – we can guess that she had not paid much attention to the significance of that fruit nor understood why it was prohibited. Probably she had not thought about such things. We can identify with her in that we also do many things without thinking much about the implications of God's instructions and prohibitions.

Let us also notice how she also mentioned that they were not even to *touch* the fruit, which God had not told them (Gen.2:17)! Her imagination was running only around the things that were not to be done, rather than on their spiritual implications and meanings. This is another common mistake we make, when we focus too much on the external do's and don'ts, all the while missing what God is trying to teach us through them all.

Eve also mentioned that if they ate from that tree they would die. At this time Satan stepped in with forceful statements. First, he said that they would not die (Gen.3:4). Sad to say, Eve didn't recognise at this point that Satan was directly

contradicting God, and that he was suggesting that she should ignore what God had said and accept what he was telling her now. But, of course, Eve didn't realise this was what was going on. Now, in order to substantiate what he had told her, Satan explained to her that God had ulterior motives in giving them such instructions. According to Satan, God didn't want them to become wise and know for themselves what was right and wrong. If they gained that knowledge, they would be like God Himself (v.5)! Therefore, God was trying to keep them ignorant and 'under His thumb'! Do we remember this kind of thoughts that have come to us when we imagined God was a spoilsport for giving us so many don'ts, or that God was very arbitrary or unreasonable in His will for us? Now we can understand where such thoughts come from!

Now the Bible explains what Eve thought in her mind when these ideas came to her. The whole proposal from Satan looked attractive to her. The fruit itself looked appealing from its appearance and the promise of a delicious taste. But more than that, it seems, she was pulled in by the thought that she and her husband could become wise like God (v.6). She ate that fruit, and gave it to Adam too.

What Happened When They Fell?

It is obvious that Adam and Eve had directly disobeyed God and done what He told them not to do. The consequence was that they 'died' just as God had warned them. 'Death' entered their bodies and they began to degenerate from this time onwards, even though they died fully only more than 900 years later. This is how sickness came. But God had told them that *the day they ate*, they would die (Gen.2:17). This was the *spiritual* death that took place immediately. Their spirits became 'dead in sin' (Eph.2:1), and separated from fellowship with God (Col.1:21). This death is what God is concerned most about, while we people are more concerned about our physical death!

We human beings have three parts to our being, body, soul and spirit (1Thess.5:23). With our body we relate to the external world, and with our spirit we communicate with God who is spirit. With our soul (mind) we process what we receive through our spirit and body. This soul has a part by which we can think, analyse and understand, another part by which we feel emotions connected with our thoughts and our bodily senses. When Adam and Eve fell, all the three parts of their being began to experience decay and death.

Adam and Eve discovered immediately that this knowledge of good and evil that had looked very attractive earlier had not done them any real good. It didn't make them like God! On the contrary, Satan had deceived them entirely. Now they were afraid of God. They felt their guilt at disobeying God, and felt ashamed of themselves for failing Him and themselves. They immediately became aware that their innocence was gone, and felt shame because of their nakedness in front of the other. They tried to cover themselves with fig leaves.

This knowledge of good and evil, that they thought would make them like God, turned out to separate them from God. They now had knowledge *independent* of God, that made them feel they could manage without God. Earlier, before the Fall, they were dependent on God to know what to do. But now they had a sense of their own ability to manage their lives. Actually, their knowledge was not perfect, but very much distorted! And also, even when they knew what the right thing to do was, without God they didn't have the moral strength to do it. This was one of the most crucial consequences of the Fall. Their existence and sustenance came from their connection with God, and now when they became independent, they experienced lack and need in everything. Satan had camouflaged it by promising them independence as if it was a great thing to be desired.

This is the nature that we have all inherited from Adam and Eve. Our sin, in essence, is that we have lived our independent

lives apart from God, doing 'our own thing'. If we think we haven't done any of the grosser forms of sins that some others have done, that doesn't really make us any better than them, because we *all* have sinned in its essential form of living self-centred lives, irrespective of what God wanted us to do and what He thought about it. It is really true that we have *all* sinned and come short of the life that God wanted us to have (Rom.3:23). It is this gap that Jesus has come to bridge (Matt.1:21), to take us back to the life where we live with God, dependent on Him and doing His will.

God Confronts Them

God knew what had happened, but He wanted to question them to see if they would at least humble themselves and acknowledge the truth. When He called out to Adam, he was hiding, which prompted God to ask him if he had eaten the forbidden fruit (Gen.3:8-10). At this point Adam manifested the drastic change that had happened to his great love for his wife Eve. He said that it was her fault that she gave him the fruit to eat. Eve, in turn, blamed the serpent (vv.11-13). What would have happened if they had humbled themselves? God would have forgiven them and dealt with them differently. But because they would not own up to their sin, they faced judgment from God, and they were driven away from God. We are now living under the consequences of that judgment.

The Judgment

God gave the judgment separately for Adam, Eve and Satan. For men it was going to be hard work to make a living on the earth. They would have to, so to speak, work by the sweat of their brows, against the odds, in order to produce output (Gen.3:17-19). Finally, man would have to return to the dust from which he was created, meaning that he was going to die physically too. For women, the judgment was to be in two directions. Their childbirth was going to be painful for them. Secondly, "Your desire would be for your husband, but he was

going to rule over you” (v.16). The implication that Hebrew scholars bring out from this passage is that wives would face a power struggle with their husbands – they would try to ‘control’ their husbands while the husbands would try to ‘dominate’ them. God told Satan that there would be war between him and human beings, and while he would be able to hurt the people, ‘the seed of the woman’ (referring to Jesus) would defeat him totally (v.15).

In addition, God cursed the ‘ground’ so that man would now have to struggle against it in order to be able to bring out the harvest (vv.17,18). Even though it mentions only the ‘ground’ specifically, it probably includes all the rest of creation as we see in Romans 8:20. Adam and Eve experienced instant spiritual death when they sinned, but now they began to experience the degeneration in their bodies that would finally lead to physical death too. Sickness of the body and natural calamities began to occur. Animals began to attack and devour one another.

In summary, what we find here is the result of sin in its spiritual, physical and psychological dimensions. Adam and Eve were created innocent, but they became sinful as a result of their choice. All of us who are their descendants inherit the fallen nature by birth, which is corrupted in all these dimensions as well. We are born dead towards God in our spirit, and in our body we begin life with degeneration setting in quickly. We are born in sin (Psa.51:5), and we sin because we are sinners. In the psychological area, we are given to foolish thinking, negative feelings and wrong choices.

Many people try to say that people are inherently good, and it is the circumstances that make them do bad things. It is clear that circumstances of our life contribute a lot to what we become and how we behave (e.g., the training we receive as children shapes our lives). But it is also true that we are born with a sinful nature. We have to only observe young children to

see this is true; they start telling lies and fighting early in life even without any example or training!

CHAPTER 3

GOD'S PLAN OF SALVATION

God, who created time, is outside of time. For Him the past, the present and the future are all the same. When He created man in His own image with an ability to make his own choices He knew that there would be the Fall. And so, He made a plan in His mind in advance to redeem the situation when it happened. 1 Peter 1:20 says that the plan for Jesus Christ to shed His blood was already in God's mind even before He created the world. So, when Adam and Eve fell, God immediately announced His plan of salvation. He said He would accomplish it through 'the seed of the woman' crushing Satan's head (Gen.3:15). Here, 'the seed of the woman' refers to Jesus who would come to this earth at the right time. This did not happen immediately, though, because God had to prepare man first to receive this salvation.

When people think of salvation, many only think of salvation from hell, and how they will become eligible to go to heaven. This *is* a significant part of the deal, of course. But that is not the main part! Many other Christians seem to understand salvation only as forgiveness of sins. Forgiveness is essential, but that is only the *first* part of salvation. God wants to restore to man what he lost at the Fall. And then He also wants to give man much more as a bonus.

What happened at the Fall was essentially that man had become separate from God and independent in himself. Now he had only his own limited abilities with him to deal with the realities of life that presented him with many different challenges. His spirit was dead in sin, disconnected from God, and he was set to die physically too in the course of time. When death finally came, he would be away from God forever, eternally. All the sins he had committed in his life could not be erased, and he had to face God's judgment for them which was

eternal separation from God – death, and no amount of good things he had done could compensate for that.

What God had to do was to bridge the gap that now existed with man, and then to train man to live in dependence on Him and not on himself. Also just think of this. If man had eaten from the ‘tree of life’ instead of the ‘tree of knowledge of good and evil’, he could have become godly in his character (*partaking of the divine nature – life*) and lived forever in fellowship with God. This is the other thing God wants to restore for man.

Now, how can God bridge this gap? Even though God can do whatever He wants, He cannot act against His own nature or the laws of His nature. He cannot just overlook man’s sins. He has to bring about salvation in a proper manner.

It would have been unrighteous and unjust for Him to simply overlook man’s sins and his sinful nature, and to treat him as if he was all right. There are some people who think that God should just show mercy and forgive everyone. But that would be against His righteousness, justice and impartiality. His justice requires that sin should be punished.

God is also not in a position to demand that man should make amends for his sins, because nothing man can do would be sufficient to meet the divine standards of justice.

Some people expect that God should accept what they offer in terms of ‘good works’ or acts of piety or penance as sufficient for Him to forgive their sins. But that is because they do not understand how God looks at sin, how abominable it is in His sight. Also, they do not realise that the ‘sin’ of having lived independently, following their own understanding of good and evil without relating to God as God (Rom. 1:21), is far greater than all the individual sins they have committed. A lack of understanding about this is one reason why people who have grown up without what they would consider as gross forms of

sins find it difficult to accept that they are sinners! Another thing is that even if God were to just forgive (overlook) man's sins without any stipulation, it would not have been sufficient to deal with man's sinful nature. No. Sin has to be dealt with, and only God can do that.

God had to first prepare man so that he would be ready when He unveiled His master plan for man's salvation. The problem was that man was in such a state of spiritual darkness that he did not even realise that he needed any salvation. He either felt that he was, generally speaking, a good man, or that his sins were justified by his circumstances. He did not see any need for God, or he imagined that He could be appeased with some religious rituals. So, God's first challenge was to bring man to a place where he saw himself as a sinner in need of a Saviour, and helpless without God.

After Adam and Eve, when men began to multiply over the earth, their wickedness only became greater, and even their thoughts and intentions became evil (Gen.6:5). Now God demonstrated that this deserved judgment. He destroyed all the people on the earth with a flood, except Noah and his family whom He saved through an ark. Noah was the most righteous man on the earth at that time.

But people soon began to worship idols in the place of God (Rom.1:23). This time, instead of destroying all the people, God separated one man called Abraham from his idol worshipping family, and He developed Abraham's descendants into a nation called Israel. He gave them His laws and commandments. He wanted them to be distinct from the nations around them who worshipped idols, and become a model to everyone around them. The standard of the Law that God gave to Israel was only of an intermediate level, much below what He really wanted from man. He wanted only a certain type of external behaviour from them because He knew that they would not, by themselves, be able to come to a heart to heart relationship

with Him. And the children of Israel demonstrated through the centuries of failure and backsliding the fact that no one could keep all His commandments or reach up to His level by their own strength. On the contrary, it was clearly seen that *everyone* had a tendency to fall. The time was now ripe to bring in God's salvation.

In order to bring man to the original purpose of God, two essential steps had to be completed. First of all, all the sins that man has done, that separated him from God, needed to be punished. This was a requirement of the justice of God. Till this was accomplished, there could not be any restoration of relationship between God and man. Secondly, man had to be given a new nature and power that would enable him to live faithfully along with God.

We could say in a human way that God had a dilemma at this point. He needed to punish all human beings because every one of us had sinned. The legitimate punishment for sin is eternal separation from the holy God, which is what is implied in 'eternal death' in hell. This means that all the people whom God had created would need to be sent away from God forever. The dilemma was the God loved every single one of the people He had created, and He did not want to lose any one of them. The solution God came out with was to take the punishment on Himself. He sent His Son Jesus into the world as a Man, who lived a sinless life, proclaimed the good news of salvation from sin, performed miracles to validate His claim of being the Son of God, and finally allowed Himself to be crucified. (God raised Him from the dead on the third day demonstrating that death had no power over Him because there was no sin in Him.)

Jesus' death was one of substitution, the sinless Lamb of God dying for the sins of the world. Through this death, He paid the penalty for the sins of all people. Now whoever acknowledges his sins, repents from them, and accepts this sacrifice on his behalf can receive the free gift of forgiveness from God. This is

an offer of *grace*, which is an unmerited favour from God that we can receive freely through faith in Jesus (Eph.2:8,9).

Every religion that man has thought up teaches in essence some means by which they imagined people could appease their god and find acceptance from him. But here is God putting away the requirement that man should qualify for salvation, because He knows that no one can come to Him in that way, and making an offer of grace to those who will acknowledge their need for this grace.

When we go to God and receive forgiveness from Him in this way, God causes us to be 'born again'. This is a supernatural work in our life when God's Spirit comes into our spirit and *regenerates* our spirit that was 'dead' till then. In this way we become a 'child of God', and now we have the opportunity to grow into maturity in our spirit and become like Jesus in our life and character. Also importantly, God becomes our Heavenly Father.

In the beginning of salvation, we are washed by the blood of Jesus, the Lamb of God, and even though our sins were like crimson, God now sees our heart as whiter than snow (Isa.1:18). When we place our entire confidence in God's grace for our salvation, God debits our sins into Jesus' account and credits the righteousness of Jesus into our account (Rom.4:20-24). He 'justifies' us who used to be sinners (v.5). This is what gives us a right standing before the holy God. When Jesus died on the cross, the veil in the Temple in Jerusalem was torn from top to bottom, signifying that now the access to the Most Holy Place was now open to all men. This was a place which, under the time of the Law, had been closed to man always, and even the High Priest could enter it only once a year with the blood of the sacrifice that had been made for his own sins and those of the people. Now by God's grace we can have access to God the Father always, through faith based on the blood of the Lamb of God that was shed for us.

Now God begins to write His laws upon our heart and mind so that we will have a hatred for sin and a desire to be pleasing to Him (Jer.31:33;Ezek.36:25-27). A 'new man' begins to be formed in us, and this becomes stronger and stronger as the Holy Spirit helps us to resist the promptings of our 'old man', our sinful nature. God takes away our bondage to sin because of which we felt compelled to give in to sinful desires, and gives us a freedom to choose to be obedient to Him (Rom.6:14;8:12). God does not forcefully transform us into the image of His Son, and neither does this transformation take place automatically once we are born again. He respects our free will with which He has created us. How much we become like Jesus depends on how much we yield to the Holy Spirit and submit to His leading when we are tempted to sin.

This is a crucial aspect of our practical life as a Christian. We shall look at this in greater detail in a later chapter.

CHAPTER 4

THE EXPECTED RESPONSE FROM MAN

God is absolutely sovereign; He can do whatever He wants, and there is no one who can obstruct Him. When God created man in His image, He created him with a *limited* free will. Man is free to do what he wills, within the boundaries laid out by God. This free will is limited practically in many ways because of man's own physical and mental limitations and also those of his circumstances, with the result that man cannot do whatever he likes to do. However, within those limitations man still has a lot of freedom, and he can choose to do the things that are pleasing to God or himself. The first man and woman made the wrong choice, to please themselves and disobey God. Afterwards, all of us who are born from them have continued to please ourselves even when it meant disobeying God.

God has made salvation available to all people, while at the same time requiring those who want it to make a deliberate choice for it. God's Holy Spirit is working with people just as He brooded over the chaotic emptiness that existed in the world when God started His creation (Gen.1:2). He works through man's conscience, which is a gift from God that all men are born with, and He also works through the proclamation of the Gospel of salvation. God does not choose some people for salvation while rejecting some others, and neither does He force anyone to be saved. But when a man is convicted in his heart by the Holy Spirit about his sinfulness, he can respond to God with repentance.

Repentance includes recognition and acknowledgement of one's sins, sorrowing over it, and turning away from a sinful life to God (2Cor.7:10,11). If any of these elements is missing, something will be lacking in the experience of salvation. It is not that the man who repents stops sinning, but he gets a strong *desire* to stop sinning and makes a firm determination

in his heart not to sin anymore. He may fall into sin again, but that would be against his own desire to stop sinning. When he 'falls' into sin, he goes to God and receives forgiveness from Him, renews his determination not to sin again, and asks God for help.

When he truly repents, there will be some fruit that people can immediately see in his life. He feels sorry for his sin, apologises to people for sinning against them, makes restitution wherever he has caused loss to the others because of his sins, and makes every attempt not to sin again. Due to incomplete preaching of the Gospel, many who think they have become Christians have not really repented from their sins, and so their conversion experience is incomplete.

This repentance will be an ongoing process in our life because we have to deal with sin all through our life. From God's side, our 'old man' (our old sinful nature) has been crucified with Christ (Rom.6:6). But our old sinful nature is put away in practice only as much as we deny it and put it to death through the power of the Holy Spirit daily in our life (Eph.4:22,23). As a spiritual baby who is growing slowly to maturity, when we start out we do not even recognise all the sinful tendencies that are in us. Many times we discover our sin only after we have fallen, and our repentance continues.

One of the ways we seek to gain strength for overcoming sin is by reading the Bible and seeking to understand God and His ways better. We also learn to spend more time in prayer as a means to cry out to God for help. Another thing that we do is to seek the fellowship of other believers for comfort, encouragement and guidance in the new way of life we have entered into.

When a man comes to experience salvation in this way, one of the immediate results in his life is an increasing assurance from God that his sins have been forgiven and that now he is a child of God. He begins to grow from one level of faith to the

next, increasingly enjoying the promises of God as they work in his life and the fellowship with God as His Father.

CHAPTER 5

WHAT IS FAITH?

Without faith it is impossible to please God (Heb.11:6). It is only through faith that we can receive the salvation that God has prepared for all mankind. He has taken away the old covenant that demanded that people should keep all His commandments if they wanted to receive His blessings, and has established the new covenant under which He offers His salvation freely to everyone, out of His unmerited favour (grace) towards us. Even though this offer is open to all, only those who go to Him in faith will actually receive it (Eph.2:8,9). Therefore it is extremely important that each of us goes to God with *true* faith and receives this salvation from Him. We can imagine what our fate would be if what we imagine to be faith now turns out to have been a counterfeit on the last day when we stand before God!

The Devil has managed to counterfeit this most precious thing that we need for our salvation so that he can lead people astray. Before we look at some of the most common counterfeits let us look at the character of the genuine one. When we are clear about the true faith, then it would be easier for us to recognise the counterfeits when we come across them.

What Is Genuine Faith?

Jesus said, “Do not let your heart be troubled; believe *in* God, believe also *in* Me” (Jn.14:1). Our faith is to be *in* God – in Him as a person. Just as we develop confidence in people as we get to know them closely, our faith in God is dependent on what we know about Him and how closely we know Him personally. It is obvious that as we get to know Him more closely our faith in Him will also increase.

Before we can get to know God personally we need to hear *about* Him from others. The Holy Spirit works in our heart as

we listen to someone preach about God, give his testimony about what God has done in his life, or when we read the Bible or some other book that elaborates on the Bible. Some people respond to Him immediately and put their faith in Him. Some others become curious to know more about this God and they may start listening to more preaching, or reading more. And then they place their life into God's hand, trusting in Him and deciding to follow Him for the rest of their life.

What we hear about God is about how He has created all the universe and everything in it (Gen.1:1), how He is almighty and can do anything He wants (Jer.32:27), how He knows everything including what we are going to think or say (Ps.139:2,4), that He is present everywhere at the same time and knows everything that goes on (Ps.139:8–10), how He makes His decisions in a perfectly sovereign way (Ps.115:3), how He is perfectly holy and righteous without any blemish in Him (1Jn.1:5), how He deals with all people without bias or partiality (Job.34:19), *how He loved us so much that in order to save us from perishing He sent His Son to take the punishment for our sins in our place* (Jn.3:16), how He loves us with an everlasting love (Jer.31:3), how He would always be with us (Matt.28:20) and never leave or forsake us (Heb.13:5), how He would provide us everything that we need when we seek Him first in our life (Matt.6:33), etc. When we hear such things about Him, especially about His love for sinners like us, our natural response will be to love Him, trust Him and place our life into His hands. This is genuine faith.

See how the apostle Paul describes in Romans 10 the usual process of receiving faith. “13 for ‘Whoever will call on the name of the Lord will be saved.’ 14 How then will they call on Him in whom they have not believed? How will they believe in Him whom they have not heard? And how will they hear without a preacher? 15 How will they preach unless they are sent? Just as it is written, ‘How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news of good things!’ 16 However, they did not all heed

the good news; for Isaiah says, ‘Lord, who has believed our report?’ 17 So faith comes from hearing, and hearing by the word of Christ.”

Somebody preaches (or writes) about the Gospel (good news) of the love of God and His offer of salvation. When people hear it, some of them believe it. The evidence that they really believe what they have heard is seen in the way they ‘take heed’ or respond to it. They begin to repent and seek to live according to what they have heard.

Even though we hear about God from other people and respond to it in our spirit (heart), faith is the result of a supernatural work of God in our spirit (1Thess.1:5). There is a paradox in faith in that it is a grace of God given to us (Acts.11:18) while being at the same time the right human response to the truth we hear. It is something that cannot be produced by human effort. We can say therefore, that faith comes into our heart when we ‘hear’ God – whether we hear Him as we are listening to a preacher, reading a book or God ‘speaks’ directly to our heart. Then we choose to believe what we have heard and act according to it.

Without this kind of faith we cannot be pleasing or acceptable to God (Heb.11:6). If we don’t believe He exists, and that He is who He is and the kind of a person He is, our faith cannot be genuine because it is not the genuine God we have faith in.

Two Kinds Of Faith

Genuine faith comes in two forms in terms of its application. The Bible talks about faith as a fruit of the Holy Spirit (Gal.5:22), as well as a gift of the Holy Spirit (1Cor.12:9). The fruit of the Spirit refers to aspects of God’s character *all* of us need to grow in, while gifts of the Spirit are different supernatural abilities that God distributes to different people according to His choice (1Cor.12:11). The fruit called faith is our trust and confidence that we place in God that all of us

must have and grow in. This is what we have addressed so far. But we can assume from the context of 1 Corinthians 12 that the gift of faith is for extraordinary situations such as when we are praying for a miraculous intervention from God. This understanding is supported by what we also see in real life. Let us see what this means.

“Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen” (Heb.11:1). If we think about it we can see that ‘the assurance of things hoped for’ is more applicable to the gift of faith for extraordinary situations rather than for faith in God as a person. When God gives us an assurance in any situation that what we hope for is going to happen, then that is a gift of faith. The second part of this verse, ‘the conviction of things not seen’ may be applicable to both types of faith. Therefore it would not be proper, as many people do, to take this verse as a simple definition of faith without understanding the implications.

In practice, the gift of faith seems to work in two ways. It may be that God gives the gift of faith to some people whose ministry is based on exercising this gift to obtain miraculous results from God, such as healing and answers to prayer in extraordinary situations. I guess there is no 100% consistency in the case of most such people in that miracles do not happen every single time. That may be because people being what we are may make mistakes about knowing God’s will. We may pray at times wrongly assuming it is the will of God and nothing happens! On the other hand, God sometimes gives this gift of faith to different individuals in *particular situations* and when they exercise that faith they experience marvellous results even though these individuals do not have a regular ministry where they use such gifts. Many children of God have experienced this at different times in their lives, but these are occasional events rather than an anointing for a ministry using that gift.

This gift of faith is not God giving power to some people to do

miraculous things independently of His will. The power still rests with God (Psa.62:11), and it is only as the people are led by God's Spirit that extraordinary things take place. Also, we cannot assume just because God *is able* to do something that He *will* actually do it. What He does is according to His sovereign will though He is able to do whatever He wants (Ps.115:3). When we know this, we can go to our Father and ask Him for anything we want in Jesus' name (Jn.16:23), knowing that He will give it to us if it is according to His will (1Jn.5:14).

How can we know when we pray whether it is according to His will? In many cases His will is clearly shown in His written word, the Bible. At other times we understand His will when He gives us the gift of faith, when we hear His voice in our heart (Rom.10:17) and receive an assurance (some people call it 'peace') of things hoped for and a conviction of things not seen (Heb.11:1).

Some Common Mistakes

Many people make the mistake of taking some verses by themselves and start 'believing' that it will happen to them according to those verses, without recognising certain important factors that we need to consider when interpreting the Bible. One factor is that some verses were only meant for certain people at particular times and that other people cannot blindly apply them to themselves! For example, when God told the people of Israel to stand still and see the salvation of God when they were standing between the Red Sea and the Egyptian army, we must not think that this is what God is giving us as a commandment for *all* difficult situations. God may tell us *sometimes* to follow this, but it is not a universally applicable instruction. Actually, Israel itself was asked to do things differently later, in different situations, such as walking around Jericho, attacking cities to conquer them, etc.

Another thing we need to remember is that since the revelation

of God's ways is given in the Bible distributed over the entire Bible, here a little and there a little, we need to see the whole Bible together to understand some of His truths. For example, a common mistake is to take the promise of Jesus that He would give us whatever we ask (Jn.14:14), without taking into account the clarification that our request needs to be according to the will of God in order to guarantee a positive answer (1Jn.5:14)!

A very common mistake is to assume that if we are convinced without any doubt that God is *able* to do something, then we have 'faith' that He *will* do it. But here the confusion is between recognising God's almighty nature and understanding His sovereign will! Everything is possible for God, but He does only certain things that He chooses to do. We may have faith in His ability, but until God speaks to us from His word or in our heart directly we do not have that gift of faith that is needed for our situation (Rom.10:17).

In connection with this is another common mistake in assuming that since God has done something for someone in a particular situation, He will also do it for us. People misquote "Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever" (Heb.13:8) to support this. But what this verse says is only that He is the same person with the same character all the time, and not that He does the same things always. Think of the two apostles Peter and James who were put in prison by King Herod. James was killed, and Peter was rescued by an angel!

One of the best examples in the Bible about these two kinds of faith we saw above is from the story of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego. King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon wanted everyone to bow down and worship a golden statute he had set up. When these three Hebrew men refused to do that, he threatened them saying they would be thrown into a fiery furnace. Look at what they said. "O Nebuchadnezzar, we do not need to give you an answer concerning this matter. If it be so, our God whom we

serve is able to deliver us from the furnace of blazing fire; and He will deliver us out of your hand, O king. But even if He does not, let it be known to you, O king, that we are not going to serve your gods or worship the golden image that you have set up” (Dan.3:16-18). The first part of their answer shows us their faith *in* God and His abilities. But the second part shows that they had not received the gift of faith from God concerning the situation and they did not know what He was actually going to do. Their faith in God was so strong that they were willing to leave the choice to Him about what He would do! One mistake we can make is to assume God is going to do something for us even when He has not told us, and then getting disappointed when it does not happen.

Counterfeit Faith

When people substitute imitations for the true faith, it is obvious that it will not connect them to God. But such people will insist that they are indeed connected to God because they find various explanations and excuses for their beliefs. They will be amply assisted by Satan in this deception because it is his aim to deceive people about their relationship with God. He also brings out false doctrines (teachings) that can deceive people on a large scale.

How does Satan deceive? Whether it is an individual person whom he deceives or a Bible teacher, what he does is to slip in false ideas into their thoughts as they are thinking about different things. This can happen to any of us, even if we are ‘filled with the Holy Spirit’! Just think of how he slipped in ideas into Jesus’ mind in the wilderness. Jesus was discerning enough to recognise that these were coming from Satan and to reject them. That is how we also ought to deal with such ideas. We must not imagine that all ideas coming up in our mind are our own!

Let us look at some of the common forms of false faith.

Faith without works. The apostle James points this out in chapter two of his letter. He says emphatically that if someone's faith does not produce action as a result of it, that faith is not genuine. He says such a faith is 'dead'. In this case people have knowledge about God and His teachings in their mind. James says that demons also know things about God and His doctrines but they are still demons! In a similar way, these people's knowledge remains merely in their head and has not touched their spirit (heart), and as a result it has not affected their practical life! The apostle John says that if a man says he believes in God but does not obey Him, he is a liar (1Jn.2:3)! In other words, there is no genuine conversion from their old life to a new life. This is true even if they have adopted new religious practices or even got baptised. It is not difficult for people to adopt external religious practices if they believe such practices will make God happy with them.

This is the difference between religious 'works' and works that come from a genuine faith in God. Religious works are performed by people in the hope that God will accept them because of these good works. There is a sense of duty or a fear of rejection involved here, and there is also no assurance that God has accepted them. Works coming out of faith are the result of what God has done in their lives by forgiving their sins, accepting them, making them His children, and blessing them in every way. Such people do these works of obedience because of their love and gratitude to God. Some people who do not understand this difference between the two types of works shrink back from any mention of 'works' concerning believers thinking that it refers to going back under the Law – which means someone is trying to win God's favour with his works!

We can see that a large number of people who assume they have come to Christ fall into the category of having faith without the works that accompany true salvation. How does this happen?

One reason may be that when they have received this knowledge of God they assume that it is all there is to faith. The blame goes to the preachers who did not explain the way of salvation clearly to them. They did not help the people to realise first of all that they were sinners in the sight of God who deserved to be in hell. They did not explain the love of God for sinners who sent His Son to pay for their sins, and ask them to repent from their sins in honesty, humility and sincerity. Such preachers, by trying to be nice to the people and not to offend anyone for fear of losing them, have become guilty of the blood of these deceived people (Ezek.3:18). Those who know the truth must proclaim the truth as much as possible so that even those who are deceived can come to be saved.

Faith as a mental assent. There are many people who understand the doctrines of salvation very clearly. They agree that Jesus came to save sinners, died on the cross for the sins of the whole world. They agree that people should turn from their sins and turn to Jesus as their Saviour. What is lacking is that they do not see themselves as among those who need to be saved! That truth has not *hit home* yet. They assume that they are acceptable to God because they know and agree with all the correct doctrines. They have not seen themselves as sinners in the sight of God, who are as hopeless as the worst people they can imagine. Therefore, while they agree with the need to preach the Gospel to others, they have never truly repented before God.

It is possible that whenever they hear the Gospel being preached, they divert their attention to others who need to be saved and do not see their own condition. They are unable to point to any time in their life when they realised that “once they were blind and now they see.” There is no hatred for sin that comes from seeing how it used to bind them and there is no joy of having discovered how God loved a sinner like them.

Faith as a human achievement. For some people, faith is not

about trusting God and submitting to Him but about getting answers to their prayers. It becomes all about finding out methods or techniques by which they can get what they want. In the days of Jesus, when He saw big crowds following Him, He was neither impressed nor fooled by the numbers. He saw through them that they were not coming to Him because they recognised Him but for what they wanted from Him (Jn.6:23-27). He told them straight to their face that they should instead look for things of eternity. In response they seemed to ask Him what they should do in order to do the works of God (v.28). But again it became obvious that they were really not interested in following Him as their Lord and Saviour but only in getting Him to do miracles in order to give them what they wanted (vv.29-31).

Many people nowadays also are only interested in getting to know how they can claim things from God. Some try to reach a level of faith by rejecting all thoughts of doubt ('negative thoughts') in their mind and filling their mind with 'faith' ('positive thoughts') by repeating God's promises and making themselves 'believe' that what they want is going to happen! When they think they have reached that level of faith for something particular, they imagine that God will now give it to them!

They do not realise that they have not come to trust God in such a way as to be willing to lay their whole life into God's hands to do His will. What they are trying to do is to force God to do for them what they want! Then they get upset with God for not granting them their prayer! Imagine their dismay if they have also fasted and prayed or made some vows to God and still God did not answer!

A technique that some people use is to get someone else to 'agree' with them in their prayer, or to get many people to pray together for what they want. Someone else will ask some 'man of God' to pray for them or give some preacher some 'seed

money' in order to force God to multiply their seed with a hundred fold harvest.

God has made it clear that if we have a proper relationship with Him through our faith in Jesus we are free to ask Him for whatever we would like to have. But we must remember that if we really know God as God, we will never try to twist His hands but we would be willing to submit to His will knowing His wisdom and love for us (1Jn.5:14). We must also remember that true prayer is, after all, only a 'request' we make to God (Php.4:6), and that it is utterly presumptuous on our part to make any demands on Him. To demand that God should do something for us is to totally forget our standing before God.

The 'word of faith'. This is a false doctrine that came out during the late part of the 20th century and which spread all over the world quickly. This became so popular that many of the big preachers have absorbed it in some form or other and many have preached or written about it. The essence of this teaching is that our words have power in them and so when we speak things with our mouth they will happen. In practice it means two things. One is that we must confess with our mouth what we want to happen, and only then it will happen. The second is that we need to be careful what we speak because if we say something foolish with our mouth it can cause us calamity!

The underlying assumption is that just as God has power to speak and to make things happen and even cause things to be created out of nothing, as His children we too have that power in our words. There are two big flaws in this assumption. The first one is that as created beings who have been 'adopted' to be children of God (Rom.8:15;Gal.4:5), we do not 'become' God or even 'gods' with a small 'g'. Only God is God and we remain creatures! Power belongs to God (Psa.62:11), and only to Him. He will not share His glory with anyone else (Isa.48:10,11). We have no power that we can exercise by ourselves apart from

God. We note that even when Jesus has given us *authority* over all the power of the enemy (Lk.10:19) we exercise that authority *in the name of Jesus* (i.e., subject to His power and authority). E.g., the *power* to cast out evil spirits is still with Jesus and not with us.

The second flaw is in not realising what happens to the will of God or God Himself if we have power in our words to make things happen! Will things happen when we speak irrespective of the will of God? Certainly not! If God did such power to us, just imagine the chaos we would create in our folly! The proper thing for us to do is to *ask* or *request* God to do things for us instead of presumptuously taking the power and authority on ourselves.

The most common verse that is quoted to prove this doctrine is, “Death and life are in the power of the tongue, and those who love it will eat its fruit” (Prov.18:21). What we must remember is that this is a *proverb* (which is a statement about things we generally see in life but which are not laws of God), that uses a figurative language and is not to be taken literally! What it means is that we should be careful how we speak, because our words can result in good or bad situations. To believe anything more, e.g., that we can physically kill people or give life to dead bodies with our words, is, to put it mildly, uncalled for! A similar passage is from James who warns us about how we can cause problems if we speak carelessly (Jas.3:3-12). To conclude from such verses that our words have literal power is to get into a delusion.

The world famous preacher who started this teaching has himself explained how it came about. He said that from his teenage years he had developed the habit of emptying his mind so that he could make himself open to God’s voice. (It is a very dangerous thing to do, to empty our minds and not use the God-given ability to think, question and analyse, because evil, deceiving spirits can also speak to us.) One day he had done

this when he heard a voice telling him to read Mark 11:23 in which Jesus told the disciples, “Truly I say to you, whoever says to this mountain, 'Be taken up and cast into the sea,' and does not doubt in his heart, but believes that what he says is going to happen, it will be granted him.” After that this voice asked the preacher to note in this verse how many times Jesus mentioned ‘say’ and ‘believe’. When the preacher noted that ‘say’ occurred three times and ‘believe’ only once, the voice told him that he should preach about saying or speaking more than about believing!

This is a very erroneous interpretation of the Bible based on a word count in *one* verse, and that too in an unconnected manner. There are times when we can get an idea about how important God thinks a subject is, based on how often He speaks about it. But to take one verse like this and to make this interpretation, especially when the Bible as a whole speaks much more about believing than speaking, shows that such a direction could not have come from the Holy Spirit. However this preacher assumed that it was the Holy Spirit giving him a revelation and started preaching about it. The rest is history.

We receive our salvation through faith. When we believe, we will also speak about it. (In fact if we claim we believe but we are unwilling to confess it, then our faith comes under question (Lk.12:8,9)). Paul says in Romans 10:8-10, “But what does it say? ‘The word is near you, in your mouth and in your heart’ – that is, the word of faith which we are preaching, that if you confess with your mouth Jesus as Lord, and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved; for with the heart a person believes, resulting in righteousness, and with the mouth he confesses, resulting in salvation.” This passage talks about believing, confessing with our mouth and salvation, and even uses the phrase ‘word of faith’. First of all, the passage is about our salvation, and it will have to be stretched a lot if it has to be made to mean our confessing with our mouth what we want and expecting it to happen! Let us not

read into verses what we want them to mean.

Some Commonly Misunderstood Verses On Faith

There are certain verses concerning faith that are commonly misunderstood. Let us look at some of them, standing on the foundation that true faith is a trust in the person of God. Let us also keep in mind the general principle that in order to understand any verse in the Bible properly, we must see it in the context of the whole Bible; other verses must support the meaning we attribute to the verse. It is also good to check our doctrines with practical experience. Sound doctrine must be also seen in practice.

“Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen” (Heb.11:1 KJV). The problem is the use of the word ‘substance’, that gives the picture of something material, leading some people to imagine that faith can be ‘accumulated’, increased in quantity by adding a little at a time, such as by repeating the promises of God over and over again! The true meaning of the verse is carried by modern versions, e.g., “Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen” (NASB). The meaning here is quite clear, and very different from ‘substance’.

“And He said to them, ‘Because of the littleness of your faith; for truly I say to you, if you have faith the size of a mustard seed, you will say to this mountain, “Move from here to there,” and it will move; and nothing will be impossible to you” (Matt.17:20). The context was the inability of the disciples to cast out a demon from a man’s son at the foot of the mount of transfiguration. These same disciples had cast out many demons and healed many sicknesses in the past, but they were stumped on this occasion. It is possible that they were scared when they saw the violent manifestations of the demon on this occasion and wondered if they would be able to cast out this one. As long as we believe that it is the power of Jesus and not our power that casts out demons, no demon will be able to

scare us. But if we begin to imagine that it is our faith, knowledge, experience, holiness or anything else that will cast out demons, it will not work. This shows us that what is important is that our faith is *in* God and not in the *quantity* of our faith! If we come to a mountain standing in our way, what we need is a gift of faith from God who tells us to ask it to move out. Jesus is not saying that apart from that God-imparted faith we can speak to any mountain at our will and it will move out! Experience will also bear this out! We need to put such verses in the context of the whole Bible.

Jesus also made it clear here that it is not the *quantity* of our faith that is crucial; a mustard seed size would do. But what is important is *whom* we have faith in!

The point here is *not*, as some ‘word of faith’ people insist, about ‘speaking’. How we exercise the faith God gives us depends also on His guidance. When the people of Israel came to the Red Sea, God asked them to stand still and see His salvation. When they in need of water in the desert, one time God asked Moses to strike a rock with his rod, and another time to speak to the rock. The physical method is not the issue but whether we have faith in God and we follow the guidance He gives us through the Holy Spirit.

“And He said to her, ‘Daughter, your faith has made you well; go in peace’” (Lk.8:48). A casual reading might give an impression that faith has the power in itself to heal the sick. And so people try to accumulate this faith till they think they have it sufficiently to get what they want. In this case, aren’t they imagining that it is their faith that is going to do the miracle and that they have to manufacture that faith somehow? Wouldn’t we then be implying that if we have ‘faith’ we can make things happen even without reference to God? How ridiculous!

“Then touched He their eyes, saying, According to your faith be it unto you” (Matt.9:29 KJV). This is many times interpreted to

mean as if what we can receive depends on the quantity of the substance of our faith! I have heard one preacher explaining this to say that if the blind men whom Jesus healed had only half the quantity of faith compared to what they actually had, according to this verse only one of their eyes would have been healed! In other words, this verse is being interpreted to give a mathematical formula that says the outcome of our prayer will be proportional to the quantity of faith that we have! That is *not* what Jesus said. We have already seen above that it is not the quantity of faith but who we have faith in that matters. What Jesus was saying was simply, “All right, I am going to do for you just as you wanted and trusted Me for.” If we remember what we learned about faith for extraordinary situations, we can see that this was such a situation. We cannot generalise from here and assume that whatever we want and trust Jesus for He will do for us. No. It will have to be according to His sovereign will.

“And Jesus answered saying to them, ‘Have faith in God. Truly I say to you, whoever says to this mountain, “Be taken up and cast into the sea,” and does not doubt in his heart, but believes that what he says is going to happen, it will be granted him” (Mk.11:22,23). We have already covered the subject of ‘speaking’ to the mountain. The new point here is about not doubting in our heart. Our mind is such that it is usually impossible not to have any doubt at all in our mind that what we say is going to happen. Let us be honest here! But it becomes possible when God gives us a gift of faith in our heart for our situation that goes deeper than our mind. Then we have an ‘assurance of things hoped for’. It is then that we know what God’s will for us in the situation and have the boldness to ask a mountain to move. Note that Jesus is asking us to have faith in God and not to create faith by ourselves in our mind!

When we know who God is, it is not at all difficult to believe without any doubt in our mind that He *is able* to anything He wants in a miraculous, supernatural way. But Jesus is not

talking here about that kind of faith. When we have that kind of faith we should not assume that therefore what we want is going to happen. Jesus is talking here about a faith that has no doubt that what one believes is going to happen. God is able to do anything He wants, but He will do only what He chooses to do. This concerns the will of God, and this kind of faith can come only when God gives us a gift of faith in our particular situation by revealing His will for us.

“Therefore I say to you, all things for which you pray and ask, believe that you have received them, and they will be granted you” (Mk.11:24). Is it by manipulating our mind and convincing ourselves that we have received it even when we have not actually received it? That is not actually possible. Is Jesus actually asking us to believe in a falsehood? No. But when we receive a gift of faith for our situation and we are so assured about it that our mind is at rest just as if we have already received it!

“If you ask Me anything in My name, I will do it” (Jn.14:14). Asking in Jesus’ name is not about adding the phrase ‘in Jesus’ name’ at the end of our prayer. It is not a magic formula. It means submitting to Him, His character, His will and His authority. When we do that, first of all we will not ask for anything that is against His will or contrary to His nature. We must not neglect this part of the sentence and focus on ‘anything’. As created beings it is our wisdom to know that our God knows best and to submit to His will. When we know something to be God’s will (from His written word or by the gift of faith He has given), then we can be sure that if we ask for it we will receive it. “This is the confidence which we have before Him, that, if we ask anything according to His will, He hears us” (1Jn.5:14).

“Again I say to you, that if two of you agree on earth about anything that they may ask, it shall be done for them by My Father who is in heaven” (Matt.18:19). Many people try to catch

hold of others and ask them to agree with them about what they are asking God for. This is like adopting a magic technique, and not connected with personal faith in God. More often than not, they also do not actually receive what they ask for! The problem is about what we understand 'agree' as. The original Greek word used there is *sumphoneo* which means 'to be harmonious' as in a symphony. This is not the same as mental agreement about an idea. What Jesus means is about two people completely in harmony with each other about what they are praying for. I suggest that this is possible only when God gives the gift of faith to both people. When that happens, both of them have an assurance that what they are asking is according to the will of God and that they will receive it. One person receiving such an assurance is great. But knowing that anyone can make a mistake, God confirms things to us when He has given the same witness to two people.

Conclusion

The understanding and practice of faith have been victims of a lot of misunderstanding. I hope this chapter has brought some clarity into this subject.

CHAPTER 6

WHAT HAPPENS AT SALVATION?

When we come to God repenting from our sins and placing our trust in Jesus for our salvation, God does many miraculous things in our life. In fact, this miracle of salvation is a greater miracle than the physical ones we can think of, because this is for eternity. This is the miracle that turns a persecutor and blasphemer like Saul to a great apostle called Paul. Those of us who have experienced this salvation in our own lives know how supernatural it has been. We want to take a look here at different aspects of this miracle that takes place in a man who gets 'saved'.

Sins Forgiven

It was our sins that had so far separated us from the holy God (Isa.59:1,2). The first thing needed to restore us to Him was to remove the record of sins that was against us. He could not overlook our sins or simply brush them aside because His righteousness demanded that we should be punished for them (Rom.6:23). But when Jesus died in our place and took our punishment, God came into the position where He could righteously and justly forgive us our sins. He forgives us in such a gracious and magnanimous way that where our record was blood red with the guilt of sin, the blood of Jesus washes it and makes it whiter than snow (Isa.1:18). God puts our sins from His mind as far away as the east is from the west (Psa.103:12). He promises never again to raise the memory of our old sins (Heb.8:12). God now puts away the accusing cries against our sins (Col.2:14) so that our Accuser, the Devil, is disarmed. We are given a clean conscience, free from guilt. Such a salvation from the guilt is possible from nothing but the death of Jesus and our faith in Him. When Jesus died on the cross at Calvary, the veil in the Temple that separated the Most Holy Place from the common man's entry was torn aside from

top to bottom by God, indicating that the way to God is now open for man.

Justification

When God forgives us and puts away the record of our sins, He now accepts us as 'righteous' in His sight. This is called justification, which is freely given to us by grace following our repentance and faith in Jesus (Rom.3:24). Someone has tried to explain it as being given the status of '*just-as-if-I'd* never sinned'! This is because we have accepted the status of being sinners who deserve death, and received from God the free gift of the righteousness of Christ being accounted to us. Our sin was credited to Jesus, and in our union with Him by faith, His righteousness was credited to us (2Cor.5:21). Now God accepts us 'perfect in Christ'. The Law that demanded that we should keep all the Law before we could be accepted by God could not make anyone 'perfect' (Heb.10:1). But the Law constantly reminds us about our sins (Rom.3:20). But when the righteousness of Christ is imputed to us by faith, "by one offering He has perfected for all time those who are sanctified" (Heb.10:14). In other words, our acceptance before God is now *perfect!* We can now go boldly into the presence of God our Father with the blood of Jesus (Heb.10:19-22). There is now no condemnation for us because we are 'in Christ Jesus' (Rom.8:1).

Born Again

When Adam and Eve sinned by disobeying God in the Garden of Eden, they 'died' in the same instant (Gen.2:16,17). From a spiritual point of view this death meant an eternal separation from God, and the immediate result was that the fellowship they had with God was broken. In other words, their human spirit became dead towards God. They felt guilty and ashamed of themselves and tried to hide from God in fear. Physically their bodies began to degenerate, and psychologically their minds became corrupted, experiencing foolish thinking, negative

emotions and confusion in their choices. God knew that they needed to be 'born again' in order to reverse the effect of sin in their life.

When a man comes to God through faith in Jesus, God causes him to be born again (1Pet.1:23;1Jn.3:9). The Holy Spirit comes to dwell in his spirit and causes his spirit to become alive towards God. This re-establishes his connection with God. He becomes a new creature who is born of God, and this spiritual baby grows up feeding on the word of God (1Pet.2:2). The Holy Spirit works in his mind to restore reasonable thinking, positive feelings and the ability to make the right choices. His body comes under the care of God who brings protection. Spiritual, psychological and physical healing will be fully restored only when he is 'glorified' in eternity, but every aspect of his life begins to grow better under the care of the Father.

One very crucial change that happens when we are born again is a transformation in our attitude towards sin. When we were born physically we were 'born in sin' (Psa.51:5). It was natural for us to sin, and even though we had a conscience that convicted us in the beginning when we sinned, we usually ignored it and went on sinning, trying only not to get caught. When we are born again, God takes away this heart that was inclined towards sin and gives us a new heart and a new spirit (Ezek.36:26). This transformation makes us to want to stop sinning and to always do the will of God. This hatred for sin is a sure mark that shows that a person has been born again.

An important truth we must recognise is that when we are born again and become children of God our old sinful nature is *not* removed from us. But we are set free from the bondage we were in earlier that compelled to serve the old nature (Rom.8:12;6:14). Now we hate sin and do not want to sin, even though we may still fall because of our weakness, lack of power to overcome and ignorance of what God has provided for us. But there is still a duality in us in that what has been born of

God in us – our new nature (new man, new self) – will exist along with the remains of our old sinful nature (sometimes called the ‘flesh’). There is a constant battle between these two natures. We are to keep the old nature on the cross (Gal.5:24) and put to death by the help of the Holy Spirit every desire for sinful behaviour that comes up from the flesh (Rom.8:13). Here is where we demonstrate our hatred for sin, fear of God and love for God.

One way to understand this is to think of the death on a cross. The cross does not kill its victim at once, but over hours of agony. Our ‘old man’ has been now placed on the cross with Christ (Rom.6:6). If we feed this old man on the cross now and then by yielding to the lusts in our flesh, it is going to take much time for the old man to finally die, if at all he dies! Therefore we are exhorted to ‘put off’ our old man (Eph.4:22,23), not to yield any part of our body to sin (Rom.6:13), and to put to death the deeds of the body (Rom.8:13). This is an example of how we ought to respond to what God has already done in our lives.

Children Of God

When God causes us to be born again through His Spirit, He declares us to be His children and Himself as our Father. This is an extremely privileged position for us that He has given to us who used to be His enemies because of our sins. To have the Creator of the universe as our Heavenly Father and to live in that relationship daily is our privilege. To know that He knows everything about us – such as the strengths He has created us with and the weaknesses we have because of our sinful nature, every detail of our sinful past (Psa.103:13) – and that still He loves us with an everlasting love, gives us the boldness to approach Him without fear or condemnation. We can open up ourselves to Him frankly and honestly with the confidence of His understanding and compassion, and ask Him anything (Jn.16:26,27). We know that He watches over us,

protects us, plans good things for us and causes even our mistakes to work something for our good (Jer.29:11;Rom.8:28).

We also become the younger adopted brothers and sisters of His eldest Son Jesus Christ. As God's children we become heirs of God and joint heirs with Jesus (Rom.8:17).

We must understand at the same time that when we are made 'children of God' we do not become 'God' in essence but remain as created human beings, albeit with the Spirit of God residing in us (Rom.8:9). We are only 'adopted' as children of God (Eph.5:1), even though we have been declared as fellow heirs with Christ (Rom.8:17). Another aspect of this is that even when God has given us the authority to use the blood of Jesus for access to His presence and the name of Jesus to heal the sick or to cast out demons it is Jesus who has the real power and not we. Our authority comes from trusting in Him and submitting to Him. Remembering this will keep us from some of the heresies that have come up in the church.

Names In The Book Of Life

Jesus the Lamb of God keeps the Book of Life in which is written all the names of people throughout the history of the world who have trusted in Him and whom God has found worthy of eternal life (Rev.20:12). Those whose names are not in this book will be thrown into the lake of fire after the final judgment (v.15). This also gives us access to the tree of life that was kept away from Adam and Eve after they had sinned (Gen.3:22-24).

Many Christians assume that once they are born again and get their names into the book of life eternal life is given to them and they cannot lose it by any means. But this is a grievous error. Jesus has given a promise, "He who overcomes will thus be clothed in white garments; and I will not erase his name from the book of life, and I will confess his name before My Father and before His angels" (Rev.3:5). But this means that it

is possible for the names of some to get erased, because otherwise this promise would not mean much.

'Eternal life' is obviously a life without end, and that is what Jesus offers to everyone who gets saved by believing in Him. He has also told us that no one would be able to take such ones from His hands or the Father's hands (Jn.10:28,29). What we should not forget is that He does not take away our choice to walk away from Him! We came to Him by putting our faith in Him, and it is possible that we may choose to walk away from that faith. Unfortunately this happens in some cases when people choose some sinful pleasures above the commandments of God and refuse to repent. There are many warnings against this in the New Testament (Heb.3:12-14;6:4-6;10:26,27;2Pet.2:1-9). What we must understand is that our eternal life was given to us by His grace through our faith (Eph.2:8,9) and that if we give up that faith we can no longer claim eternal life from God. Paul warned the Gentiles not to take their salvation for granted because Israel lost it and they, the Gentiles, stood only by their faith (Rom.11:18-20).

Eternal Life

It is well known that one benefit of salvation is eternal life (Jn.3:16). Many people understand this only as living forever, without realising that even the people who are thrown into hell 'live' there forever (Rev.20:10,15). In a strict sense, only God is eternal because He has no beginning or end. We all have a beginning when we are conceived in our mother's womb, and from then onwards we will live forever, either in heaven or in hell! The eternal life that God promises His children is more than just living forever or living in heaven forever. It is for us to receive the 'eternal life' that is in God. This is, in fact, the life of Christ, or His character or nature, that we can know experientially (Jn.17:3). This is the divine nature that we partake of when we become God's children (2Pet.1:2-4). It is not the essential nature of God's divinity, as we have seen

earlier. The greatest news is not just that we can be forgiven our sins but that we can be transformed from our sinful nature into God's nature.

Freedom From The Law

All religions of the world tell us to do certain things or to conform to certain standards so as to find acceptance by God. In other words, they all teach following different 'laws' in order to reach God. The Bible reveals God telling us that no one can become good enough for God by doing things or following laws (Rom.3:20), because everything we can do is tainted by sin and God's standards are infinitely high. That is why Jesus has come with the good news of grace or unmerited favour from God where we find acceptance with God 'freely' by acknowledging our unworthiness! When we receive that acceptance, we are freed from the demands of the law that were needed to be met before we could find acceptance. This is what it means to be freed from the law (Rom.8:2). When it refers to the Law of the Old Testament it also means that we do not have to follow the laws relating to ceremonial purifications and also clean and unclean things.

However this does not mean that a Christian is without any law! We must be careful not to exaggerate the grace of God and think that we are not under any law! It does not mean that we can live anyway we like because we are under grace (Rom.6:15)! Those who are born again through the work of the Holy Spirit when they repented from their sins and put their trust in Jesus find *another* law working *inside* them. This is the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus (Rom.8:2) that works against the sinful desires coming up from the flesh (Gal.5:16,17). It is as we follow this law of life that we get transformed into the life of Christ.

Sanctification

Receiving forgiveness of sins and justification is only the

beginning of salvation. Once we are accepted by God as His children He begins to work in us to transform our actual lives into His character. This process is called sanctification, that continues all through the rest of our life. Sanctification means to be set apart for God and to be made holy. Some people imagine that when one is born again he is also at the same time 'sanctified entirely' as if there is nothing more to be done. But the fact that we are tempted to sin even afterwards shows us that this is not true. Some others claim that when one is baptised in the Holy Spirit he is sanctified entirely – body, soul and spirit. This too is to be unrealistic. In reality sanctification means to be made holy in a practical sense – God causes us whom He has declared to be righteous and accepted in His sight to actually become righteous in our practical life. In other words, He wants to translate our judicial position before Him to become our real, practical position; He wants us who are 'in Christ' to actually become like Christ in our behaviour. This takes place little by little and it is a lifelong process.

When we are born again we are wholly set apart (sanctified) from God's side as belonging to Him and not to the world anymore. At the same time He also wants to sanctify us entirely in a practical sense in our body, soul and spirit, which is the goal of this lifelong process of sanctification (1Thess.5:23). The first is our position in the sight of God, and the second is the process that we go through from then onwards.

This process of sanctification takes place as the Holy Spirit works in our life *and* we cooperate with Him by submitting to Him (Rom.8:13). Some make the mistake of thinking that all they have to do is to read the word of God and 'behold' the beauty of the Lord there, misunderstanding 2 Corinthians 3:18. Others claim that since they are under grace automatically sin will stop having any power in their lives, misquoting Romans 6:14. This is what comes from reading verses independently of others! We shall look at this subject in more detail in a later chapter.

Glorification

This final stage of salvation is what will happen when we are raised up to be with Christ and we are given 'glorified' bodies that are perfect and without sin or sickness or any blemish. Then we will no longer have any remains of our old nature with us that will tempt us to do wrong. That is how we will be for eternity.

CHAPTER 7

FORGIVENESS OF SINS

“Behold, the Lord’s hand is not so short that it cannot save; nor is His ear so dull that it cannot hear. But your iniquities have made a separation between you and your God, and your sins have hidden His face from you so that He does not hear” (Isa.59:1,2). The fact is that every single one of us has sinned in many ways in our thoughts, words and deeds, in doing what we should not have done and not doing what we ought to have done. The result is that there is no way we can go near God on our own merit. The righteousness and justice of God demand that sin must be punished with death – eternal separation from God. Yet the love of God for the people whom He has created compels Him to seek us out. Both these sides of God – His righteousness and love – met on the cross of Calvary where the Son of God was sacrificed to bear the punishment for our sins. God’s love has triumphed over His justice by meeting its demands Himself, thereby making it possible for Him to extend His love to us.

The Cost Of Forgiveness

When we experience forgiveness from God freely when we go to Him humbly acknowledging our sins and sinfulness, we need to recognise that it cost God the most precious thing He had – His only Son – in order to become able to grant us forgiveness. Jesus had to suffer, shed His blood and die on the cross in order to bear our sins. That is how much God loves us. This knowledge is what should prevent us from taking His forgiveness for granted, as if it was something cheap. Otherwise we might tend to use grace as an excuse for sin (Gal.5:13). We may choose to give in to sin without fear if we presume on forgiveness being freely available to us just for the cost of confessing our sin afterwards! But God who sees our heart cannot be fooled (6:7).

Under the Law in the old covenant, there was provision of forgiveness only when someone committed a sin *unintentionally* (e.g., Lev.4:2). When someone disobeyed God's law knowingly, he could not escape the punishment. For example, after the law of the Sabbath was given, a man who went out picking firewood on a Sabbath day was stoned to death (Num.15:32–36). We have another example in the case of Ananias and Sapphira in Acts 5 where these two people died when they chose to tell lies to the apostles. If we think this was harsh, let us remember that God is always just. Let us also understand that it is possible that God used these instances in the beginning of the old and the new covenants respectively to teach people through examples how He viewed sin. What we see in general, however, is that He mixes His righteousness and grace together in that He does not usually punish people immediately but gives them time to repent.

God is willing to forgive us even our deliberate sins if we truly repent afterwards. But we must remember that we cannot fool God with merely an external pretence of repentance.

One of the remarkable aspects of God's unmerited favour towards us in the new covenant is that He would be merciful towards our sins (Heb.8:12). He says He will not 'remember them anymore'. The omniscient God who knows our past, present and future cannot actually *forget* anything. What He promises is that He will not recall our sins from His memory and hold them against us. He has completely cleared up every accusation that His laws had against us. Once we see this clearly, we do not have to feel guilty every time we remember our past.

When we first go to God as a sinner and receive His forgiveness, He not only forgives our sins but He also forgives us as a person! *We* are forgiven and justified. He accepts us as we are, with all our present shortcomings and weaknesses too. He takes away our guilt and our shame. We can walk with our

heads lifted high with humble boldness. When we fall, we confess our sins and receive forgiveness. But there will be many sins we fall into even without being aware of what we are doing wrong. The blood of Jesus keeps washing all our sins as long as we are walking in the light – open with God, not trying to hide or justifying ourselves (1Jn.1:7). Our forgiveness is not based on our confessing every sin but confessing we are sinners who need His mercy. It is practically impossible to confess every single sin, because we can't even remember many of them and we aren't even aware of many others. We don't have to worry if we would be denied heaven if we died before confessing some sin! Think what happened to the thief on the cross who went with Jesus to Paradise.

Some people point out that Jesus has died only once and so He has paid even for our future sins. Therefore they say that if we fall into any sin after we have been forgiven we do not have to confess them because we are already forgiven! Some of them even say that if we now confess our sins it would be insulting God by implying that He has not forgiven us those sins. Even if this appears to be reasonable, it is an error. The Bible tells us that what He wants us to do is to stop sinning but that if we fall into sin we can go to Jesus who is our Advocate and who has made the sacrifice for our sins (1Jn.1:1,2). We also know that God asks us to confess our sins and receive forgiveness and cleansing (1Jn.1:9). We ask for forgiveness because we realise we have sinned against God who loved us and gave His Son for us. It is an acknowledgement of our sin and also a thankful receiving of His forgiveness. It causes us to feel sorrow for grieving our Father and helps us to renew our repentance. It also helps us ask God earnestly for wisdom and grace to handle the next temptation rightly. What a lot we will miss if we do not acknowledge or confess our sins! We may even begin to take sin lightly and forgiveness for granted.

Two Sides Of Forgiveness

We receive forgiveness from God for our sins as an unmerited favour He shows upon us. When we ask for forgiveness we must remember how we have violated God's holy laws and what we really deserve for that. Our confession of sins must come from a broken heart that sorrows over our sin (1Jn.1:9;2Cor.7:10,11;Psa.51:17). If our forgiveness is on this basis, then it must be that our forgiving others who have sinned against us must be also on the same basis – as an unmerited favour towards them. If we hold back anyone's forgiveness saying he does not deserve it, we are actually negating the grounds for our own forgiveness. That is why Jesus said that if we do not forgive others their sins, then our Heavenly Father will not also forgive us (Matt.6:14,15).

There is a very important parable Jesus said concerning this subject (Matt.18:21-35). A king forgave one of his servants who owed him a lot of money. But this servant would not forgive a fellow servant who owed him comparatively very little. When the king heard about it, he *took back* the forgiveness he had already given and put him in prison. Jesus concluded the story saying that the Heavenly Father would deal in the same way with anyone who would not forgive others.

I think we must also remember at this point that God understands our struggle with trying to forgive someone who has done us severe harm, especially if we are still suffering from the consequences. But the ones He is going to be severe towards will be only those who refuse to forgive others while wanting free forgiveness for themselves.

We must realise that when we go to God for getting forgiveness from Him based on His grace, we are at the same time declaring that we do not have any right to sit in judgment over anyone else because we are all on the same side of God, with none of us deserving forgiveness from Him.

Practical Forgiveness

One difficulty with regards to receiving or giving forgiveness can be the state of our feelings. It may be that even after we have repented and confessed our sins we do not *feel* forgiven. We may be still troubled with feelings of guilt or doubt. On the other side, even after we have decided to forgive someone we may find that feelings of anger may come up when we remember the one we have forgiven. Then we may wonder if we have really forgiven him.

Remember that our feelings have been corrupted because of the Fall. They are not directly under our control. Also, the Devil may stir up our feelings in order to cast doubts into our mind. But the secret of victory is to recognise that forgiveness is a decision that we deliberately make, and not something that is dependent on feelings. God forgives us when we confess our sins, and that is a fact, irrespective of how we feel afterwards. When we forgive someone, that is what we decide to do, and that also does not depend on how much time it takes for our feelings to follow. What we need to do after we have confessed our sins to God is to remind ourselves that if we have done our part, God can be trusted to have done His part (1Jn.1:9). Then every time feelings of doubt or guilt come up in our mind we can tell ourselves God has already forgiven us, and then refuse to entertain any further discussion about it! Similarly, after we have forgiven someone and feelings of anger rise up, we can remind ourselves that we have already forgiven them! When we do this reminders a few times we will find that our feelings stop troubling us.

There are some more practical aspects regarding forgiveness we need to know. Since God is at once the Lawgiver and the Forgiver, He demands that we should first repent and confess our sins before He forgives us. However, since we are only recipients of grace we have no right to demand repentance or apology from others before we forgive them. We must learn to forgive them as soon as we realise they have done us wrong. That is how we have to forgive even those who remain our

enemies. Jesus identified Himself with man in such a way that even when people were crucifying Him He forgave them from His heart (Lk.23:34). What did He mean when He said they did not know what they were doing? They certainly knew they were crucifying Him. What they did not know were important things such as that He was their Messiah who had come to save them, that He had done them no harm but only good, and that they would heap upon themselves severe judgment from God for this heinous act. For us too, it is this attitude of Jesus that will help us in forgiving everyone who does harm to us.

When we forgive someone their sins against us, we are only declaring that we have no right to judge them, and cleansing *our* heart towards them. Also we recognise the fact that as sinful people, even if we were to judge, our judgment can never be fully righteous or merciful. Even after we have 'forgiven' them, their sins will remain before God till they repent. Only He has the authority to make that final decision. When we forgive them we pass them to God who, we can be sure, will give a perfectly righteous and merciful judgment (Rom.12:19).

It is very common to hear well-meaning people suggest that we should not only forgive the sins of others, we must also forget them – 'forgive and forget'. It sounds nice, but it is not something God asks us to do because it is unrealistic! What we will find is that the more we try to forget, the more it comes up to our mind! That is the way our mind works. What God wants is for us to 'let go' and stop holding sins against the others, just as He does towards us (Heb.8:12). After we have forgiven, every time the memory comes up in our mind we can remind ourselves that the matter has already been settled and refuse to think about it anymore. We can immediately divert our attention to some other subject! After we have done this a few times we will notice that this particular subject is coming up less and less times to our mind.

If we have done wrong to others, it is only right that we

apologise to them and set things right with them as far as possible. Remember that once we have hurt them whatever we may do afterwards cannot retract that hurt fully. It is only right that we clear our heart in humility and acknowledge our sin. Also, it is only righteous for us to make retribution and restoration to the extent possible from our side.

We must realise from a practical point of view that whenever we sin against someone we lose their trust to some extent. It may take time, sometime a long time, depending on how badly we broken their trust, to restore that trust. It will not be right for us to *demand* that after we have apologised the others should restore their relationship as before.

Some are confused about Jesus saying that, if we are about to make an offering to God and then we remember that 'a brother has something against us', we should leave the offering and go immediately and settle the matter with him and then come back to make the offering (Matt.5:23,24). In a practical sense, this refers to situations where *we* have done wrong to someone and then we remember that it has not been settled. We are not under any bondage by which we have to go around appeasing everyone who is offended with us because of some misunderstanding on their part!

Lastly, forgiveness and reconciliation are not the same, as many assume. Someone may forgive us, or we may forgive someone else. This forgiveness may happen entirely from one side. But it is not practical to expect that there would be a restoration of relationship until things have been sorted out from both sides. God is very practical about this, and tells us to be at peace with others *as far as it lies with us* (Rom.12:18). Some people may not accept our apology or forgive us even after we have genuinely repented. But that is something we cannot control, and so we do only what we *can from our side*. On the other hand, we may forgive someone but recognise that since the other person has not repented and changed towards

us, we may decide that it would be in our interest to keep a distance in order to avoid getting hurt again.

CHAPTER 8

WATER BAPTISM

“Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age”

(Matt.28:19,20). It is clear what Jesus planned. When the preaching of the Gospel caused people to be born again, one of the first things they had to do was to get baptised in water and then continue to obey everything Jesus had taught. That was how they would become ‘disciples’ of Jesus, or those who chose to learn from Jesus as their Master.

Baptism in water was one of the two outward acts Jesus wanted His people to take part in, the other being the ‘breaking of bread’ (which some call the Holy Communion or the Lord’s Supper). Both have no value in the physical acts themselves. Their value is in what they signify. We shall look at the meaning and significance of water baptism first.

The word ‘baptism’ itself is a transliteration of the Greek word *baptisma* used in the New Testament that literally means “immersion, submersion or making fully wet” (Strong’s Greek Dictionary). What it means for a person to be baptised in water is explained by Paul in Romans 6:3-10. This is a depiction of how we identify ourselves with Jesus as He died on the cross, was buried and rose up from the grave. When Jesus died on the cross, our old man was crucified with Him (v.6), and when Jesus was buried, our old man was buried with Him (v.4). When Christ rose again from the dead, it signifies that we too have entered into the power of His risen life that we can now enjoy (vv.8,9). The simple act of being ‘buried’ in the water and then coming out from it signifies the burial of our old life and the receiving of the new life in Christ.

The first fact we must address is that this can be meaningfully gone through only by someone for whom these spiritual events are true. In other words, when someone goes through baptism he is proclaiming figuratively that his old life is over and buried, and that he has received a new life from Christ. It is only one who has been born again and who has come into the new life with Christ who can enact that experience through the act of baptism. We should not reverse this and make it as if someone who gets baptised gets born again. Baptism is not a means to regenerate an unbeliever into becoming a believer, but a testimony demonstrating what God has done through grace in his life.

It becomes obvious now that the practice of 'baptising' babies is not correct since they have not yet come into the experience of salvation and they have no understanding or choice in what they are being made to go through. And by making them go through this ritual they cannot receive salvation either. People who go through the meaningless ritual of baptising babies know that there is something wrong there, and so it is that they have added another ritual called confirmation to compensate for the lack! But two wrongs do not make a right.

It is also obvious that it is not a question of baptising only adults in contrast to baptising babies. It is not that any adult can be baptised, even if they express a wish. The question is if the person who wants to be baptised has had the experience of salvation and hence is in a position to signify his testimony meaningfully through this act.

Some people claim that baptism is a mere ritual and that since salvation is by grace through faith and not through anything that *we* do, it is really not to be made into a point of issue. However, we must not forget that Jesus Himself thought it necessary to go through water baptism even though John the baptiser tried to dissuade Him. Jesus said that it was necessary to fulfil *all* righteousness (Matt.3:15). If He thought it

was important enough to go through, as an example to those who were to follow Him, even though He Himself did not have an old life to be buried, we should make no excuse for ourselves.

Some quote Mark 16:16 to teach that there is no salvation without baptism. In order to answer this, let us look at other related parts of the Bible.

In Ephesians 2:8,9 where Paul explains the way of salvation, there is no mention of baptism as a necessity for salvation. That salvation is through faith is the teaching of the Bible as a whole. When the Philippian jailor asked Paul what he needed to do in order to be saved, Paul's answer was again clear that it was through faith (Acts 16:30,31). After the jailor and his family listened to the message of the Gospel and believed, then they were baptised (vv.32,33). When Cornelius and others who heard the Gospel in his house believed, God sent them the Holy Spirit. They were baptised *afterwards*, not as a requisite for salvation (19:44-48). When the thief on the cross repented of his sins and believed in Jesus, Jesus declared that it was enough for him to be taken to heaven (Lk.23:40-43). Obviously baptism was not necessary for him. Abraham was justified through faith, without any additional qualification necessary, as is clear from the discussion about whether circumcision was also necessary (Rom.4:3,19,11).

All these examples illustrate the point that salvation is through faith alone. Why does Mark 16:16 then say, "Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved"? This verse alone cannot be taken to contradict all the other examples we have seen. Therefore it must be understood to mean something different. One clue comes from the remaining part of the verse that says, "but whoever does not believe will be condemned." If the verse was saying that baptism was necessary to be saved, this part should have said, "but whoever does not believe *and get baptised* will be condemned." But no, it does not say that.

Can we conclude that baptism is something a believer has to obey Jesus in, but not a requisite to obtain salvation? When Mark said, “Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved,” he may have been just referring to the normal sequence in the process of salvation – one believes (and gets saved) and then one gets baptised.

It is a fact that there have been many believers who have come to a very close relationship with God even though they have never been baptised in water or they have only been taken by their parents through the ritual of infant baptism. It confirms the point that baptism is not a requisite for salvation. But the fact remains that these people have not obeyed Jesus on this one point. Just imagine how much more godly they could have become if they had chosen to obey in this matter too!

Sometimes people withdraw from the choice to get baptised after they become believers because it is costly, as they may have to go against tradition and the opinion of many people. But just think of how much God will value such a sacrificial obedience!

Some people have a doubt whether they need to get baptised again if they did not know the meaning of baptism when they got baptised and now they have come to know its significance. What understanding did the 3000 have who came to believe the Gospel on the Day of Pentecost and were baptised immediately afterwards? It is not the understanding of the theology of baptism that is necessary for baptism, but a genuine experience of having been saved through faith in Jesus and the desire to obey Him.

Another question some people have is whether someone who got baptised as a ritual before he had the experience of salvation, whether it was as a baby or as an adult, should get baptised ‘again’. Once we understand that baptism in water is a depiction of what God has done in salvation in one’s life, with the putting away of the old life and the putting on of the new,

we can see that it would be a meaningless ritual for someone who has not been saved. When such a person actually comes to experience true salvation, that is the time to obey Jesus in baptism. Since that is the real baptism, it cannot be considered as a *second* baptism!

CHAPTER 9

BAPTISM IN THE HOLY SPIRIT

The same John the baptiser who said about Jesus, “Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!” (Jn.1:29) also said, “As for me, I baptize you with water; but One is coming who is mightier than I, and I am not fit to untie the thong of His sandals; *He will baptise you with the Holy Spirit and fire*” (Lk.3:16). If we want to receive *everything* the Lord has made ready for us, the baptism with the Holy Spirit and fire is one thing we should not miss. Just as in the case of the baptism in water, there is also great controversy among Christians about this subject.

Admittedly, there is a lot of counterfeit and excessive behaviour among some who believe in this baptism. But that should not cause us to withdraw from it or keep away from it, because, if we do that, we will miss one of the great blessings of the new covenant. It is one of the promises under the new covenant (Ez.36:26,27) that He will give us a new spirit, and God has said He would pour out His Spirit on all flesh in the last days (Joel.2:28,29).

First of all, being born again of the Spirit is not the same as being baptised with the Spirit. It is the work of the Holy Spirit to cause us to be born again (Jn.3:5), and *everyone* who belongs to Christ has the Holy Spirit dwelling in him (Rom.8:9). But it is our privilege to also be baptised (immersed) in the Holy Spirit afterwards. Jesus was conceived of the Holy Spirit, but after He was baptised in water, the Holy Spirit came upon Him in the form of a dove signifying two different experiences that are available for us.

The first time believers in Jesus Christ were baptised in the Holy Spirit was on the Day of Pentecost. On that occasion, there was the sound of a rushing wind, flames of fire in the

shape of tongues resting on those gathered, and all of them speaking in unknown languages that visitors from other places could identify. But it was not in these things that the major impact was felt. It was that the disciples who had been hiding because of the fear of the Jewish leaders suddenly became bold, and they also began to operate the gifts of the Spirit such as prophecy, miracles, healing, etc. They had received 'power' as Jesus had promised them before He was taken up to heaven (Acts.1:8). It is when we give more importance to the 'special effects' of the experience rather than to what the Holy Spirit does in transforming our lives that we give rise to many controversies.

We are born again through the work of the Holy Spirit when we come to God after repenting from our sins and placing our trust in the Saviour. But the same Holy Spirit comes upon us and immerses us as He imparts to us His power and gifts. It would be detrimental to our growth and ministry if we neglect this special anointing that He gives. Jesus said, "You will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be My witnesses both in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and even to the remotest part of the earth." 'Being witnesses' has two parts to it, the first one of becoming the kind of person who represents Christ in every place, and the second of having the supernatural power to minister to people.

The power of the Holy Spirit working in us is supernatural. Many people are impressed by the natural abilities and the charisma of different people who speak, sing or do other things that are considered as 'ministry'. But think of a person like the apostle Paul who was not impressive as a man or as an orator, but whose words and deeds had the inimitable signature of the Holy Spirit in being able to reach deep into the lives of people and start lasting changes there. Do we want to impress others or truly bless them? Do we want to be channels through which the almighty God can work supernaturally to bless the others?

How much we need to rely on the power of the Holy Spirit!

Objections Answered

One objection that some people bring up against what they derisively refer to as a 'second' experience is that they have relegated the experience of the baptism in the Holy Spirit to the time of the early apostles. They say that it was a sign to validate the apostles and their teachings, and that once the whole Bible became available in the present form such signs were no longer necessary. They use two arguments to explain this, one by referring to the Bible and the other by looking at church history.

They refer to the passage in 1 Corinthians 13 where Paul says that when a man becomes mature, he puts away childish things. When the perfect comes, the imperfect means to represent the perfect is no longer required. Prophecy, tongues and knowledge that are mentioned as 'imperfect' are expected to lose their relevance when the 'perfect' comes. But the mistake is in assuming that Paul was referring to the availability of the full Bible when he was talking about the coming of the perfect! He is actually referring to our life in eternity when we are face to face with the Lord when signs are no longer necessary (v.12).

Think of the present times when life on earth has become very difficult especially for Christians who want to be faithful to their Lord in every aspect of life (2Tim.3:1). Don't we think that we need the power of the Holy Spirit more now than ever before in order to *be* proper witnesses to the Lord in our life and to do our ministry more effectively? Is this a time when the Lord will leave us to our own resources to manage somehow?

Secondly, some people point to church history and say that the supernatural workings among Christians seem to have disappeared after the time of the early church. They take this to be a confirmation of their first argument. Actually, much of

church history that is generally known is a story of backsliding, compromise, politicisation, and worldliness overpowering the church. It is only natural that when the Holy Spirit is not valued or respected He will withdraw to the background. On the other hand, the parallel history of smaller groups of Christians in different places indicates that the Holy Spirit was still active working supernatural things among them during the times when He was not welcome among the mainline churches. Fulfilling His prophecy for the last days (Joel.2:28), God has now caused an awakening to happen worldwide that makes people recognise the Holy Spirit, His anointing and His gifts.

Counterfeits

One major hindrance to Christians submitting to the work of the Holy Spirit in their lives and seeking for His baptism and gifts is that there are quite a lot of things that put them off. There are counterfeit experiences coming through deceiving spirits or human manipulations, distortions of doctrine and explanations, and excessive behaviour among those who claim to be filled with the Spirit.

Jesus tells us that the Father is extremely eager to give us the Holy Spirit and He has guaranteed that if we ask Him for the gift of the Holy Spirit He would not give us some other substitutes (Lk.11:5–13). Then why is it that many people end up with counterfeits? The answer may be that they ask with wrong motives. In the passage above, we see that Jesus used the story of a man who went to a neighbour to request for some bread to meet the need of a visitor. This man was not seeking anything for himself but for his friend. We can see the connection between this story and seeking for the Holy Spirit when we note that the gifts of the Holy Spirit are *for serving the others* (1Cor.12:7). We can guess why people who seek spiritual gifts for their own advantage end up with counterfeits.

Some time ago, when the charismatic movement came up, a lot of people suddenly became interested in speaking in tongues.

Some of them tried to bring out some syllables (unrecognisable and repetitive) and some others were prodded along by their pastors. Some got into a pursuit of tongues with high zeal, and sometimes ended up with tongues from deceiving spirits. If their goal was to somehow speak in tongues and join the club of tongue speakers, they got what they wanted! But if what they sought after was genuine power from the Holy Spirit to be witnesses for Jesus, then His guarantee of genuineness would have been held true. God looks very much at our motives and intentions (Heb.4:12).

In a similar way now, if we are seeking for thrilling experiences, a name before others, or some other carnal goal like that, we can fool ourselves or even open ourselves to deceiving spirits. If we look at many of the 'anointed ministries' around us, we can see that it is not the genuine anointing. A genuine anointing of the Holy Spirit will produce genuine fruit – "You shall know them by their fruit" (Matt.7:15-20) – the fruit of the Spirit in the individual's life and fruit in the lives he ministers to, and the name of Jesus being lifted up (Jn.16:14).

Being Baptised In The Spirit

Luke 11:13 says that God will give His children the gift of the Holy Spirit if they ask Him. As we have seen already, this asking must be done sincerely, earnestly and with the right motive of receiving power to become His witnesses. Sometimes God waits before He answers, to test if we really want this with all our heart. If we want this desperately, we will keep asking till we receive. If we are not so eager, we will give up after some time. During this time of waiting, we will also get chances to purify our motives and also to submit to Him more.

It is also good to ask someone we respect as a godly leader to lay hands on us and pray for us so that we may be baptised in the Holy Spirit (1Tim.4:14). It is not necessary that we should do this, because God baptises people with the Holy Spirit (e.g., Cornelius) even where there is no one to lay hands and pray for

them.

We receive this baptism by faith, just as we receive salvation (Gal.3:5). The main sign that shows God has baptised us with the Holy Spirit is the deep assurance that comes in our heart (Heb.11:1). Usually there is also some form of ecstatic feeling of joy that may be accompanied by speaking out in an unknown language. The exact form of this experience varies for different people according to God's choice. What happened at Pentecost has not happened since, and different people quote different experiences. It binds people down unnecessarily if someone insists that there should be a speaking in an unknown language, because not everyone will have that gift (1Cor.12:30). It is a good thing to be able to speak in tongues because that gives us an ability to express things in our heart that are beyond our normal comprehension (e.g., when we overflow with praises to God or when we are overwhelmed with trouble in our heart). The apostle Paul talks about how it builds us up personally when we speak in this way to the Lord (1Cor.14:4), and he wishes that everyone would speak in tongues (v.5). But he suggests that one should not speak in tongues in a church meeting unless there is someone who has the complementary gift of interpreting its meaning (vv.27,28).

The baptism in the Holy Spirit is usually accompanied by the impartation of one or more supernatural gifts of the Holy Spirit. It is also possible that further gifts may be given later.

Also, a genuine baptism in the Holy Spirit will result in empowering us to be transformed into His nature. We will find a greater love for the Lord and a willingness to serve Him.

One thing we must remember is that it is possible for us to grieve or quench the Holy Spirit by our careless lives. Therefore, it is good for us to keep the fire going in our lives by staying close to the Lord, and judging and cleansing ourselves whenever we fail Him. Just as a piece of coal has a greater chance to be ablaze when it is with other pieces of coal on fire,

fellowship with other believers who are earnestly following the Lord will help us to purify ourselves constantly.

Gifts Of The Spirit

Usually the Lord gives one or more gifts of the Holy Spirit along with power when He baptises us in the Holy Spirit. All of these gifts are meant to be used for blessing the others (remember, He gives us power so that we can be His witnesses), except the gift of speaking in tongues which has a double purpose. If we speak in tongues and there is someone present who can interpret what God is saying through us, then it blesses the others. On the other hand, if we speak in tongues in our conversation with the Lord, we do not understand what we are saying, but it serves to build us up in our fellowship with the Lord as it encourages us in our faith (1Cor.14:4). But in general, all other gifts are for serving the others. So we can see that the best way to receive these gifts is if we have a strong desire to bless others. When we want to minister to others and we find our human limitations hindering us, it is good to go to God and ask for spiritual gifts to serve the others with.

If we seek these gifts for personal thrill or glory, there is a strong chance that we make ourselves open to deceiving spirits who will give us counterfeit gifts. These counterfeit gifts may also have supernatural power because they come from demons. But then we get the gifts without the anointing that comes from God. Also, evil spirits who give us such gifts will also try ultimately to ruin us (Jn.10:10). When we seek spiritual gifts with wrong motives, it is also possible that we use our human abilities to imitate the working of the gifts such as speaking in tongues or prophesying.

Many people ask God for gifts that will place them before the public eye and make them shine before the others. But the fact of the matter is that it is God who chooses which gift to give to whom depending on His knowledge and plan (1Cor.12:11). If we want to serve God in a godly way we should be willing to leave

the choice to Him knowing that He knows best. When we are not sure which gift He wants to give us, it is not wrong to ask Him according to our desires, but being at the same time willing to submit to His will.

Gifts And Ministry

Every born again believer is a member of the body of Christ on earth which carries on with the work Christ has to do here now. Each one has a unique function to carry out, just as in the case of the parts of the physical body. There are three lists of these functions given in the Bible. In 1 Corinthians 12 we read about apostles, prophets, teachers, miracle workers, healing ministry, helps, administration, and tongues. In Romans 12 we see prophecy, serving, teaching, exhortation, giving, leading, and acts of mercy. In Ephesians 4 we see apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors (shepherds) and teachers. What we can see from these is that these lists are just indicative and not exhaustive. There can be many other types of service in the body of Christ that are not mentioned here. We need not think we are useless or we are not in the body of Christ if our particular form of service is not found here or we are not prominent like some others (1Cor.12:15).

Some people wonder what ministry it is that God has called them to. Many times God does not call us in a special, supernatural way like we read about some people in the Bible, but He indicates His plan to us indirectly by giving us a burden for some task. We see some need, and we start to be concerned about it more and more. Finally we start doing something about it in a small way, and we get encouraged because it blesses some others. Sometimes our ministry may get enlarged, but sometimes it may be that God wants us to stay in the gap and fulfil some work that nobody is there to do, and we may never become well-known or big.

Sometimes we may wonder if the ministry we have in mind is what God is calling us to do or if we are imagining things. The

best thing to do is ask the Lord to make things clear to us as we wait for Him. When we recognise the possibility that we could be making a mistake, we can lean on Him more strongly and submit ourselves more clearly to doing His will. Finally we may take a few small steps in the direction of our faith, and God's support in the form of encouragement, boldness or circumstances working out can confirm if the direction is right.

The ministry that God gives us needs to be supported by the relevant spiritual gifts also. We recognise that we cannot do God's work with merely human abilities, and so we depend on Him for strength, wisdom and guidance. We will notice that our personality, our abilities, our circumstances and our burdens will usually be fitting together to allow the task for which God has called. This makes us all different from one another. An evangelist is burdened about perishing souls, a teacher is concerned about the ignorance people have about God's truths, a pastor carries the care for the problems people face, etc.

The example of the body and the different parts illustrates for us how interdependent we are on other members of the body. None of us can stand all by ourselves. We all need to support and receive support from other people who are carrying out other parts of God's work on earth. This is how we need to submit to one another (Eph.5:21), recognising and honouring the work others do which we are not good at. But this is also a great challenge for us in practice because we all tend to think as if we were self-sufficient in all things and did not need others.

Some people who want to be 'led by the Spirit' (Rom.8:14) go to the extreme of doing nothing, waiting for the Spirit to speak. But we must remember that God does much of His work in cooperation with us. As we get to know God better, He expects us to take more responsibility for our work too. He does not want us to be like robots that are programmed to do certain things or animals that have to be controlled to do their tasks

(Psa.32:8,9). At the same time, others who have a tendency to take everything into their hands need to learn how to wait on the Spirit to receive His guidance.

CHAPTER 10

THE LORD'S SUPPER

As referred to variously by different groups of Christians as the Lord's Supper, the Lord's Table, the Breaking of Bread, and the Holy Communion, this is one of the two external practices that Jesus has prescribed for us Christians. (Some add 'washing of feet' – Jn.13:1-20 – also to this list. But since this has not been seen to have been practised in the Acts of the Apostles or elaborated further in the epistles in the New Testament addressed to the churches, most Christians believe that it was only something that Jesus did in order to teach the idea of servant leadership.) The initiation of the practice of the Lord's Supper was made by Jesus on the night in which He was betrayed and arrested, and it is described in Lk.22:1-22 and taught later in 1Cor.11:23-34.

To understand the significance of this, we must look back to the night the children of Israel left Egypt after their years of slavery there. The tenth plague that God brought upon Egypt before they were willing to let Israel leave was the killing of the first born in all the families in Egypt. God preserved the Israelites from this calamity by preparing them through a solemn ceremony that later became a festival known as the Passover. Each family in Israel was to take and kill a lamb and sprinkle its blood on the two posts and lintel of the door of their house. When the Angel of Death went through the streets of Egypt, he would *pass over* the houses that had this blood on their door. Afterwards, the Israelites were to celebrate a Feast of the Passover on the same day every year.

The lamb of the Passover pointed to Jesus, God's first-begotten Son, who would one day be killed for the sins of the whole world, and those who put their trust in Him would be spared from the judgment that was to come on the rest of the world. Jesus actually died on the Day of Passover in that year, and

when He had supper with His disciples on the previous night, He was taking part in the Feast of the Passover.

Now when we take part in the Lord's Supper, we remember the death of Jesus on our behalf and the new covenant that He brought out for us through that death. The bread represents the body of Jesus that was broken for us and the wine (or grape juice that some substitute for wine) stands for the blood He shed for us that ratified the new covenant He brought in. Every time we participate in the Lord's Supper, it is an opportunity for us to remember what Jesus has done for us, to give Him thanks for it and to rededicate ourselves with repentance to walking in faith before Him.

It will be also good for us to think of the Body of Christ which is the universal church and see if our relationship with the other members of this body is right. This gives us an opportunity to decide to set things right at the earliest opportunity if the Lord reminds us of any existing tension in this area. Jesus told us to do this in connection with making an offering to God when we remember that we have to set things right with a brother whom we have wronged (Matt.5:21-26).

Some Christians tend to think of the Lord's Supper as a *sacrament*, as a religious ritual that imparts a certain blessing from God. There is no blessing from God if we take part in this as a mere ritual. The blessing comes when we remember what Jesus has done for us and then respond to it. There is no forgiveness of sins that anyone can get just by eating the bread and drinking the wine, as some people assume who give Communion to those who are facing death. Forgiveness comes only when someone repents from their sins and puts their trust in Jesus. It is also true that when someone who has no personal relationship with Jesus takes part in the Communion he does not receive any blessing.

On the other hand, there could be serious discipline from God if someone takes part in the Lord's Supper "in an unworthy

manner” (1Cor.11:27-30). This could range from taking part in a casual or careless manner without thankfully remembering the death of Jesus and responding to it, to taking part when continuing in deliberate sin without repentance. Therefore it would be right to ‘examine oneself’ honestly and sincerely before the Lord as we take part. If we find there are things that need to be attended to in our life, we can confess them to God, repent, and if it would take more time, make a decision to set things right as soon as possible, and then take part.

Some Christians seem to be taken up with the external form of breaking bread than with the transactions that go on between our heart and God when we take part. Some argue that it should be done every Sunday, quoting Acts 20:7. But remember, in the beginning days of the church, they used to break bread every day (Acts 2:46)! When Paul writes down instructions for the church in 1 Corinthians 11, he does not lay down any rule regarding the frequency of breaking bread but only about doing it in the right way. We should not miss the forest for the trees, as they say.

Some others point out that the way Jesus broke bread with His disciples was suitable for the Jewish culture of that time and that it might look ‘foreign’ to other cultures. Their focus now turns to adapting the procedure to be in line with the local cultures where it is to be practised now. Many times this only ends up in some confusion which is quite unnecessary. Christianity is very much linked to the Jews and Jewish culture in its origin and history, and instead of trying to eliminate the connection, giving appropriate explanations and pointing out the links may be more meaningful.

CHAPTER 11

BIBLE, PRAYER, FELLOWSHIP

Someone has said that reading the Bible, praying and fellowship with other believers are like three legs of a stool on which we can sit safely. If any one of the legs is missing, the stool becomes very unstable. Certainly we primarily need the presence of God in our life at all times. But it is foolish to think that we will depend entirely on that as if it will be there automatically, and neglect what we need to do from our side to experience it more and more in our life.

The Bible is the written word through which God primarily reveals Himself to us. But this is not the *only way* God reveals Himself. He uses different means at different times for different people, through visions, dreams, prophetic words, circumstances, speaking directly in our heart, etc. But His word has a prominent position in this revelation. Therefore, whenever we believe God is speaking to us, it is safer for us to check it to see if it agrees with what He has already revealed in the Bible; obviously God will not contradict Himself at different times. There is obviously a level of subjectivity on our side in understanding when God applies some part of the word individually to us. But then we have the advantage of being able to check that out with what is revealed in the rest of the Bible!

(I use 'word' with small letters when I refer to the words in the Bible as the word of God because neither the Bible nor the words in it are *God* but only His word. But I use 'Word' when it refers to the Jesus, the Son of God, as the Word who became flesh.)

We take the Bible as the benchmark when it comes to doctrines about God, His character, His dealings with people from the time of creation and the Fall, the way of salvation that He has

prepared for us, His plans for the future, etc. This is needed because our experiences alone are not a sure foundation to build doctrines. The interpretation we give to our experiences may depend on our temperament, our family background, the previous experiences we have gone through, the philosophies or doctrines that we have accepted and followed till now, etc. If there is no reliable standard to which everyone can refer, our interpretations and the resulting doctrines can differ widely. And that is what is happening to many people, resulting in great confusion. Remember that deceitful spirits are also at work, seeking to confuse and lead people away from God (1Tim.4:1). But when we hold that what the Bible reveals is reliable because it is what God has inspired people to write down (2Tim.3:16,17), we can check the authenticity of our experiences with the Bible and see its true nature.

It is very sad that many present day Christians have not read the Bible properly or fully, but they depend mostly on what preachers tell them. And many preachers themselves have not studied the Bible properly! As a result, there is a huge amount of confusion among Christians leading to divisions and strife. So, one of the reasons why each one of us needs to read the Bible personally is to try and get a first-hand knowledge about God and His ways.

If we have been born again by the grace of God and through our faith in Jesus, it is the word of God on which we have to feed in order to grow up in our relationship with Him. Initially it becomes our milk (1Pet.2:1,2) and later on as we grow, our meat (Heb.5:13,14). Understanding the word of God and reordering our lives according to it brings us into a closer walk with God and helps us to relate to Him as a real Person. We are not thinking here about an intellectual understanding, but about getting to know God personally as the Holy Spirit reveals His truths to us.

Intellectual understanding alone is not sufficient for this, and,

in fact, that can even deaden our mind and heart towards God. But when we wait, as it were, sitting at His feet and listening to what He has to tell us as we read His word, our inner 'eyes' get opened to see His truths (Eph.1:18). We must remember that the Bible is not an ordinary book that anyone can read and understand, but we need the Holy Spirit who inspired the authors to write it to reveal the truths to us before we can understand it truly. We need to understand spiritual truths spiritually and not merely intellectually. The Bible refers to "knowing as we ought to know" (1Cor.8:2). Sometimes His word 'becomes alive' as we read it, but many times it is as we sit and meditate on His word, pondering over it, connecting it with other passages in the Bible, asking God for understanding, that we get to grasp it and it grips our heart (Prov.2:1-5). Then it begins to shape our life.

One secret of getting insight into the truths in word of God is to be clear in our mind that whenever the word convinces us about any truth, we would be willing to change our life to fit in with that truth. God is not interested in satisfying our curiosity about the truth, but that we should know it and it should set us free (Jn.8:32). Therefore He looks to see in our heart whether we are willing to obey Him before He reveals His precious truths to us (Jn.7:17). That is why we see that God was able to show His *ways* only to Moses while the rest of the people could only see His *acts* (Psa.103:7).

We can make the mistake of reading the Bible as a duty or a routine when we think we *have to* read a certain portion every day. Then it becomes boring and a chore. But if we go to it eagerly, waiting to hear what God wants to tell us today, it will profit us even more than physical food (Matt.4:4;Lk.10:41,42).

At the same time it is good to have a regular habit of reading the Bible. Most people do it as the first thing when they get up in the morning, but for some people other times of the day may be more convenient. But it is good to make it regular, at the

same time of the day, in the same place, so that it becomes a habit.

In addition to this regular time, it is also good to snatch a few minutes of free time whenever they become available, to catch up with the word of God. Carrying a pocket New Testament in the pocket and reading it when we wait for a bus, while travelling, during the lunch break, etc., will produce great results! Now people can also use a smartphone or computer to read the Bible or listen to an audio Bible from a music player!

We will find that there will be days in which we get ‘nothing’ from our reading, because of various reasons, but it is good to keep up the discipline of reading the Bible even then.

Sometimes the Holy Spirit brings up what we have read then into our mind later when the need arises! It is also good to keep reading the ‘difficult’ portions and the ‘boring’ parts because one day we see the benefit!

As we keep reading, we will find that the Bible is not only giving us information about God and His ways, but it becomes ‘living’ as God speaks to us personally through it. It comforts, encourages, lifts up, guides, corrects, teaches, trains, warns and exhorts us in relation to our practical situations that we face. It becomes a medium through which we become connected with God in a real way, along with our prayers.

There has been a lot of confusion among Christians because of a misunderstanding about the Bible being ‘the word of God’, and some wrongly assume that this means every single sentence in it is God speaking to us directly. As a whole, it is the word that God has given to us people, that comes in the form of historical narratives, teaching, poetry, prophecy, etc. As such, every single word there is *not* God speaking to us directly, asking us to obey it. Some are words God spoke to specific people, some are words people spoke, some are historical narrations, etc. In order to understand what each passage means to us and how we must apply it, we must

understand the actual meaning of the words themselves, and also the context of those words – who spoke it to whom, God’s intentions, the historic background, the cultural context in which the original text was written and addressed to particular readers, etc. If we do not do this carefully, we can *misapply* many words in ways in which God never intended for us.

The Bible has not been written in a systematic, textbook style with everything explained neatly and unambiguously. Its revelation is given throughout the Bible in a progressive manner from Genesis to Revelation, and in order to understand it properly we must know the *whole* Bible and see individual passages as parts of the whole. This underlines the need for us to read the Bible again and again till we become familiar with the whole, and then we can get deeper into different passages. It is good to use ‘concordances’, cross references and dictionaries to understand Bible subjects better. When we first begin our study of the Bible we may like to follow some reputed commentary to guide us. But I would suggest that we slowly move towards reading and studying the Bible ourselves and using commentaries only as a source of reference in case of doubt. In this way we can let God speak to us rather than become parrots of what others have said.

As someone has said, the Bible has many treasures hidden there, and every time we read it, we may be able to see things there we have not noticed before! As we read it and understand more of the glory of God, we see how far we are from that because of the Fall, and start seeking God to transform us into His likeness (2Cor.3:18).

The second leg of the stool that represents our spiritual life is prayer. In its simplest form, a prayer is a simple *request* to God (Php.4:6). As people we are needy in many ways and it is right that we ask God our Father for help for everything. In that sense, prayer is a mark of our dependence on God. Self-sufficient people do not pray; they think they can handle

everything. Prayer is also a mark of our faith in God. Those who see their own need and put their trust in God to take care of them pray a lot. In fact, the best place for us to be in is where we pray without ceasing – in a sense non-stop in an attitude of prayer and also without giving up.

The simple practice of keeping in touch with God all the time, talking to Him in all situations, asking Him for His help in whatever we are doing, thanking Him when we are able to do anything well, asking for forgiveness when we fail and for help to do better next time, can define our life. In this way prayer becomes more than merely making requests.

Many Christians seem not to have understood the significance of the life to come – with God in eternity – and they seem to focus only on this life on earth most of the time. Their prayers are only for earthly needs, and for meeting their earthly ambitions. But we must realise that our time on earth is short and temporary, and our real enjoyment is going to come when we are with the Lord in eternity. We must think of our life here more with regards to its impact on eternity. So we are exhorted to set our mind on the things above and not on the things of this world (Col.3:1,2) and live in such a way as to be ready for that life in eternity (2Pet.3:13,14).

This is what Jesus also teaches us through what is generally referred to as the Lord's Prayer (Matt.6:9–13). This is *not* a prayer to be repeated or chanted word for word, but it is a model that teaches us certain values. We see that the top priority in that prayer is for God's name to be glorified and His will to be done on earth in every way. Of course, there is also a place for asking for our needs, but our hearts must be gripped with God, His honour and His will. Then what we ask for ourselves will also be in line with that – we will only ask for things that will glorify His name and accomplish His will.

When more and more of our prayers are taken up with His kingdom and His will, it will show that our thoughts are

becoming aligned to His thoughts. When our prayers begin to be more for the blessing of other people rather about ourselves and our family we will see that God begins to entrust to us some service (which is what 'ministry' is all about). Just as Jesus is now interceding for us, we also begin to intercede for the others.

We people have a tendency to make everything into a form that we can then easily follow. Missing the point of the Lord's Prayer and repeating it routinely is an example. There are other forms also that we make of prayer that we need to get rid of and learn to make prayer a heart to heart relationship with God. Only then will we be able to reap the blessing God has intended for us through it.

Some people think that if they prayed for long durations of time it will impress God or earn more points for them with which to bargain with Him. Some others think if they can get more people to pray for something there will be better chances of getting it. Another trend is to get some people to 'agree' with a prayer so that it will guarantee surer results. These are all a result of misunderstanding God and our relationship with Him. We can never *earn* anything from God; whatever He gives us is from His unmerited favour towards us. We can never come of a place of bargaining with God, claiming things from Him or demanding that He does certain things for us based on what we have done. Our prayer will always remain as a *request* to Him. Understanding our relationship to God in this way – as people who are totally dependent on God's grace making requests to Him – will produce better results and avoid a lot of unnecessary disappointments.

Jesus encourages us to ask Him and the Father *anything* in His name (Jn.14:14;16:26,27), because of our Father-child relationship. But we must remember that like any father on earth, our Heavenly Father also will not give us everything we ask for, because He knows some of those things are not good

for us or according to His plan for our lives. Actually, it should be comforting to us to know that He will filter our prayers and give us only what He knows is good for us. If we trust Him, we will also know that we should not desire anything other than what He wants for our lives. So, every prayer we make should be appended with this phrase, “Not my will, but Yours be done, Lord,” if not in words, but at least in spirit.

John the apostle wrote that just as the first disciples of Jesus had a close fellowship with Him and with one another he would desire the same type of fellowship for us (1Jn.1:3). Fellowship is the third leg of the stool as a metaphor for the stability of our spiritual growth. This word ‘fellowship’ has come to mean these days as nothing more than spending time with other believers and having small talk, perhaps having tea together or going out and doing something together. These kinds of activities can form an *opportunity* to get to know one another better. But the real purpose of fellowship is to strengthen, encourage, comfort, correct, guide one another as we go on our journey with the Lord and face different challenges on the way.

The Greek word used for ‘fellowship’ in the New Testament refers to ‘partnership, participation, social interaction, benefaction, communication, communion, contribution, distribution’, etc. God does not want us to be loners, and neither can we manage to complete life’s journey alone. Therefore it is God’s plan for us that there should be others to share our burdens and us to share theirs (Gal.6:1,2). If one pilgrim is suffering or lagging behind, the others are there to lend a helping hand. This works out in many different practical ways.

In the early church, some people used to sell off their property and share the money with the others in need and everyone used to consider all things as belonging to all (Acts.2:44,45). Nowadays some groups of Christians try to imitate this and live in communes. But it was obvious that this was not to be the

norm for Christians, and soon the early church gave up that practice. But the spirit of that movement – valuing one another as brothers and sisters and caring for others – is to continue all the time. Not only joining together in the activities of the church, but also in showing care for other individuals and families that are going through difficult times is to be the mark of true Christian love. In fact, Jesus said that it would be this kind of love for one another that would characterise Christians in the eyes of the world (Jn.13:34,35). In many cases, when this love extends towards those outside the church, it accomplishes evangelism that draws like a magnet.

Fellowship offers its own challenges too. Many people think that they would be all right if they were left to themselves but that it is when they have to deal with others who are different from them that problems start! Since we are all from different backgrounds in terms of family, culture and even race, it can happen that even when we desire to be a blessing to the others we may even hurt them inadvertently. And we can get hurt too. When this happens we are tempted to withdraw and keep to ourselves. But if we can see that all of us are imperfect in many ways, then we can benefit from the mistakes and hurts. As long as we are in these sinful bodies mistakes are inevitable (Jas.3:2). We can learn to humbly acknowledge our own mistakes and bear with and forgive the others, as well as learn to do things differently in future.

Even though there are apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors and teachers among us, we are not to be like the hierarchy that is seen in an office, with designations, lines of authority and responsibility. The only One to receive glory among us should be Jesus, and the rest of us should be brothers and sisters in our attitude and behaviour. The old covenant patterns of ‘priests’ and ‘ordinary people’ is not to be carried over to the new covenant because now we are *all* kings and priests before the Lord (1Pet.2:9). At the same time, God gives different ones responsibilities within the church to lead and take care of the

others and there is to be a spirit of respect and submission too. We can see that this calls for the right heart much more than legal delineations of authority.

We see both kinds of abuse in the church – those who lord it over the others and those who place no value for submission to authority. These are challenges to be faced and overcome, rather than excuses to withdraw or give in.

Communication is a big part of fellowship. If we keep our thoughts and feelings to ourselves and refrain from expressing them to the concerned people, difficulties can multiply themselves. At the same time our expressions of our thoughts and feelings have to be done with an attitude of humility and love, and with restraint. This restraint has to be there because we should take into account the maturity of those we are dealing with – whether we consider they will be able to handle what we share – and the appropriateness of what we share – whether it is designed to build our fellowship or cause further distance. We all need to grow in wisdom here that will only come as we move forward with prayer to God.

Jesus tells us an approach towards dealing with issues that come up in our interpersonal relationship in the church (Matt.18:15-17). The first step is to talk things over with the other person and see if things can be sorted out there itself. But if it does not succeed, we are to get the help of one or two others who can mediate. If this also does not work out, we can take matters to the leadership of the church who can decide what is to be done.

CHAPTER 12

BELIEVERS, FOLLOWERS AND DISCIPLES

The word 'disciples' seemed originally to apply only to the twelve He had chosen to be with Him and to learn from Him. These were also later called 'apostles' (sent out ones) when He sent them out to preach the Gospel, heal the sick and cast out demons. But Jesus had other disciples apart from the twelve from among whom He chose the twelve (Lk.6:13). What Jesus wanted was that those who believed and followed Him should become His disciples. When He asked the apostles to go out into the world and preach the Gospel to every creature (Mk.16:15), His intention was that those believed and chose to follow Him should be made disciples by teaching them to obey all that He had taught them (Matt.28:19,20). But as it stands today, believers, followers and disciples loosely describe three different groups of people!

The word 'believers' initially used to refer to those who believed in Jesus as their Saviour and were born again. In that sense the word 'believe' meant 'adhere to, trust in, and rely on' Jesus Christ (Amplified Bible). But as time went on, many people started claiming they 'believed' meaning only that they accepted the facts about Jesus in their mind, without having a commitment in their heart to obey what He said. This resulted in 'faith without works' that the apostle James warned about. Even though they claimed they were believers, their lives did not show any change that should have taken place if they had a genuine faith. So it was a deception for them to consider themselves as believers – who were accepted as children of God – even though actually they were not properly converted.

One reason for this could be a modified gospel that is preached by many that tells listeners to merely believe in Jesus as their Saviour or accept Him as Saviour without having seen themselves as sinners facing the judgment of God and

repenting. So, having obeyed this instruction they now consider themselves as being right with God.

Another group of people have been 'following' Jesus hoping to experience some miracles from His hands and to find some resolution for their problems. In the days when Jesus was on earth, this was the reason why multitudes followed Him and Jesus was well aware of that (Jn.6:26,27). Jesus was moved with compassion when He saw people suffering, and He healed their sicknesses, raised them from the dead and cast out demons from them. But that did not mean that their sins were forgiven and they were now children of God! For that to happen, first they needed to repent from their sins and put their trust in Jesus as their Saviour. Nowadays many preach and tell people to come to Jesus and to get all their problems resolved. Multitudes come even now for the same reason as in the days of Jesus, and many of them experience miracles in their lives. Then many of these people decide to 'follow' Jesus, leaving their religion and 'becoming Christians' without, however, having experienced real conversions. Many others who used to be nominal Christians become more serious with their religion, becoming more active in attending church, studying the Bible, paying their 'tithes' etc. But these too have not experienced true conversion. So, when someone now says he is a 'follower of Jesus' it is not clear where he stands.

Jesus Himself asked people to 'follow Him'. But what He meant was to follow Him so that they could learn from Him and live as He lived. That would be the same as becoming a disciple! But that is *not* what many seem to understand who say they are His followers.

It seems to be safer to use the word 'disciple' to convey what Jesus expects from us than any other word. Even though there have been some excesses in the so-called discipling movement in terms of undue control of disciples by 'disciplers', the word 'disciple' is better described in the four gospel books than any

other similar words.

First of all, Jesus is very clear that for a disciple of His, He would be more important than everyone and everything else, including himself. He said that anyone who loved father, mother, son or daughter, husband or wife, or himself or herself more, would not be worthy of Him (Matt.10:37;Lk.14:26). He taught in a parable that one who was in the kingdom of God would be like a merchant of pearls who found a pearl of greatest value and sold off all the other pearls he had in order to buy that one (Matt.13:45,46). This is a clear picture of how a man who comes to Jesus will start counting everything else he used to value in his life before as worthless now in comparison to Jesus.

Listen to the apostle Paul's testimony, "If anyone else has a mind to put confidence in the flesh, I far more: circumcised the eighth day, of the nation of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; as to the Law, a Pharisee; as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to the righteousness which is in the Law, found blameless. But whatever things were gain to me, those things I have counted as loss for the sake of Christ. More than that, I count all things to be loss in view of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them but rubbish so that I may gain Christ" (Php.3:4-8).

The relationship between a disciple and Jesus is that of a student/learner and the Master or Lord. The goal of the disciple is to follow the Master, learn from Him and finally to become like Him (Matt.11:28-30;10:25). The disciple who has seen the sinfulness of his old nature wants to be free from sin and to become like the Master, partaking of His nature. Therefore he gives up his own life to gain the Master's life (Jn.12:25). He follows the Master, denying himself, putting his fleshly desires to death and obeying His Master (Lk.9:23;Matt.10:38). Contrary to what Satan tells us, denying

ourselves does not make our life morose and take away all the fun in life. We deny ourselves only when what we desire is contrary to the will of God, and that is going to save us from a lot of misery! On the other hand, when we do the will of God, that will fill our life with joy and satisfaction which people of the world seek but never receive. What we sow we will reap (Gal.6:7,8), and what we gain by denying ourselves is to avoid 'reaping corruption', and by following Jesus, eternal life.

A clear example of how we ought to relate to God is seen in the way Abraham was willing sacrifice the son of promise because God asked him to. Then God acknowledged that this made it clear to Him how much Abraham valued God (Gen.22:12). That is the mark of a disciple.

It is a sad thing that many Christians do not see things this way. Many imagine that discipleship merely involves attending church, Bible studies and prayer meetings. Apart from that they live the usual life of seeking their own and pleasing themselves. And then they wonder why they are still not being transformed into the likeness of Christ.

CHAPTER 13

THE OLD AND THE NEW COVENANTS

In order to understand the total plan of God for man's salvation, it is important for us to learn about how He proceeded from the time Adam and Eve sinned. God had already anticipated man's sin and He had already planned his salvation even before He had created the world (Eph. 1:4; 1Pet. 1:20). He began to accomplish His plan *in steps* after the Fall. When most people of the world went deeper and deeper into sin, He destroyed the world that had become corrupted with sin through a flood and made a new beginning through Noah and his family. But sin began to multiply even then. Then God picked up a man called Abraham out of an idol worshipping family, took him away from his old surroundings to a new place and instructed him to bring up a godly family after him. Out of Abraham's successors, God identified the twelve children of Jacob (later renamed Israel) to start twelve tribes of the children of Israel. As these people multiplied, God formed them into the nation of Israel to become a model for the rest of the world.

It was to this nation of Israel that God gave the 'old' covenant (which became old once the 'new' covenant came). This was an agreement between God and this nation. God gave them the Ten Commandments and many other instructions related to sacrifices, festivals and what was clean and unclean. The covenant was that if Israel kept all the commandments they would be blessed above all other nations and also that if they disobeyed Him they would be cursed (Exo. 19:5; Deut. 28:1, 2, 15).

The Law of God that He gave to Israel through Moses made them very special compared to the nations around them. They had God Himself to provide abundantly for them and to protect them from their enemies and sicknesses. He had told them how to acknowledge Him through sacrifices and festivals. They had

moral boundaries that protected them from wrong behaviour that would hurt them and those around them. They knew how to get right with God if they failed to keep any of His commandments. God had also given them instructions on the personal and social aspects of hygiene and many other practical aspects of life. If Israel paid heed to all these directions from God they would become the envy of all nations around them, and other nations would be drawn to know and serve this true and living God.

When the Law and the covenant were announced to Israel, they agreed with their whole heart that they would follow them (Exo.24:7). But they broke it soon afterwards when they made a golden calf to represent God and worshipped it.

What followed were cycles of turning away from God to idols, God punishing them, and their coming back to God. God sent them many types of warning, but it turned out that they just did not have it in them to keep His commandments. Finally God sent them over to a long time of captivity under the Assyrians and the Babylonians. By the time they returned from the Babylonian captivity Israel had learnt not to go after other gods, but they were never able to keep the whole Law of God.

What we understand from the teaching of the apostles later is that God knew always that no one would be able to keep the Law by human effort alone (Rom.3:19,20). But God wanted people to try their best and then come to recognise their impotence when it came to the Law. This is what happened through the nearly 1500 years in which Israel struggled with the Law. At the end of this period God brought in a *new* covenant through Jesus Christ. When this covenant came, the *old* covenant became obsolete and was replaced by the new covenant (Heb.8:13). As the Gospel was thrown open to the Gentiles (non-Jews) also, this new covenant became God's arrangement for *all* the people of the world. (Israel was not really a favourite of God but a very important link in His overall

plan for the salvation of the world.) We understand from the apostles that the salvation of all people was what God had in mind all the time (1Tim.2:4;2Pet.3:9). The old covenant was only intended to serve a temporary, intermediate purpose till the new covenant became available. It was like a child being held under the authority of a tutor till he became mature enough to inherit the father's property with necessary responsibility (Gal.3:23-25).

What were people expected to learn under the old covenant that would prepare them for the new? That God's standard of holiness is high and keeping it would lead to blessings, and that no one is able to reach that standard by oneself however earnestly and sincerely one tries. Once people saw that they came far too short of the demands of God (Rom.3:23), then they would be in a position to appreciate their need for grace that came under the new covenant.

The new covenant comes with the offer of grace (unmerited favour and help – Heb.4:16). There is free forgiveness from past sins and there is help that enables us to keep God's laws (Acts 13:38;Tit.2:11,12). What the Law was unable to achieve because of human weakness, God has now done through His grace (Rom.8:3).

Under the old covenant, blessings of God were based on obedience to the Law. In other words, it was a performance based covenant. But the big catch was that absolutely no one would be able to receive God's blessings on this basis. Under the new covenant, God's blessings are made available to us even though we do not receive them, based on God's grace. We can receive them freely, without having qualified to receive them, through our faith in God (Eph.2:8,9). As we have seen in the earlier chapter on faith, this faith includes accepting what God says about us, that we are sinners who deserve punishment in hell, and receiving salvation by grace by accepting the sacrifice of Jesus in our place.

Under the new covenant God takes away our heart that was inclined towards sin and gives us a new heart that hates sin. He imprints His laws on our mind and heart through His Holy Spirit and enables us to walk according to them as we are led by the Spirit (Jer.31:33;Ezek.36:25-27;Rom.8:2,14;Php.2:12,13). God forgives our sins to such an extent that even if it was the dirtiest, He makes us whiter than snow (Isa.1:18) – justifies us just as if we had never sinned – and He promises never to remember our sins against us anymore (Heb.8:12).

There are some more things we need to understand about how different the new covenant is from the old. When Jesus came He explained that the standard of life God wants us to have was much higher than what the Law demanded under the old covenant. Let us just look at three examples He gave. He said that even though the old covenant forbade murder, the real root was in the anger behind the murder. If we keep anger in our heart towards someone but avoid killing him, we would still be guilty in God's eyes who pays more attention to our heart than to our outward behaviour (Matt.5:21,22:1Sam.16:7). In a similar way, if we look at a woman with desire we would be guilty of adultery even though we have not even touched her physically (Matt.5:27,28). Jesus said that everybody loved others who were good to them. But true love is seen when we love those who do not deserve our love, such as our enemies (vv.43-48).

It is easy to see that God is moving the focus from our external behaviour deeper to what goes on in our heart. It is what is inside that makes us the real person that we are. Jesus was furious with the Pharisees who paid great attention to the external details while inside they were full of self-indulgence and uncleanness (Matt.23:25-28). If we kept the inner life pure, our outer life would certainly follow (v.26). Salvation from sin's power in our inner life and transformation into the likeness of His Son Jesus is God's goal for us (Rom.8:28,29). This likeness

is in terms of His character than an imitation of the things Jesus *did*. What would matter in eternity is how much our 'inner man' has been renewed (2Cor.4:16), rather than our physical experiences down here on earth. That is what He brings to us under the new covenant. Now we can see that the old covenant was only an intermediate step before bringing the new covenant!

In fact, the old covenant focus was mainly on external behaviour, and the rewards and punishments based on the keeping of the Law were also earthly (Deut.28). The sacrifices under the old covenant found their real fulfilment in Jesus Christ. The blood of bulls and goats could not actually *take away our sins* (Heb.10:4). Those sacrifices kept sins covered (Psa.32:1,2) till Jesus came as the Lamb of God and *took them away* (Jn.1:29). The concept of clean and unclean things taught people the idea of being holy and separate unto the Lord. When the Holy Spirit comes into our hearts He teaches us that what is *really* clean or unclean in the eyes of God is in our hearts (Mk.7:14-23). People were taught by rule to keep the Sabbath day holy unto God (and do their business on the other six days) till men learnt to do all things at all times as unto the Lord (1Cor.10:31). Then keeping one physical day as Sabbath became redundant when *all* days were equally holy before the Lord (Col.2:16,17). The Jews were taught to give a tithe of their income to God (and do what they liked with the remainder) till the Holy Spirit worked in people's hearts and helped them to realise that everything they had belonged to God (and not just a tenth) and they learned to give cheerfully and abundantly (without any legal requirement on how much to give) (2Cor.9:7,8).

What we see is that the old covenant rules have now been extended to their fullness under the new covenant. So now it is not right to preach the old covenant standards to people, which will limit their potential to reach the full abundance of life Jesus has come to give us (Jn.10:10).

At the same time we must avoid making the mistake of neglecting to read and study the Old Testament part of the Bible. We must remember that it is on the foundation of the old covenant that the new covenant has been built. Without understanding the old covenant we cannot see the full glory of the new. Without realising how far short we come of the expectations of God we cannot appreciate the grace God has shown to us. We must also see the whole revelation of God coming to us in steps – and the old covenant was a very important part of His revelation – even while we seek to live in the liberty of the new covenant.

Now we don't have to follow all the external laws pertaining to sacrifices, festivals, clean and unclean things, etc., because we are to live according to the *spirit* of life in Christ Jesus and not according to the letter of the Law (Rom.8:2). We are free from having to follow external rules such as not eating certain foods, keeping festivals, keeping the Sabbath day, giving God based on tithing, etc. We are free to seek to do all things according to the fruit of the Spirit (Gal.5:22,23).

Finally we must remember that the new covenant has taken us to a higher level of life than what was available in the old. On one hand we must realise that the standard of the new covenant is far too high for any of us to reach to while here on earth. None of us is going to become perfect here. But what is most important is that each of us must be pressing on towards the goal of perfection or full maturity that is offered in Christ (Heb.6:1). When we fail, we have forgiveness made available through our Advocate, our Lord Jesus Christ (1Jn.2:1,2) so that we can get up and press on more earnestly.

Under the old covenant the mark of God's blessings was wealth, health, comfort, etc. But now the blessing of the new covenant is to partake of the life of Jesus Christ (Rom.8:29). The mark of this blessing is seen in the growth of the fruit of the Spirit in our lives. Jesus and the disciples have clarified to

us that kingdom of God is not about external things but “righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit” (Jn.6:27;Rom.14:17). They have also warned us that we are going to face trouble in this world (Jn.16:33), opposition and persecution (Matt.10:35,36;Jn.16:2; 2Tim.3:12) and that we will have to go through much trouble in order to inherit God’s kingdom (Acts.14:22). Let us not be deceived by any who promise us a trouble-free life with the blessings of health and wealth or prosperity because they deceive themselves and others by misquoting from the old covenant.

CHAPTER 14

THE OLD MAN AND THE NEW MAN

The apostle Paul was one whom God used to bring out many truths related to salvation. There are details we find in his writings that we do not see elsewhere. One of them is about 'our old man' and 'our new man'. The old man refers to the sinful nature we were born with and according to which we lived before we came to the Lord. The new man is what we have received from the Lord when we were born again. It is the same as the 'mind of Christ' we have received from God (1Cor.2:16). Some new English translations refer to 'man' as 'self' in this context.

Paul sometimes refers to another entity called the 'flesh' (There are other times where the word 'flesh' is used in its natural meaning to refer to the fleshly part of our body, as in 'flesh and blood'. We can see from each context which meaning is meant there.). The flesh is seen as the source of sinful desires (lusts are *strong* desires) (Gal.5:24) from which we are tempted to do sinful things (Jas.1:13-15). A victorious Christian is one who keeps the flesh crucified, refusing to yield to its desires (Gal.5:24). The Greek word used in the New Testament for flesh is *sarx* whereas that for the physical body is *soma*. Possibly with a desire to make the translations simpler and more easily understood, some English translations have used 'body' to translate *sarx* that unfortunately changes the actual meaning (cf.1Pet.4:1).

We can understand things better if we realise that within our old nature, if our flesh is the place of all the sinful desires, our old man was the one who made the decisions to yield to the flesh. That was what made our nature itself sinful. But when we were born again, God, through the Holy Spirit, gave us a new heart that does not want to sin but hates sin. This is the new man.

From a human point of view we would wish that after we were born again we would never want to sin and never sin again! We also wish that our flesh (with its passions and desires) would be completely eradicated so that we would never even feel any desire for anything sinful. But God has not done it that way! Now we have a mind (our new man) that does not want to sin, and at the same time a flesh that has strong desires that tempt us to sin. This explains the battle all of God's children face – not wanting to sin but wanting to be pleasing to God, and constantly facing strong temptations that pull us towards sin. This is what Paul describes in Romans 7:14-24, and godly people throughout the centuries of the age of grace have lamented about. The answer Paul found was that it was the Lord Jesus who helped him to win the battle (v.25).

There are two reasons that the Bible gives for our sins – unbelief and disobedience (Heb.3:18,19). Holding faith alone without obedience does not work, and neither does obedience succeed without the strength that comes from faith. By faith we know what God has planned for us and the help He has provided to give us victory. But then, by faith we obey God in order to put our sinful desires to death and do the will of God (Rom.8:13).

However, based on some verses that *seemingly* describe a total end to the old life and the beginning of a new life of total victory, some people teach such doctrines. For example, “knowing this, that our old self was crucified with Him, in order that our body of sin might be done away with, so that we would no longer be slaves to sin; for he who has died is freed from sin” (Rom.6:6,7), “For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set you free from the law of sin and of death” (Rom.8:2), “and those who are in the flesh cannot please God. However, you are not in the flesh but in the Spirit, if indeed the Spirit of God dwells in you. But if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, he does not belong to Him” (vv.8,9), and “Now those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with

its passions and desires” (Gal.5:24), among other verses, seem to indicate a *finality* in being freed from a sinful life and being endowed with a ‘sinless’ life.

This is because of an incomplete understanding of the full picture we see in the Bible. We can see that the above verses refer to God’s *provisions* and not to actual experience to the full in our lives. There are gaps between God’s provisions and our experience that we need to strive to bridge! Here are some verses that talk about what *we ought to do* in order to come to experience what God has prepared for us. “Therefore do not let sin reign in your mortal body so that you obey its lusts, and do not go on presenting the members of your body to sin as instruments of unrighteousness; but present yourselves to God as those alive from the dead, and your members as instruments of righteousness to God” (Rom.6:12,13). “If you are living according to the flesh, you must die; but if by the Spirit you are putting to death the deeds of the body, you will live” (Rom.8:13). “In reference to your former manner of life, you lay aside the old self, which is being corrupted in accordance with the lusts of deceit, and that you be renewed in the spirit of your mind, and put on the new self, which in the likeness of God has been created in righteousness and holiness of the truth” (Eph.4:22–24).

The Bible talks about our old man having been crucified with Christ (Rom.6:6) and us having *died to sin* (Rom.6:2,7–9). ‘Died to sin’ does not mean that there cannot be any more sin in us, but that our *inclination to sin* has died. In other words, we no longer want to sin. This is the new man God has given us. God asks us to recognise this new attitude and take the position that we are *dead to sin* (Rom.6:11), because it is from this position of the new man that we have to fight our battles against the flesh.

Our flesh with all its passions and desires has not been annihilated yet! (It will happen when we are ‘glorified’ in

eternity.) That is seen from the fact that as children of God we are being tempted through the desires which are of the flesh even now (Jas.1:14). Our old man wanted to sin and he enjoyed it, and so he yielded easily to the desires of the flesh that enticed him. Now our new man who has been created in us by the Holy Spirit does not want to sin even though we are being tempted (Gal.5:17). If we yield to the Holy Spirit we will be able to overcome these lusts (v.16).

Earlier we saw that our old man was crucified with Christ (Rom.6:6) and that we have crucified our flesh (Gal.5:24). Yet we are asked to put off the old man and put on the new man (Eph.4:22-24) and instead of yielding to the flesh to put to death the deeds of the body (Rom.8:13). This is what appears to be a paradox between what God has provided and how we are to appropriate it. But the simple explanation is this. We shall be carrying with us the flesh with its lusts from which we are going to be tempted till we die. But we have to choose whether we will align ourselves with the new man and fight against our flesh or allow our old man to yield to the flesh. This is the inner battle that a Christian faces every day.

CHAPTER 15

GOD'S PART AND MAN'S PART

As we go through our Christian life, one question that troubles us is about what God is going to do from His side and what He wants us to do. Some people take the position that He will do everything for us because He has promised, and all that we have to do is to simply believe. Others are of the view that there are many things God expects us to do and that unless we do them God will not be able to fulfil what He has planned for us. But as we will see when we examine God's word, both God and man are involved in the work of salvation.

There is no doubt that God is sovereign. He does whatever He wants (Psa.115:3) and no one can stop what He does or tell Him what to do. He has created all the universe, including us, and it is He who is in control of everything from the massive galaxies to the tiniest atomic particles. There is nothing He cannot do, and the only 'limitation' to His almighty power is that He cannot do anything against His own nature.

When He created man, He created us in His own 'image'. A part of this image is sovereignty, and so we were created with a limited version of sovereignty which is called our free will. Obviously, our free will is limited by the boundary that God has decided, and He still holds the authority to intervene in our lives if He sees fit. In other words, God holds complete control even though He has granted us some freedom within our domain. It is because we have this free will that we are accountable to God for everything we do.

It was the misuse of this free will by Adam and Eve that led to the first sin. They chose to disobey God imagining that they would become sovereign like God with their own knowledge of good and evil without having to be dependent on God (Gen.3:5). Our salvation cannot be complete until we choose (exercise our

free will) to revert to submit to the kingship of God. So it is not sufficient for God to forgive our sins, He also needs to help us to take ownership or responsibility for our behaviour. It will be obvious that He cannot do this if He does everything for us while we 'just believe'!

We can learn a lesson from the way God led the children of Israel from Egypt to the Promised Land because this is a picture of our being taken out of a life of sin to the promise of making us like Jesus. When they faced the crisis of being caught between the Red Sea and the Egyptian army pursuing them, what God told them was to stand still and see the salvation of God (Exo.14:13). The next time, as they faced the walled city of Jericho in the Promised Land that they had to conquer in order to occupy, what God told them was *not* to stand still but to walk around the city seven times (Josh.6). The next time, with the city of Ai, what they had to do was to actually fight a battle (Josh.8).

This is a picture of our spiritual growth. When we are newly born again it is as if God carries us in His arms like a baby and does everything for us. But as we grow up He expects us to take more and more responsibility for our lives. He wants us to learn His ways and make decisions in life just as He would. He does not want to treat us like horses which have to be directed manually at each step to do what we want them to do, but to think and make more and more of our decisions without passively waiting for God to take action (Psa.32:8,9).

Even as we are growing up spiritually there may come special occasions in our life that might look formidable. It may be that at some such times God might tell us to just stand still and see what He will do for us. What we should avoid is to make this the regular pattern of our lives. One mistake we can make is to pray and leave the matter in God's hands, and not do what we need to do from our side. For example, if we are in debt it is not enough to ask God to clear our debt without trying to learn

from looking at how we got into the debt or taking steps to cut down our present expenditure and to pay back our debt at least in instalments.

“Work out your salvation with fear and trembling; for it is God who is at work in you, both to will and to work for His good pleasure” (Php.2:12,13). As God is working inside us, we need to follow His leading and actually do what He is telling us to do in order for our lives to be transformed. No change will take place if we keep expecting God to change our lives without cooperating with Him as He seeks to do that. “If by the Spirit you are putting to death the deeds of the body, you will live” (Rom.8:13). We can partake of the divine life only if cooperate with the Holy Spirit by denying ourselves when we are tempted and preventing our body from carrying out what it wants to do (1Cor.9:27). When we see the life of Christ as we read the Bible, we see ourselves in that mirror and see how different we are from Him, and that helps us to become more active in denying all the ungodliness in us and also in doing what He wants (2Cor.3:18;Tit.2:11,12). God supplies strength both to choose to do His will (and deny our own will) as well as to actually carry it out.

It is sure that without God’s grace, merely by our efforts to choose God’s will and do it we will not be able to actually carry it out. Therefore, knowing that we are dependent totally on God’s grace, we learn to cry out to God earnestly for help (Heb.5:7). And then we actually use that strength and deny ourselves do His will! The earlier we learn this lesson, the better. But many learn to lean on God only after thorough failure from their own efforts. That was how Jacob, Moses, Peter and many of us learnt this!

All Christians are familiar with the fact that when Jesus died on the cross, the sins of the whole world were placed on Him; that was why He died. He died on the cross for us. But another death also took place on the cross. That was when we were

crucified with Him (Gal.2:20). This happened in God's mind when He placed us in Christ when He died on the cross, even though we didn't physically exist at that time. We didn't die for our sins; Christ died for that. What was this death that we died with Him? It was our death *to sin*. God says that Jesus not only died for us – our sins (1Cor.15:3), but He also died *to sin* (Rom.6:10).

When Jesus died for our sins, He paid the penalty for our sins so that we could be forgiven. But when He died *to sin*, that was to give us an attitude of hatred towards sin, just as He has, so that we would no longer like to sin but we would hate to sin. This is what we experience when we are born again through faith in Him (Rom.6:1,2). Our response when this happens is that we place our flesh on the cross from our side, because it was through the desires in the flesh that we were being tempted to sin (Gal.5:24).

God tells us to consider ourselves now as ‘dead to sin’ (Rom.6:11) because that is the new attitude He has given to us. Now we are not to yield any part of our body to commit sin (vv.12,13), because God's grace has taken away our old willingness to sin and given us a hatred for sin instead (v.14).

Now we see that whenever we are tempted to sin, we need to put that desire to death on the cross by the strength the Holy Spirit gives us (Rom.8:13). That is the meaning of taking up our cross daily, denying ourselves and following Jesus (Lk.9:23). In this way we work out our salvation daily, because God is working in us to hate sin and to want to do His will, and also giving us help to do it (Php.2:12,13).

We know that our salvation has three phases – justification, sanctification and glorification. Jesus died on the cross for our forgiveness from which we get justified before God (Rom.5:1) and accepted as His children. He has then started us off on the way of sanctification by giving us a heart that hates sin and wants to do the will of God. When we recognise this, we

respond by seeking to keep the flesh crucified and placing each lust on the cross to die as we are tempted daily. This is the process through which our life is being transformed from our old sinful nature to the nature of Jesus Christ. We can see that without this response from our side, God is unable to give us this sanctification.

To summarise, we see how far off we are from God's goal for us and we try our best to do what He wants us to do, only to find that we are quite inadequate in ourselves to do that. Then we learn to cry out in desperation for grace (help), God gives us grace, and now we are able to do those things that were impossible for us earlier!

As we have seen earlier, some people are confused between what God has already planned and prepared for us and what is real in their lives. As a result, they keep claiming that God has already done those things or that God will do them in their lives, not realising that they need to do certain things in order to make them come true in their practical lives. For example, when we read that God has predestined us to be conformed to the image of His Son (Rom.8:29), that is what He has planned and prepared. But it is not going to happen automatically and there are certain things from our side that we need to do in response before we can experience the reality in our life.

Some other people argue that since our salvation is only by the grace (unmerited favour) of God, we do not, and should not, have to do anything from our side because they will be 'works'! According to them, we just have to keep believing and God will complete His work. But when grace works in us, we work it out (Php.2:12,13), and grace instructs us to deny ungodliness and fleshly lusts and to live godly lives (Tit.2:11,12).

A balanced understanding can avoid these kinds of confusion.

CHAPTER 16

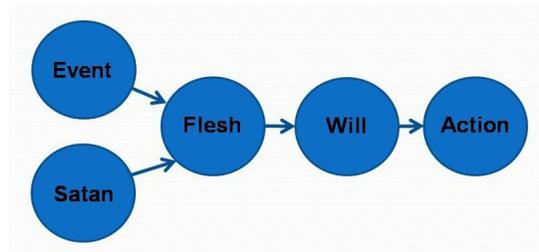
TEMPTATION AND SIN

Everyone faces temptations of different types daily. A lot of people seem to give in to temptations thinking that if temptations do come, there is no other option but to give in! If this was true, that we cannot help but give in, then there would be no hope of ever overcoming temptations. But the fact of the matter is that this is a lie from the devil. Many people have actually learnt to deal with temptations and overcome them. Jesus Himself was tempted in everything just like us, and never sinned even once (Heb.4:15). The Bible says very clearly that we are not under any obligation to follow the desires of our flesh (Rom.8:12). It will be helpful if we can understand what happens when we are tempted and what we can do to deal with temptation.

Temptation is simply an invitation to sin with an attractive appeal to us to enjoy some thrill, pleasure, gain, advantage, etc. The sting of temptation is hidden, just as a sugar coated pill containing poison inside. Certainly there is a thrilling outcome when we yield to temptation, but it is certain that the poison will hit us soon with disastrous results. It causes 'death' (Rom.6:21) that translates as break of fellowship with God, distortion of our personality, and physical consequences (Gal.6:7).

Temptation comes to us from the strong desires (lusts) that are there inside us in our 'flesh' (Jas.1:14,15). These lusts are exaggerated forms of the normal desires we have, and we have them as strong desires because of the sinful tendencies we have inherited from Adam as a result of his fall. For example, our normal desire to eat can become exaggerated and we can overeat! When we listen to the appeal of these desires and give in to them, we sin.

If we struggle to stop sinning – by trying to stop acting out the sinful behaviour – we usually fail. The place to focus on is not the act of sin but what goes on inside us. Let us look at the sequence of temptation in more detail so that we can get clearer understanding.



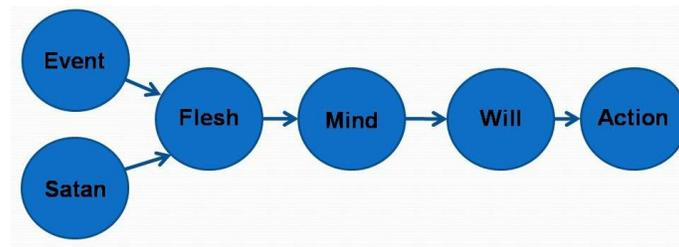
An ‘event’ usually triggers the flesh and some relevant lust (desire) pops its head out. This event can be something we do, such as seeing, hearing, or thinking about something. Or it can be something other people do or something that affects us in our environment. When such things happen, some of our lusts get stirred up and we feel the pressure to take some action. Satan may also get into the act, either by independently putting some ideas into our mind or joining the ‘event’ by adding some comments and suggestions in between. We may not realise what all is happening, and we may wrongly imagine that our thoughts are our own and that we should take action. Our will then decides what to do, and action follows.

We must distinguish between temptation and sin. Temptation is the invitation, and sin is the act of accepting the invitation in our mind and doing something accordingly. Just because a tempting thought has come into our mind we have not sinned. We have only been tempted. Only when we accept the temptation we sin. Remember how Jesus was tempted and yet remained pure and holy throughout His life (Heb.4:15).

Those who (unconsciously) think that once these thoughts come up there is no option but to act according to them do not realise that there is indeed another option. If we follow these lusts it will result in sin (Jas.1:14,15). The other option is to

refuse to act according to these lusts. But unfortunately under the pressure of these lusts it does not look as if it is possible to refuse them. Also since this sequence takes place so fast it looks as if there is no time even to think, and our response is almost automatic.

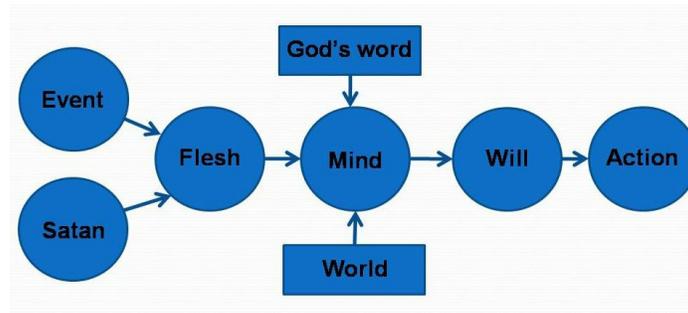
The previous picture was not clear enough because it missed out one major aspect of the process. Now look at the next picture.



If we assume that there is no other option than to give in to our desires we are actually ignoring the presence of our ‘mind’ that can think! Before our will makes a decision, our mind can tell it what to decide. Our mind thinks first based on the inputs that are already in our memory. All our past experiences and our responses are stored in our memory. Our first response when some provocation comes is to act in a way we have been used to before. The first time we try to go against our previous response patterns we may find it very difficult to do so. But still there is a freedom to decide to refuse to comply with our sinful desires. To repeat, we are not obliged to simply give in to our flesh (Rom.8:12). When we refuse to give in to our desires and choose to do what God tells us, we have victory!

As long as we live here on earth, we will not be able to avoid ‘events’ that stir up the lusts in our flesh. Whatever binding or loosing we may try to do, we can also not prevent the Devil from coming to us with his temptations. Neither can we come to the place where our lusts will all be annihilated. But even though these things are not in our control, there are other things that are in our control.

Since God has given each of us ‘the mind of Christ’ (1Cor.2:16) that hates to sin, and a sound mind with which to think properly (2Tim.1:7), we have the ability to choose what we should do. But previous experiences of automatically giving in to our lusts have distorted our thinking, and we tend to forget that we need not give in like that. This is where it becomes necessary to get our mind transformed to think like God wants us to think (Rom.12:2). Look at the next picture to see how we can let our mind get transformed.



God makes it very clear that it is as we read, meditate on and obey His word that we can have our mind renewed (Psa.119:9,11,15,54,98,105). As we spend time before God reading His word carefully and sincerely, and listening to Him as He reveals His ways through the Holy Spirit, our way of thinking gets changed. An ongoing fellowship with God through the Holy Spirit helps us to get to know Him and His ways, and our life gets transformed (2Cor.3:18). Our values, priorities, direction – all these change to fit in with God’s. Then our mind gets the ability to direct our will to refuse the lusts that come up from our flesh and to obey God’s ways. Over a period of time this becomes almost automatic for us and temptation loses its power!

We must also remember that inputs from the world are constantly entering our mind through our senses – the opinions of other people and the media. Though we cannot cut this off totally, it is important that we deliberately avoid harmful inputs that can put us in danger. We cannot play with fire and expect not to get burned.

There is one 'key' that makes it possible to understand God's word, that in turn can transform our minds. That is to have a willingness to obey whatever God tells us (Jn.7:17). Without using this key, we cannot understand God's truth properly, and it is also possible that we end up learning false 'truths' that justify our wrong actions.

As we go through this process we must also be prepared to discover things in us that the Holy Spirit wants us to change. This may be very painful for us at first to acknowledge. But this pain is very much short-lived compared to the joy of partaking of God's own nature.

CHAPTER 17

WHAT IS VICTORY?

When Christ promises us an abundant life (Jn.10:10) some people look for a trouble-free life or a healthy and prosperous life. But He has also warned us as that long as we are in this world there would be trouble (Jn.16:33). It will only be in eternity that we will be free from pain, sorrow and sin. Here on earth we will keep facing different types of struggles including persecution sometimes (2Tim.3:12).

Under the old covenant, victory was mostly external – victory over enemies, evil people, lack, debt, barrenness, etc. But that is not what is promised under the new covenant (Mk.10:29,30). “Through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God” (Acts.14:22). “We also exult in our tribulations, knowing that tribulation brings about perseverance” (Rom.5:3). “Rejoicing in hope, persevering in tribulation, devoted to prayer” (Rom.12:12). “I, John, your brother and fellow partaker in the tribulation and kingdom and perseverance which are in Jesus” (Rev.1:9). “Consider it all joy, my brethren, when you encounter various trials, knowing that the testing of your faith produces endurance” (Jas.1:2,3). “In this you greatly rejoice, even though now for a little while, if necessary, you have been distressed by various trials” (1Pet.1:6). “Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal among you, which comes upon you for your testing, as though some strange thing were happening to you” (1Pet.4:14). What was promised under the old covenant was a land flowing with milk and honey where they could enjoy a materially abundant life. Under the new covenant we are promised the nature of our Saviour Jesus Christ.

The external forms of victory that people were promised under the old covenant were earth-based, and therefore not eternal. But if we partake of the divine nature, that will be our asset through eternity. It is through temptations that we make a

choice between God's nature and our sinful nature and to partake of His nature or to continue with our old nature. So the greatest victory under the new covenant is victory over sin in temptations.

When we are tempted, what is essentially being tested is our faith. Our faith involves our trust in God and what He says, and that really decides our priorities in life. Our faith is what helps us to continue to trust in God and His word when external circumstances put pressure on us to do something sinful, ungodly or against God's revealed will.

What we see from the example of Job is how he was tempted to leave God in the face of all the calamities that he faced for which he did not have a theological explanation. He was confused and said things in his agony but he continued to trust in God. That was his victory. Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego were tempted to disobey God and bow down to an image in order to save their lives. Their victory was that they chose to obey God even if it meant death. These are giant examples of the temptations we too face every day. Our situations may not be as bad as Job's or as threatening as that of those three men. But we too are tempted to disobey God in order to gain some temporary pleasure or advantage for ourselves.

Some Christians think of victory as conquering different lusts in their flesh after which they expect not to be troubled by those lusts any more. This is like conquering different cities in Canaan by driving out the Canaanites and occupying the land, after which they could enjoy peace there. But this analogy cannot be pushed beyond a point when it comes to our life because the dynamics of practical life are different from conquering land.

Let us say we want victory over our temper. When we start the battle in this area we may be people who get very violent and hurt others physically. Then God helps us to stop doing that,

and for us it is a major victory. But then we notice that even though we have stopped physical violence our words still uncontrolled and full of anger, and we renew our battle. Our words are coming more under control, but we notice that sometimes even when we are not saying anything we are still fuming inside. This way of getting deeper and deeper to the roots goes on. When can we say we have victory over anger?

Also, after we have victory, if we become proud we can fall again (Jas.4:6). If we become careless and stop watching and praying, we may slip back into slavery again (Matt.26:41). If we become careless we may go back to shouting and even violence! Therefore God warns us not to take for granted that we have victory lest we fail again (1Cor.10:12).

A victorious life is the birth right of every Christian even though it looks as if many have not even heard that it is possible. Such a life is not one without sin (1Jn.1:8), but where we increasingly get power over temptations and our life reflects the life of Christ more and more. Sin need not rule over us because God's grace is enough to help us to overcome (Rom.6:14). It is not that because we have come into the grace of God sin will automatically disappear from our lives. But God's grace can help us to become stronger and stronger in our relationship with God and make it easier and easier to conquer temptations (Tit.2:11,12).

Finally, even if we fall into sin after we have received victory it is not the end of the world for us. We can get back to the battle without giving up.

CHAPTER 18

HEALING OF THE PAST

After discussing about victory we must also realise that the abundant life which Jesus came to give is greater than just victory in temptations. It means to live out *God's plan* for us to the full. Satan seeks to steal and to destroy, and God works now to restore what people have lost in the past and to give us a fullness of life (Jn.10:10). One way by which people lose out on life is when painful experiences of our past affect and limit our life now. Sometimes we are aware that this is happening, but many times we are not even aware that some problems we are experiencing now are there because of the memories of the past still hurting us. Sometimes it happens that however much we may seek to become spiritual we still find ourselves unable to make progress because the baggage from the past is holding us down. In some cases it may also be that our behaviour in the past has given some access to demons in certain areas of our life and they seek to oppress us or to affect our behaviour now. Jesus has come to set us free from every kind of bondage (Lk.4:18,19), and when He sets us free we will be free indeed to enjoy His abundant life.

Common Types Of Trauma

If we look at the common situations that people face in their lives that cause them severe trauma (an emotional wound or shock often having long-lasting effects), we can group them into a few categories. Even though there are some overlaps in these groups, it helps us to understand them if we look at them separately. Emotional trauma is more damaging when it happens in childhood because children are unable to process them intelligently and to overcome them. For example, if a father told his son, "You are a useless boy. You will never succeed in anything in life," the child is not able to reason things out and tell himself, "My father doesn't mean it. He is

angry about something and that's why he is saying this. I am *not* a useless boy." When trauma takes place in childhood, children unconsciously form life strategies that will become major behaviour patterns of their later lives. Since children do not have enough knowledge or understanding when they form these strategies, these strategies are usually self-defeating or the causes of negative development. In the above example, one possibility is that the boy may grow up always considering himself useless and unable to succeed, and this may affect every area of his life. Often, even after someone is born again, these natural tendencies might remain and affect them until they are addressed and dealt with.

Rejection. Psychologists point out that it is one of our strongest desires in life to be accepted and valued by others. But we live in a broken world, and instead of acceptance what we get many times is rejection. Sometimes a baby is rejected by his mother right from the time of conception because she was unwed or it was an inconvenient time for her to become pregnant. In countries like India where girl children are considered to be a burden, a girl baby faces immediate rejection from her parents and other relatives when she is born. The baby can also sense that he is not welcome from adverse comments about colour, shapes of the different parts of the body, etc. If the mother is too busy or unable to carry the baby, give him a sense of acceptance through physical touch and talk, the baby's developmental milestones themselves may get delayed. As the child grows up, he feels rejected if he is negatively compared to siblings, is told by parents he was an unwanted child or an 'accident', or made fun of for any deformity, way of talking, etc. The chances are that he will grow up with a poor self-esteem, withdraw from people, show unwillingness to take initiatives or risks, become overly eager to get approval from people and easily dejected at negative comments, etc.

The three common strategies such people develop in childhood

are 1) to act belligerent or rebellious to cover up for the poor self-esteem they feel inside, 2) to protect themselves from further rejection by avoiding mixing with others or confrontations, hiding their opinions, suffering quietly, etc., and 3) to reject themselves, lose all hope and take self-punishing or self-destructive actions. If we come across such behaviour we may wish to explore the possibility of some roots of rejection.

Abuse. Many children are abused physically, verbally, emotionally or sexually, and these also can leave deep wounds in their mind. There are degrees of abuse, and in the case of lighter forms, many people get over the pain naturally over a period of time without any external intervention. In more serious cases, the wounds are very deep and affect people even after they grow up. This becomes especially troublesome if the children were asked to keep quiet about what happened for fear of punishment or shame. The children are unable to make any sense of their experience and the common thing is to blame themselves. There are even cases of the mind repressing the painful memory and the children relating their experience to a fictitious person! The responses could be a hatred for authority figures, hating themselves believing that there is something very wrong in them, or an aggressive behaviour to get back at people. In the case of sexual abuse there are cases of people detesting the idea of sex itself, becoming promiscuous and others becoming confused and turning homosexual or transgender (body of a certain gender and thinking in their mind of being the opposite gender).

Neglect. As parents are busy with their own pressures, many children get neglected. They are left to themselves and allowed to do whatever they like without too many restrictions. The Bible is very clear that if we want our children to walk in the right way, it is our responsibility to train them (Prov.22:6). We are warned that children who are left to themselves will bring shame to their parents (29:15). The absence of deliberate

training will result in an imbalanced development for the children, and this will show in different ways when they grow up.

Demonic oppression. We will address this in a later chapter.

What Is Needed For Healing

As I mentioned earlier, all of us human beings need a sense of being accepted and valued. Psychologists refer to this as the needs for security and significance. Security means knowing we are loved and cared for, and a sense of belonging coming from those who love us. Significance stands for a sense of importance that comes from being valued and recognised for the things we do. When Adam and Eve were in the Garden with God, God was everything for them and they didn't feel any need. But when they sinned and lost their connection with God, they began to feel insecure and insignificant. From then onwards people began to seek security and significance from other sources, from people, pleasure, achievements, positions, power, etc. What we need is to get connected back to Him.

Relationship With God

It is in our relationship with God that we know we are most loved. He loves us not like people who love us as long as we are good to them. God loves us because it is His nature to love. He knows all about our past sins and our present shortcomings, but He loves us in spite of them. He treats us as His children, provides for us, protects us, takes care of us, guides us, and does for us everything else that we need. He demonstrated His love for us even when we were His enemies (Rom.5:8), and now that we are His children He promises to always be with us (Matt.28:20) and never to leave or forsake us (Heb.13:5). We can see from the parable of the lost sheep (Lk.15:4–7) that even if we were the only sinner on earth and everyone else was righteous, He would have come after us and saved us. So here we have the ultimate sense of security in our relationship with

God.

God values each of us so much that He was willing to let His Son suffer and die in order to save us. That is how much He values us. His value of us is not affected by the colour of our skin, how we look, how clever we are, which family we come from, etc. We are all equally valuable to Him (Gal.3:28). With the particular combination of personal history and gifts, He has planned something unique for each one of us to accomplish that others cannot do. Just as He turned the evil that Joseph's brothers did to him to work for their good (Gen.50:20), He is able to cause everything in our lives to work together for our good (Rom.8:28). At some point in our life we may have wondered why God made us with our peculiarities, put us into such type of a family, and allowed us to go through such and such difficult and painful experiences. But later, when we put our trust in Him, we see that the very negative things we had counted against us became in God's hands sources of our special moulding and a blessing to others! This is what gives each one of us a sense of security and significance.

We see that the things people count as great and especially valuable are not the things God values (Lk.16:15). He doesn't love us because we have some special abilities, skills or potential, but because we are ones He has created. We are precious to Him, and He would hate to see us get lost and He would give whatever He has to save us. When we understand how much He loves and values us, that is when we find meaning and purpose in life.

What Do We Need To Do?

As we think of God's attitude towards us and understand what He has done for us out of His love for us, it should transform our own attitudes in different directions.

Accept ourselves. If we have been upset with ourselves because of what we considered were our flaws, limitations,

family background, race, educational or financial status, failures at different levels, etc., this is the time to accept ourselves as we are. If God the Creator has accepted us and even loves us, we must accept ourselves as being worthy and valuable. Our 'lacks' do not disappear when we accept ourselves, but we become OK with them. We are able to take a realistic picture of ourselves, and we are able to accept that picture as something God cherishes! We recognise that our worth is based on what He sees in us and not what we or others see in comparison to others. All sense of a poor self-esteem begins to disappear. We can say to ourselves, "If God wanted me to be like this or that person, He could have easily made me like that. But He wanted *me*, to be just like me. Now He is going to work in me to bring out my full potential as *me*, and I am not in any competition with others trying to be like them!" Think of the great liberation this can give in our life!

Forgiving ourselves. If we have been angry with ourselves for being the way we were or doing the things we have done, this is the time to 'forgive ourselves'. When we went to God repenting from our sins and putting our faith in Jesus, He forgave our sins and accepted us as His children. If He has forgiven us, we must also forgive ourselves. If we don't have a healthy regard for ourselves – which we can have in the light of God valuing us – we will be always pulled back by our past. Then we will not be able to accomplish all that God has planned for us.

When we accept and forgive ourselves we don't mean that we are perfect or that we don't have any lacks or shortcomings. Of course, we will be imperfect as long as we are in this earthly life. But we can learn to overcome many things in our life with God's grace, and we can learn to live cheerfully with many things we can't change (e.g., the colour of our skin). Accepting ourselves and pressing on towards perfection is a most practical and realistic goal we can have, with God's grace.

Forgiving others. This can be a very challenging part of

dealing with the past because of the pain the mere memory of the past can produce. As a result of the fear of this pain, many choose to suppress that memory and refuse to address it. Some hope time will heal. But that does not work. Even after we suppress that memory it still remains in our memory, and as long as it remains in our memory without closure it creates problems for us. What we need to do is to face that memory, deal with it in the sight of God and put it to rest.

As we recollect the details of what happened to us and what somebody did to us, the memory will cause us different emotions. We should not immediately suppress those emotions but recognise that those are the emotions that need to be dealt with. As we think of each incident remember that our Saviour was watching us go through them and that He knows exactly how we felt. He felt for us, but allowed us to go through the pain because He knew one day He was going to turn it around to work for our good. He had His hand of restraint limiting what we went through. But He also allowed the free will of man to trouble us or our own free will to make wrong choices at that time.

Once we see God's compassion towards us and His overall control over our life even as we were going through some of the most painful times, we become able to 'accept' those situations as parts of history that happened to us. Once we accept those situations, they will begin to lose their sting in causing us pain and confusion. This is a major part of the healing.

The next thing to do, that follows from accepting our history, is to let go of our anger, hatred, malice and bitterness towards those who caused us those hurts. This can look very challenging and almost impossible if we have suffered a lot or are still hurting from the things they have done to us. We may think they don't deserve to be forgiven when we see they have not even admitted they have done us wrong, but instead they are going around enjoying themselves while we suffer! But as

we have seen in the chapter on forgiveness, we are not in a position to say they don't deserve forgiveness when we have received forgiveness from God even though we don't deserve it. Secondly, forgiving others and letting go of them is very crucial for our healing. If we forgive them we will receive a huge cleansing of our mind, and it will also give us peace after removing our anger, bitterness, malice, etc., towards them. Do look back at the chapter on forgiveness for more clarity on the practical aspects of forgiveness.

'Forgiving God'. In a sense there is nothing we need to forgive God for, because He has only done good! But what we mean is, we need to settle in our mind the complaints and anger we may have had against God – for creating us with features we were unhappy about, for putting us in unpleasant circumstances, for letting us go through painful experiences, etc. We will be the ones to benefit once our mind gets cleared of all such baggage. We can do this by asking God to forgive us for the things we have had in our mind against Him.

Conclusion. It is good if we can go through this healing process with the support of a Christian counsellor because he/she can help in clarifying issues, ask appropriate questions to make us think, encourage us to face the past without being overwhelmed by it, etc. Those who have gone through this cleansing can then face life with less baggage pulling them back and more hopeful of fulfilling God's purpose for their lives.

CHAPTER 19

ACCEPTING OURSELVES AND OTHERS

We have seen a little in the last chapter about accepting ourselves as we are. We have this tendency to compare ourselves with others which is a most foolish thing to do (2Cor.10:12). Then we tend to focus on the things we see in others that we lack, and we conclude that we are not acceptable! We also look at others and notice some things in them that irritate us and then we find it difficult to accept those people with those defects! But it is necessary for us in order to have a healthy development that we learn to accept ourselves as we are and also accept others as they are.

We can see a great secret of acceptance from this verse, “Therefore, accept one another, just as Christ also accepted us to the glory of God” (Rom.15:7). How has Christ accepted us? Not after we became perfect or corrected at least our gross areas of sinfulness. No. He accepted us just as we were, with all the baggage of our sinful past, our present sinful tendencies, our personality quirks, mannerisms, irritable behaviour, ignorance, lack of culture/civilisation, etc. Just imagine how such things should have normally irritated a holy and perfect God! But He accepted us in our existing state of life.

He agrees not to recollect our past sins which He has graciously forgiven us or to hold them against us anymore (Heb.8:12). But He is not oblivious at all to our present condition. He is working in us to slowly transform us into the likeness of His Son. So He is not agitated by the things He sees in us. He has accepted us as we are.

We can also accept ourselves if we look at ourselves in a similar way. Our past sins have been completely wiped clean by the blood of Jesus Christ. But we are painfully aware of many

shortcomings in us right now, some of which are also known to other people. We also see many areas in our life where other people outshine us and we feel very small in comparison. Even though we would like to see all our imperfections vanish instantly and get replaced by Christlikeness, the practical reality is that our imperfections seem to take too long to change. All this makes us become dissatisfied with ourselves, and we may even despise or hate ourselves. We may be upset with God for not making us in a better fashion, and also with our parents for not taking better care of us.

There are a few things we ought to consider that can help us to accept ourselves. First of all, we must be thankful that God has accepted us as His children. If He, the Ultimate Judge, considers it OK to accept us, so should we. Secondly we are in a process of transformation, like everyone else, and we need to accept the practical realities. We are not the same as what we were before we met the Lord, and not even what we were last year. This should encourage us to recognise that the Lord is at work in us. Thirdly, the special task that God has for us is unique for us and different from the tasks He has for everyone else. That is why He has made us different from the others and has given us special training through all our experiences. We should stop comparing ourselves with others, and come to terms with the fact that we will all be different from one another. Others may not be able to understand us always and we too might find it difficult at times to understand them. Once we come to terms with these things, we can accept ourselves.

Of course, it is clear that when we accept ourselves, or in other words we are OK with ourselves, it does not mean that we imply we are perfect! No. We are aware of our imperfections, but we are OK with them too as we are pressing on to perfection!

When we are able to be comfortable with ourselves, it becomes possible for us to be OK towards the others too. The same

considerations we have towards us apply to them too.

CHAPTER 20

THE CHRISTIAN AND MARRIAGE

God created man and woman, and He not only prepared the world around them to support their physical life, but also made provisions for them to have a fulfilling and satisfying relationship to sustain and strengthen each other. So, marriage is a special gift from God for us to enjoy. One of the reasons why marriages do not seem to be enjoyable at all for many people could be that they have not understood the real purpose of marriage, or pursued that purpose.

After God created Adam and he had the whole world to himself, what God noticed was that it was *not good* for him to be alone (Gen.2:18). If we use our imagination and think that it was Eve who was made first, she too would have felt alone (perhaps more so)! What Adam lacked was a companion like himself to whom he could relate (v.20). That was what God created next and gifted to him – Eve. Now Adam and Eve both had someone to be with and to share their whole life together – to face joys and challenges together, bring up children, plan and carry out different tasks, lean on each other, support each other, stand with each other, etc. This is true companionship, starting at the heart level and involving every other aspect of life.

This should be the reason why a Christian wants to get married. Imagine what would happen when people get married for all kinds of other reasons, including money, practical convenience, social pressure, advancing age, etc. Then they are not really interested in the person they marry but some side benefits they were looking for! But these ‘side benefits’ lose their value after some time, and they find themselves stuck with a person who now begins to irritate them!

Another reason for unhappiness in marriage is that people are looking for happiness that they hope their spouse will provide.

Isn't that really selfishness, the opposite of love? They don't realise that the spouse too has similar expectations! The simple secret here is that we will become happy if we focus more on loving our spouse and making our spouse happy! The fact is, if we keep expecting that our spouse should make us happy, it is going to create many situations where we get upset and frustrated.

Many people quit their marriage calling themselves 'incompatible'. Of course, when we consider someone for marriage, we do need to consider some minimum levels of compatibility – in faith, language of communication, general interests, etc., and no major disparity in economic, educational and social background – so as to ensure that both of us can relate to each other without too much difficulty. Sadly, some Christians make the mistake of thinking that if both of them are children of God, everything else should be fine. No. We can be 'unequally yoked' in other ways too (2Cor.6:14).

But at the same time, we must know that there is no such thing as perfect compatibility. Each spouse will bring to the marriage different sets of family upbringing, personality traits and *gender differences!* The adventure in marriage is to recognise and accept these differences, and then to learn to complement each other! Trying to change the spouse will not work, and will cause frustrations, anger and even hatred towards each other. Just being different from us is not a sin! A better approach is to recognise that the other person is as he or she is, and then make adjustments from one's own side! God wants our incompatibilities to complement each other – the husband's strengths meeting the wife's needs and *vice versa.*

Gender differences are more than physical! Men and women think, talk, feel and look at life and situations differently, and their expectations from marriage are also different. Recent research has shown that there are many such differences, and there are many books that describe them. These differences

have to be admitted and faced, and both spouses have a lot of things to learn in the way they should live together. This is a lifelong process of learning! But if we do it in the right way, the heartaches become less and the enjoyment more!

In a Christian marriage, when we face difficulties because of differences between each other or we face common challenges from outside, our approach should be to jointly and individually seek God for wisdom and help to face them, and then to deal with them in the right way. We must remember that just as God has a plan for our lives as individuals, He has a plan for us as families too. There are things He wants us to accomplish individually with support from the other, and there are things He wants us to accomplish together. A great joint task is parenting, where both father and mother are involved.

When two people get married, they start a new family. In order to be able to build up a relationship between them that makes them increasingly one with each other, they need to start from a place where their spouse becomes the most important person in their life. As they open up to each other and share life together, they get to know each other intimately and become 'one team' or 'one partnership'. Therefore, God says in His wisdom that they should both 'leave' their parents and cling to each other (Gen.2:24). This means that now they give a preferential treatment towards each other compared to what they used to have with their parents. Their responsibility and loyalty move from their parents to each other. Many times, the fear of cutting the 'umbilical cord' between the parents and the married children – from both sides – prevents the husband and wife from becoming one, and builds up a constant source of conflict between the old parents and the married children.

'Leaving' father and mother does not, of course, mean cutting off all connections with them or shirking the responsibility of taking care of them in their old age. "Honour your father and mother" is a commandment from God for all times. At the same

time, we must remember that these married young people are not 'children' anymore who have to obey their parents!

In a Christian wedding, the couple makes vows to each other in the presence of God and other people. We can summarise the vows in three parts. They agree that it is going to be an exclusive relationship between them, that no one else is to get in between them. This refers to their faithfulness to each other and also to not allowing anyone else to disturb their relationship. It is relevant to note that their relationship with each other should even be more important than with their own children! Secondly, their commitment to each other is to be total, irrespective of ups and downs in health, wealth or comfort level. No one can predict what all they will go through in life in these areas, but the couple is making a promise to each other that they will stick with each other and support each other through thick and thin. Thirdly, this relationship is meant to be life long, till one of them dies. Many times, people do not think much about the seriousness of their commitment when they get married. But it is good to tell premarital couples about this, and also to remind older couples frequently about this.

Just as in God's trinity where there is a hierarchy of authority and submission in the presence of equality in godhead, God has designed marriage also to operate a hierarchy among husband and wife (1Cor.11:3), who are equal in value before God (Gal.3:28). The order is God the Father, Christ the Son, the husband and the wife. If this order is respected by both the husband and the wife, it will give rise to order and harmony in the family. But if the husband demands that the wife should submit to him while he is not submitting to Christ, he has got it all wrong. For centuries many husbands have done this, and treated their wives like someone inferior. It is the task of a Christian marriage to show the right example to the world.

In the marriage ordained by God, the husband takes

responsibility as the head of the home, and gives his 'life' to take care of his wife and children just as Christ does for the church (Eph.5:25-28). In other words, he does not lord it over his wife, but 'serves' her sacrificially. He provides for the family not only for the material needs but also spiritual leadership, and takes responsibility for the family. His wife recognises this leadership that the Lord has given her husband and stands with him as he handles his responsibility (vv.22-24).

Submission is an attitude of respecting his position of leadership without trying to take over control herself.

In practical terms, the husband and wife work together as a team, recognising each other's roles, responsibilities, abilities and shortcomings. They complement each other, consult with each other and make decisions together, the wife showing her husband respect as her 'head' and the husband showing her special consideration as a woman (1Pet.3:7). They talk things out together, seeking always to understand each other and to support each other, without giving in to competing with each other or proving each other wrong. God has determined that two are better than one, and the synergy that comes out when husband and wife work together is amazing. God also points out that a husband and wife who understand each other's minds well and harmonise with each other bring a certain authority to their joint prayers (Matt.18:19,20).

Psychologists tell us that even though all human beings want to be loved and respected, it is generally true that women experience the need to know they are loved more than their need to be respected, and men have more need to know they are respected than their need to be loved. Accordingly, there is more meaning to what God tells the husbands to do – love their wives (and show it to them) – and what He tells the wives to do – to show respect to their husbands. On practical terms let us understand that husbands tend to interpret a lack of respect from their wives whenever they have a problem, and wives tend to see a lack of love from the husband's side! They may be

wrong in their interpretation in many situations, but they come to such conclusions easily because of what they inwardly feel as being the most important thing that their spouses should do for them.

Sexual relationship between the husband and wife is the most intimate expression of love between human beings. This is so for the husband and wife who are becoming more and more one in the mind and spirit, and for whom a sexual expression is natural and spontaneous. There is nothing unholy or impure associated with this relationship between husband and wife, because this is what God had ordained even before Adam and Eve sinned (Gen.1:28). Sadly, for many people it has become a quest for individual pleasure, using others. When a husband 'uses' his wife to get pleasure for himself, his wife feels used and cheap, and this causes her to turn away from sex.

One of the differences between men and women comes up in their approach to sex. Men think mostly about the physical thrill of sex, while women cannot enjoy sex properly unless they feel loved by their husbands. So, in order to have a healthy sexual relationship, the husband must make sure that he expresses his love for his wife all through the relationship irrespective of whether they are planning to have sex or not. On the other hand, wives need to realise their husband's strong urge for physical relationship and avoid turning away from him (1Cor.7:4,5).

These are days when the pressures of life are many and strong, and it is easy to let misunderstandings accumulate without having time to clear them. But this must become a priority for husbands and wives to spend time with each other, talking things over, sharing joys, sorrows, desires, fears, disappointments, etc., keeping a short account with each other with regards to forgiving each other, just as we do with the Lord (Eph.4:32). As Christian couples, let the Lord be at the centre of our life, even as we read the Bible, pray together and

discuss our life situations. In that way, we will be able to stand together and face the schemes of the Devil, as well as fulfil what God has in mind for us.

God's desire is that a marriage should last till death. He hates divorce. Every couple who has problems in their relationship should take all measures – prayer, seeking counsel, mediation – to sort them out and to restore a good relationship. At the same time we must keep in mind that there are certain situations that go beyond reconciliation, such as a husband who physically abuses his wife without any repentance, or a spouse who refuses to give up an extramarital affair, where it is a lesser evil to separate than to continue in the relationship. We must not think that when God hates divorce it means divorce is totally disallowed under all circumstances for Christians. If we study the heart of God as revealed throughout the Bible we will see that sometimes He allows a lesser evil in order to avoid a greater evil. I am not making a case for divorce, but saying that sometimes it may become inevitable. At the same time I would suggest that such decisions are best taken by mature leaders in the church rather than by couples themselves.

CHAPTER 21

THE CHRISTIAN AND WORK

There is work related to earning our livelihood and also work related specifically to the kingdom of God. For many who are involved 'full-time' in Christian work, there is obviously an overlap. But for the majority of Christians, there is a 'secular' work which they do for most part, while some of them also do some form of 'Christian service' or 'ministry' in addition.

Actually it is not right to separate these two types of work in this manner because that might give us an impression that the way we do these two things can also be different – we carry out our secular work in the same way as non-Christians, but when it comes to ministry we need to employ a different set of values!

Once we become children of God, our entire life comes into the ownership of God. Our whole life becomes accountable to God, and integrity has to become a major aspect of our life. We cannot have any double standards, one for our secular work and another for our ministry or spiritual life. We cannot behave in one way in the church and another at home or workplace. God tells us that *whatever we do*, including eating and drinking, we ought to do it recognising that it is for Him that we do it, and He is our Master whom we serve and to whom we have to give an account (Col.3:23,24;1Cor.10:31). So everything is to be done in a way that is pleasing to Him.

When we look at our secular work in this way, we can see that it is not any less important than our 'ministry'. If God has placed us in a secular position, that is where He wants us to be, and what we do there is one of the things He wants from us. In connection with the anointing God gave Bezalel and Oholiab for making the tabernacle for the people of Israel in the wilderness, God says, "In the hearts of all who are skilful I have put skill, that they may make all that I have commanded you" (Exo.31:6). Whatever 'secular' work people do for the benefit of

mankind, it is God who has equipped them with knowledge and skills. So 'secular work' and 'secular workers' are not to be belittled or looked down upon by Christians. Just imagine how the world would run if all the people were only reading the Bible or praying, and not doing any work! There are thousands of different things to be done, and many people are required to do them, and that is why God has equipped different people to do them. For example, even an atheistic medical doctor is using the intelligence and skills God has given him to cure sicknesses even for believing Christians! Once we understand things in this way, we can glorify God in whatever we do.

Many Christians who are in secular work feel bad thinking that they are spending a lot of their life in doing worthless work, while they would have been happier to be doing some 'ministry'. This is because of a misunderstanding. Once we understand that if we do 'secular' work or 'ministry' as unto the Lord, both are equally valuable to Him. How would it be if He wants us to work as a farmer or office clerk but we resign from all such things and become evangelists? We would have failed in life! There are comparatively only a few whom God calls to serve Him 'full time' in His ministry. Such people will hear the call clearly, and God will also clear the way for them to go forward. But there are others who feel like they want to serve God because of the gratitude for what He has done for them, and jump into ministry without hearing any call from God. This leads them and others into a lot of confusion that needs to be avoided.

There is a divine purpose God has even when He calls us to secular work. When God chose the nation of Israel to be a special people in the midst of heathen nations, one of His goals was to let it shine as an example for all the other nations. He wants us to be examples of how someone ought to work faithfully in the different settings He places us in. People around us should be able to see us and wonder what makes us different (Matt.5:16). They should see us being faithful to our

work even when the boss is not around, careful about punctuality, not wasting time with unnecessary chatting or the internet, showing carefulness in dealing with people of the opposite gender, impeccable in handling money, not pilfering things for personal use, etc. If they can also see as friendly and genuinely willing to help, and not who are sticklers with religious rules, it may draw their heart to us and then to our Saviour. When they see the difference and asks us about it, it gives us an occasion to share our testimony about what God has done in our life. In many places of work rules may not permit open evangelistic activities, but personal conversations with colleagues may still be possible. On occasions like Christmas and Good Friday, it is natural that people may ask us about them, and then again we get opportunities to share the Gospel in an inoffensive way. We ought to be careful not to be crude or unwise in bringing up 'religion' in our work setup, for which we can be even penalised.

One thing that commonly happens in a secular setup is that Christians are made to suffer for being Christians. In some cases we may be mistreated, mocked or side-lined just because we are Christians. Or we may be asked to do things that are unrighteous or unethical when we will have to choose whether we will fear God or man. This gives us an occasion to tell our boss or colleagues why we take such positions. But it may also happen that we lose our promotion, certain benefits or even our job. We ought to be wise in the way we do things, and we do not have to be foolish or naïve in the way we show our religion! But when our trust in our Lord, we don't have to live in fear of what man may do to us but focus on what is pleasing to the Lord.

Among the Beatitudes there is this promise of God's rewards coming to those who suffer persecution, insults or slander about them for Christ's sake (Matt.5:10-12). We pray for our protection, but if God allows us to face such things we can believe that He will cause them to work something for our good

(Rom.8:28) and learn to bless those who curse, hurt and trouble us (Matt.5:44). Our eternal rewards will far outweigh what we might lose here.

Once we accept God's standard for every part of our life, another thing that confronts us is how we handle our secular work, family life and ministry, priority wise. Some people float a simplistic formula, "God first, family second, work last." Even though this is good as a general guideline, we cannot use it as a rigid law. We need to keep it as an overall goal, but we must also be flexible in the short term, depending on the immediate requirements. For example, if there is an emergency requirement at work we may have to skip church or a family commitment, keeping in mind that this should not become regular and that the greater priority is indeed for God and the family. It may be that it is the family that needs immediate attention in a difficult situation because of which work and church may need to be put aside temporarily. When the emergency is over, we can return to the normal set of priorities.

At the same time, if the work situation becomes so demanding that the church or family is getting neglected overall, then perhaps it would be good to consider moving to another job.

We must keep in mind that there is going to be a pressure from the workplace to give it the maximum priority, in the form of wanting to impress the boss, get better appraisals, create a great personal record, earn more money for the family, etc. Here is where we must recognise that there are more important things in life such as our relationship with God and our family. It may be noted that when people come near their death, what they wish for is to be right with God and the presence of family members.

From the time of the end of the Second World War where millions of men died and wives took on the extra role of working outside their home, it is now commonly accepted that in most homes both husbands and wives may be working. For

the wives this is somewhat empowering, because they will no longer be at the mercy of their husbands financially, they gain respect in society for their work and their voice gets heard in the family as well as elsewhere. At the same time, the cost they pay is extra stress, having to deal with managing the home and also the job in the workplace. This stress comes because the woman was designed originally only to manage the home as a wife and mother (Tit.2:4,5). They must not forget that their primary responsibility is towards their husband and children. But now she has to take on additional responsibility at work too. By taking on this double responsibility, she also loses her time to relax and enjoy her family moments with her husband and children. It is not that she is not capable of handling work that is generally done by men (except when it comes to hard physical labour), but that the effect of double stress without relaxation can make her suffer psycho-somatic problems and also impact her relationships at home.

If her husband recognises what she is going through, and instead of taking advantage of her (or abusing her) starts shouldering some of her home responsibilities (helping with the kitchen, washing, taking care of children, etc.), then there is a chance that this pressure is kept under control and everyone is more or less happy. But if the case is that the husband insists on her handling all her load by herself, there will be a very unhappy wife and an unhappy home.

A Christian husband who takes responsibility over the home and loves his wife sacrificially will take on extra responsibilities on himself to make things easier for his wife and children. But the sad thing we see in many families is that children who have grown up in a self-centred way, who are used to getting their own way from the parents who have pampered them, expect their spouses to take care of them without they themselves lifting up their hands to help each other.

Couples will have to examine themselves to see what is driving

them – is it a desire for luxury and entertainment or is it a determination to do everything *as unto the Lord*?

CHAPTER 22

THE CHRISTIAN AND THE CHURCH

There are three provisions God has made for the nurture of the individual Christian – the Holy Spirit to dwell inside us as our Teacher, Comforter and Helper who will represent Jesus the Son to us, the Bible which is the written word of God, and fellowship with other children of God. This is what the Bible means when it says that God has given us *all things* that pertain to life and godliness (2Pet.1:3). God knows that no man can walk alone by himself in this spiritual journey of life. And that is why He has provided us with a spiritual family in the church in which we can grow up spiritually.

For those who think of ‘church’ as the special building where Christians meet together, it may be difficult to see this immediately. But the original meaning of the word ‘church’ that comes from the Greek word *ecclesia* is an ‘assembly’ (of ‘called out ones’). So it is not the *place* that decides whether it is a church but *who* are gathered together. Jesus said that He would be with those who gather together in His name, even if they were only two or three (Matt.18:20). What makes the difference is that they are gathered in His name, not just nominally acknowledging His name, but as those who belong to Him and who follow Him as disciples.

When people put their trust in Jesus and get born again, God adopts them as His children. That means that He becomes our Heavenly Father, and we all become brothers and sisters in Christ with Jesus Christ as our Eldest Brother. So, the church is a spiritual family, and our relationship is eternal in nature.

When people first put their trust in Jesus, those who led them to the Lord are to help them to meet together to read the Bible and pray, and over time they become recognised as a church. The first set of churches came up on the Day of Pentecost when

about 3000 people put their trust in Jesus after listening to Peter preaching. They met in the Temple and in houses (there is no mention about all of them ever meeting together as a church after they listened to Peter's first sermon). Very soon another 5000 people believed.

Local Churches And The Universal Church

What we see is that when Jesus began to build His church, starting in Jerusalem, it was seen outwardly as many *churches* (assemblies of people) meeting in different places such as homes or open spaces. Now we refer to these as *local churches*, and the church consisting of all these churches as the *universal church*. In the beginning, as all these local churches were in Jerusalem before the church spread to Antioch and then other parts of the world, it was not possible to identify any of them as *the church* in Jerusalem. But together they began to form the universal church as a growing organism.

What we see today is a variety of churches following different doctrines, practices and customs. Some are independent local churches, and many are parts of larger denominations. Some of these churches claim to be the *true church*, usually basing their claim on some doctrine they emphasise or a leader they follow. Among these churches there are also *cults* that teach heretical doctrines or have abusive practices. At the same time, there is no church that has got all its doctrines right or does everything right. Since we are nowhere near the perfection that is in Christ, no church we form together with other imperfect people can be fully right.

Once we know this, we must be always open to correction and willing to learn – not only from God but also from other people. It is possible that others may know parts of the truth better than we do, and *vice versa*. We need to see that there would always be things we can learn from other churches in particular aspects of truth or practice.

It seems as if God has distributed spiritual gifts among the different local churches, and that could be one reason why we see different churches emphasise different ministries. For example, some focus mostly on evangelism while some others are occupied with studying the Bible. Some want to make everyone more holy and some want to reach out to suffering sections of society. There are some who are good in the way they praise and worship God while some others are manifesting supernatural works of the Holy Spirit. Aren't there needs in our church that can be met with some of the ministries in other churches, and aren't there things we can do to help some other churches? But this type of cooperation does not usually take place in practice among the churches because each church is strongly barricaded with its own set of special doctrines and practices!

We can see that things are this way because we are looking only at *our* local church without recognising the universal church! But God looks at the local church as well as the universal church, and He wants both to flourish. Aren't the people in these 'other' churches our brothers and sisters in Christ? Should we not learn to follow God's heart in this?

The Purpose Of The Church

“And He gave some as apostles, and some as prophets, and some as evangelists, and some as pastors and teachers, for the equipping of the saints for the work of service, to the building up of the body of Christ; until we all attain to the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a mature man, to the measure of the stature which belongs to the fullness of Christ” (Eph.4:11–13). The church is referred to as the body of Christ (with Christ as the Head), and every true member of the church is a particular member of this body with a particular function to fulfil. As we know from the analogy to our human body, every member serves the other members, and together and individually all the members follow the directions of the

Head.

In brief, the purpose of the church is to proclaim the Gospel to everyone in the world, to bring them into the church (Matt.28:19,20), and to provide for the growth of each member to the full (spiritual) stature of the Head. Christ is in charge, and He works in the church through the Holy Spirit. As each member responds to the Holy Spirit and uses the special spiritual gifts He has given them (1Cor.12:6,7), the members help one another to grow (Eph.4:16).

As a church works under the guidance and strength of the Holy Spirit there will be teaching based on the Bible (including comfort, encouragement, correction, guidance), prayer, outreach with the Gospel and to meet social needs, care for one another, etc. This helps the others outside the church to hear the Gospel and to come into the church, and individual members to grow in the character of Christ. God appoints leaders in local churches to help the members to grow (Eph.2:11,12), but these verses make it clear that each member has the responsibility to carry out a ministry that would build the others.

Membership In The Church

It is common nowadays to keep a membership register of the local church for administrative purposes. But if we understand the church to be a gathering of those who are born again by faith in Jesus Christ it becomes impossible for us to see who all belong to *that* church. A man who has membership in the church register may not actually belong to Christ and another man who is really born again may not have registered his name in the church register! It is difficult, really impossible, for any human being to accurately know the true condition of other people's hearts!

But the Lamb's Book of Life (Rev.21:27), which I am assuming is the same as the Book of Life (Rev.20:12) because the Lamb is

the only way to the Father, will contain the names of all people who have ever lived on the earth and who belonged to God. This is the register that really matters! If anyone's name is not in this book, they will be thrown into the lake of fire (Rev.20:15). One very important point to note is that our names are not written in this book with any *indelible* ink, because there is the possibility that if we don't 'overcome' our names can be erased from this book (Rev.3:5)! It is not enough to get our name into the book, but we also need to endure till the end and make sure it doesn't get erased.

Leadership In The Church

The epistles in the New Testament that give many instructions to the churches mention elders, deacons, overseers (translated as bishops in the KJV), and apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors, and teachers. Of these, elders, deacons and overseers may be recognised as positions of responsibility or 'offices' in the churches, and apostles (those sent out with the commission of proclaiming the Gospel), prophets (spokesmen for God), evangelists (those who proclaim the Gospel), pastors (shepherds) and teachers (explaining the word of God) may be recognised as functions in the body of Christ based on spiritual gifts given by the Holy Spirit (1Cor.12:6-10,28). Deacons are generally understood to be those who have the responsibility of managing the practical aspects of the church, and elders and overseers seem to be used interchangeably sometimes, denoting those who have spiritual and administrative responsibilities in the church. Spiritual and practical qualifications have been prescribed for all these officers, and in practice they may be bestowed with one or more functions that are described above.

In one sense, these leaders in the church are set apart as those having some authority over the other members in the church. Paul describes them as those who are workers with God, and the other members of the church as being the field on which

these leaders are working (1Cor.3:9). The authority that they have been given by God is for the building up of the body of Christ and not for making themselves great (2Cor.10:8;13:10). That there is a special authority given to those in leadership positions can be noted from the fact that when the elders pray for the sick, there is a greater assurance of healing than when others pray (Jas.5:14,15).

In another sense, these leaders are also ‘brothers’ along with the others in the church (Matt.23:8). In that sense they are not to lord it over the others (1Pet.5:1-3). Jesus has made it very clear that the leaders whom He values as being ‘great’ are those who serve their flock with love and humility (Matt.20:26). When people see this servant attitude, it builds up their respect for these leaders and then it becomes easier for them to submit to such leaders.

Unfortunately, what we observe all over the world are people who want to be recognised as leaders, who take on special titles for themselves, seek positions of greatness before the people, who demand subservient obedience, etc. Some denominations have hierarchies of leadership and they run for their offices and manage them just like politicians.

“You younger men, likewise, be subject to your elders; and all of you, clothe yourselves with humility toward one another” (1Pet.5:5). When we clothe ourselves with humility towards one another, we recognise the special grace God has given to different ones and defer to them in the spheres of activity they are responsible for. For example, the pastor defers to the choir leader in the choice of songs, the choir leader defers to the musicians who play the instruments when it comes to how to play them, the musicians defer to the choir leader in the overall conduct of the music, and everyone defers to the pastor in the overall running of the church, etc. If this mutual respect is not there, there is likely to be hierarchies, seniorities, and dictatorships instead of the body of Christ there.

Ministries In The Church

Many local churches these days tend to be centred on their pastor, focussed on his major ministry. If he is an evangelist or a teacher or something else, that is what defines the ministry of the church. Perhaps that is why the New Testament epistles referring to the church mostly refer to the elders in the plural (e.g., Tit.1:5), even though there is place for an individual who is recognised as God's 'messenger' to a particular church (e.g., Rev.2:1 'angel' = 'messenger'). Such an arrangement would provide for diversity in ministry and also protection from personality cults or despotism.

I mentioned earlier the present reality of local churches being fragmented versions of the universal church, all of them lacking in many areas of teaching and ministry. But the fact remains that when a man or woman comes to a church looking for salvation (used here in the broad sense to refer to meeting every kind of need in life), many times they get disappointed in some areas of life. Perhaps they get good Bible teaching but not fellowship; perhaps there is good praise and worship but no support for hurting people; perhaps the focus is on reaching out to more people, but the people who are inside are getting discouraged. Obviously, only the universal church can be expected to be complete with all the ministries in a balanced way. But let us remember that local churches are expected to grow up (and not remain stagnant) to provide for every aspect of salvation that individuals need. Let us look at some of the major functions that should be present in a good local church.

Biblical teaching. Obviously, this has to be the foundation of any proper church. The church cannot be built around personalities or certain aspects of doctrine, but everything about the church and the lives of the people in the church has to be based on the teachings of the Bible, which is God's word given to us. A proper interpretation of the Bible is necessary, with openness to learning, correcting earlier errors, and

advancing in the knowledge of God.

Prayerful seeking after God. Anyone who knows God and his own relationship to Him will realise his total dependence on Him for everything. Such a man will pray. Prayer is a mark of this dependence. Individuals in the church and the church as a whole must have prayer as an integral part of their life. It is a heart cry to God and not a mere, formal, repetition or ritual.

Dependence on the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is God living in every true child of God. He is there to comfort, teach, correct, rebuke, etc. The Holy Spirit is also the One who imparts special gifts to each one in the church for carrying out his or her own tasks in the body of Christ (1Cor.12:7). If we are not open to Him in practical terms, but depend on the knowledge in our head and our natural abilities, we cannot accomplish the work of God.

The church as a proclaimer of the Gospel. If individuals are to be the salt and light of the earth, the church also has to be involved in a collective manner. Evangelistic outreach, training of people to such a ministry and encouraging everyone to be witnesses for the Lord wherever they are placed in life should be a part of the church's ministry. This is how the church has to grow in number and not merely biologically!

The church as a school for disciples. Everyone who comes to Christ and is born again has to grow now to become more like the Master. That is why people need to become disciples. The church cannot expect that the people will automatically grow once they are born again, but must have a focus on helping everyone to grow.

The church as the family of God. The local church is a part of the family of God, with God as the Father and every member as a brother or sister in Christ. This is to be seen in practice as they love and care for one another (Jn.13:34,35), just as members of earthly families love and care for one another in

those families. It is in this process that fellowship builds up among the members, and everyone gets strengthened. This needs to be taught and encouraged.

The church as a hospital. When someone is born again and becomes a member of the church, it is often true that he comes along with a lot of baggage from the past. There could be history of neglect, abuse, rejection, addictions, broken relationships, occult practices, demonic oppression, etc., and these do not disappear just when people first come to the Lord. They may need healing, deliverance and nurturing that may take a long time in some cases. Someone has said that all of us are wounded people to one extent or another, and everyone needs healing. Ministries such as counselling, healing and shepherding are very much needed in a church.

Conclusion

The church is an arrangement through which God exhibits His many-sided wisdom in restoring mankind from their fallen state to the likeness of His Son in every way (Eph.3:10). It is our privilege to be in that church receiving this restoration personally and also to do our part to work with God in completing that task (Eph.4:15,16).

CHAPTER 23

SPIRITUAL GIFTS AND MINISTRY

The universal church is greatly and sometimes passionately divided on the subject of whether the spiritual gifts given by the Holy Spirit and mentioned in the Bible were only for the days of the apostles or even for now. There are major denominations on both sides of the argument. Books have been written and debates have been held on the subject, with neither side yielding to the other. (There is also a third group of Christians who hold that since everyone who is born of God is born of the Holy Spirit, they have already been baptised in the Holy Spirit and endowed with spiritual gifts at that time itself. Their objection is only against a *second* experience with the Holy Spirit.) This was one controversy, concerning the work of the Holy Spirit, that I faced in my personal life after I had come to a conclusion on the subject of water baptism and got baptised. In the same way that I studied the Bible with respect to water baptism – with as much of an open mind as I could muster and willing to go either way whichever the Lord would show me – I studied this subject too. Once I was convinced of the truth concerning the baptism in the Holy Spirit and His gifts, I began to seek the Lord personally for the experience. I am now writing this on the basis of the doctrine as well as experience.

The objection to the present day operation of the gifts of the Holy Spirit arises mainly from three angles.

The first objection comes from a misunderstanding concerning the sufficiency of the word of God. ‘Sufficiency’ of the Bible should be understood as the Bible being the sole and final authority on all matters pertaining to the revelation of God and His dealings with man. It does not mean that we do not need anything else for our life here. The first premise for the above misunderstanding is taken from 2 Peter 1:3 which says that God has given to us *everything* that is needed for a godly life.

The error is in assuming that *everything* here refers to the giving of the inspired word of God in the form of the books of the Bible. It does not say that in this verse. God has also given us other things apart from the Bible, such as the Holy Spirit dwelling inside us, the church, family life, and the fellowship with the others. It is therefore not right to assume that the Bible is the only thing we need – that it is wholly sufficient – for our life. When Peter wrote this, the Bible as we have was not even complete! He was just stating that God has given us everything we need, and was not specifically referring to the Bible.

Another passage that is misunderstood is from 1 Corinthians 13:8-12. This is the place where Paul exalts the value of love above ministry, spiritual gifts, etc. He is saying that now, when we see and understand things imperfectly, we need spiritual gifts, mentioning specifically prophecy, tongues and the word of knowledge. He points out that when the perfect comes, we shall not need these gifts anymore because we shall be able to see things clearly. The mis-application of this passage is to imply that when the complete set of books in the Bible becomes available to us and the revelation of God is complete, we shall find no more need for these spiritual gifts. But it is very easy to see what Paul means by ‘when the perfect comes’ is our life in eternity when we stand face to face with the Lord (v.12). He is not referring to any time here on earth. So this passage is *not* saying that when the Bible comes, spiritual gifts will cease. Spiritual gifts are to be operated along with the Bible!

The second objection is taken from the fact that when Jesus did miracles, they were *signs* indicating who He was, the Son of God (Jn.20:30,31). It is then extrapolated that when the apostles did miracles in the early days of the church, they were again to show the people that they were from God. Then the argument goes on to say that once the Bible came and there was no more new revelation of God coming, the churches could depend entirely on the Bible, and there was no more need for

spiritual gifts. This comes from a misunderstanding of the operation of the spiritual gifts, especially prophecy, tongues and the word of knowledge. We shall see that these gifts operate now, not to bring extra-biblical revelation concerning God, but to give specific instructions to the people of God totally in line with the revelation already given in the Bible.

This objection is supported by noting that church history stops referring to supernatural gifts after the time of the apostles. However, even though the mainline churches declined and became mainly religious setups, there were several smaller churches in the side-lines who carried the torch of the testimony along with miracles.

The third objection is that what are being touted as spiritual gifts nowadays are merely human manipulations or even demonic counterfeits. We have to admit that there is a lot of truth in this statement. However, that does not prove that there are no genuine gifts working among the people of God. Human counterfeits are coming up because people would like to claim and behave as if they have spiritual gifts, in order to impress and take advantage of gullible people for their own advantage. Demonic counterfeits are operating to confuse people and to make them believe they have spiritual gifts from the Holy Spirit when they actually have only counterfeits. Someone has said that Satan is interested in producing counterfeit gifts because there are genuine gifts from God he wants them to miss! This only compels us to be very careful to ensure that we receive only the real ones.

Spiritual Gifts Are For The Church

The apostle Paul was one whom God used not only in explaining the doctrines and applications of the Gospel in detail, but also in laying down the guidelines and instructions for the churches. Evangelical Christians recognise that the inspired word of God not only spoke to the readership that the epistles immediately addressed, but also the churches that

were to come up later. Paul explains the doctrines of spiritual gifts and their application mainly in 1 Corinthians 12 and 14, interspersing Chapter 13 to explain the right attitude of love that we must have in desiring for and exercising spiritual gifts (1Cor.12:31). Nothing in these chapters suggests that they were written for the short duration till the apostles all passed away! It is also not right to dismiss these chapters saying they were written only to address certain problems in the Corinthian church! (Will we ignore Chapter 13 also?) Remember these letters of Paul were circulated to many other churches for their instruction, and that was how they came to be recognised as a part of the revelation of God to be included in the canon of the New Testament.

Spiritual gifts are supernatural endowment of power from the Holy Spirit for people to fulfil their roles in the body of Christ. No one who has recognised the impotence of the best human efforts to accomplish the work of God all by themselves will say that they do not need divine empowerment. It is not that the Holy Spirit does not make use of the natural abilities that God has created each one of us with, but we know that to accomplish spiritual tasks we need more than natural strength; we need supernatural strength. This supernatural power is what the Holy Spirit wants to give to us in order to equip us for the particular ministry He has in mind for us.

Take the example of teaching the Bible. This can be done, and this is what sadly appears to be done many times, just as someone teaches a secular subject using his natural abilities and skills. But such a transfer of knowledge can only go from the teacher's intellect to the intellect of the hearers or students, and then they can get academic degrees as a result. But this does not necessarily change their lives more than superficially. But now imagine a teacher who is anointed with the gift of teaching by the Holy Spirit. When we listen to him we can 'feel our hearts burning within us' (Lk.24:32), and something grips us inside and our life begins to change. How can one say we do

not need the gifts of the Holy Spirit?

There are those who object to this saying that the kind of supernatural work described above happens even in the case of many teachers who do not claim to have been baptised in the Holy Spirit and even those who are opposed to the doctrine of the baptism! This can be explained easily. What God looks for essentially is our heart. If He finds that there is a sincere seeking after the truth and for power to serve others more effectively, He grants them that power even if they are intellectually in error concerning the doctrine of the gifts of the Spirit. In other words, such people actually get baptised in the Spirit without recognising their experience as such! Doctrines are more connected with the intellect than to the heart – many saints will be up there in eternity with God whose doctrinal understanding had many flaws. It is the heart that matters. However, if their doctrines had been right, they could have received more than what they have, and they could also have helped many others to experience what they have.

Use And Abuse

A major confusion among those who believe in the baptism in the Holy Spirit and spiritual gifts is that some people insist that the proof of someone receiving the baptism is that he speaks in an unknown tongue. It is true that most of the incidents described in the Acts of the Apostles mention people speaking in tongues. But a general principle we need to use when defining doctrines is *not* to base them merely on experiences, but they must be based on the *teaching* in the Bible. What the Bible teaches us concerning the question whether everyone who receives the baptism in the Holy Spirit speaks in tongues, the answer is a clear no (1Cor.12:30). This should settle the confusion on this issue.

When people believe that they *have to* speak in tongues if they receive the baptism in the Holy Spirit, and God has *not* chosen to give them that gift, they try desperately to speak in tongues

somehow! Then there can be human and demonic counterfeits. Speaking in tongues is a good gift, and there is nothing wrong for anyone to ask for it. Paul said that he wished everyone would speak in tongues (1Cor.14:5), recognising that not all did! But he also mentioned there were better gifts to pursue after!

Paul mentions two types of speaking in tongues. One is speaking in tongues in a church meeting. We are to do this only when there is someone there who has the complementary gift of interpreting tongues (vv.27,28). In this case, the first person speaks a specific message from God to that church in an unknown language that the second person interprets. Without this interpretation being present, it would only be like babbling, which is to be discouraged. The other way of speaking in tongues is privately between us and God. This was how Paul spoke in tongues more than everyone else, even though he was very particular about speaking in the church more in a known language (unless, of course, there was an interpreter available) (vv.18,19). When we speak in tongues privately before God, it builds us up (v.4). We do not understand what we are saying to God because we do not know that language (v.2) but we speak in faith knowing that the Holy Spirit inside us is communicating something to God. Sometimes, for example, it could be the Holy Spirit conveying the groaning in our heart that is too deep for words (Rom.8:26,27), or it could be an overflow from our heart of the praise and worship that we feel in our heart but are unable to put into words. Certainly it is a good gift to have, and there is nothing wrong in asking God for it.

What Jesus promised the apostles what would happen when the Holy Spirit came upon them was that they would receive *power* (Acts.1:8). As we see later in the Book of Acts, many who receive the baptism speak in tongues. But power is a much broader thing. How it may come in experience to different individuals may vary in the details. But each one can know for

certain when it happens to them.

The gift of prophecy enables us to bring out what God specifically wants to tell the listeners or readers according to their situation. A prophet, in simple terms, is one who is a spokesman for God. In the Old Testament, many prophets spoke and wrote what God wanted to tell people about what was going to take place in the future. They also brought rebuke or warnings from God. In the new covenant, one who prophesies generally speaks to men for edification and exhortation and consolation (1Cor.14:3), even though sometimes a prophet may warn the church about things that are going to happen (Acts.11:28). He brings forth what people need to hear from God according to their situation. We can see that a gift of prophecy that operates in this manner will be very useful in many different ministries, e.g., for the preacher, writer, teacher, pastor, counsellor, etc., to be able to say just the right thing at the right time.

The Bible tells us not to despise or ignore prophecies, but to test each one (to see if they are in line with what the Bible has revealed) (1Thes.5:20,21). This is another instance that tells us that prophecies are valid. This was not written to the Corinthian church (as some people say about 1 Corinthians 12-14)!

Even though we can see this gift of prophecy working through many people, we also see a lot of misuse. People are appointing themselves as prophets and giving personal instructions to people they meet, seeking to dominate and gain prominence. Misunderstanding the context in 1 Corinthians 14:31, people say *everyone* can prophesy. Based on this people even conduct workshops for everyone on 'how to activate' the gift of prophecy! This is in spite of the clear teaching in the Bible that all are *not* prophets (1Cor.12:29). The context in the earlier passage is a meeting of the church where Paul is emphasising the need to keep order as people prophesy (speak for edification and

exhortation and consolation) *one by one!*

The gift of evangelism enables us to be burdened about those who have not heard the good news of Jesus, and to touch people's hearts supernaturally so that they become convicted of their sins and receive faith to put their trust in God. Without this anointing, we may use all kinds of techniques for presentations, put forth convincing arguments, display emotionally moving songs, drama or videos, etc., and see the audience going away without being born again. How sad it is to see many innovative attempts being made to 'market' the Gospel, only to end up with superficial changes and deceptive experiences!

How good it is to receive a 'word of wisdom' that tells us how to deal with difficult situations, or to supernaturally get extra information (a 'word of knowledge') about a situation when we are trying to help someone! How good to be able to discern when evil spirits are at work and cast them out! How good to bring supernatural healing or miracles in naturally impossible situations!

The Bible says that as the end of the world draws near, Satan will increase his attacks and multiply his deceitful ways (Rev.12:12). Do you think the Lord who gave His people supernatural abilities to deal with the enemy and to help His people in the early days will now withdraw all such supernatural gifts when things are becoming more difficult to handle, naturally speaking?

The Way To Receive And Use Gifts

We have seen that all the gifts of the Holy Spirit are given mainly to minister to and serve the others (1Cor.12:7), except for one use of speaking in tongues that builds oneself up. The right attitude for asking for these gifts is to seek them for the purpose of serving others better. Jesus illustrated this very clearly in the story of a man who went to his neighbour asking

to borrow some bread in order to give a friend who had dropped in (Lk.11:5-13). Think of doing any ministry and not seeing any fruit coming out of it! Would we not ask God to anoint us and give us supernatural help in order to be able to bless the others better? Would we not own up our own inability to serve God with our natural strength and cry out to Him for divine intervention? That is when God gives us spiritual gifts. The same passage tells us to ask, seek and knock till we receive, if we have this kind of an attitude. Then God promises us that He will give us the genuine gift and not any counterfeit.

Can we not imagine what will happen if we ask with selfish motives, to impress others, or to make ourselves great or rich? What will happen if we ask only for the purpose of experiencing supernatural thrills and not for helping others? Deceiving spirits will only be very eager to 'help out' such seekers with counterfeit gifts.

Lastly we may note that sometimes God gives us some spiritual gifts that define our ministry. In other words, a man who teaches with anointing recognises and continues with his ministry of teaching, the man who has a ministry of delivering people from evil spirits is known for that, or the man whose ministry is in physical healing keeps doing that. But there may be situations where any of us may receive a special gift, e.g., casting out demons or healing the sick, for a specific situation or time, and may not practise that gift at other times.

Conclusion

Yes, there are many extreme and excessive things happening in the name of spiritual gifts. While we need to keep away from the counterfeit, shall we not pursue earnestly after the genuine gifts (1Cor.14:2)? Shall we not humbly acknowledge before God how we are limited in ourselves to do anything significant in His kingdom, and how we need His supernatural anointing on us? Shall we not thank Him that He has gifts suited for our different needs in ministry that we can ask for, receive and use

for blessing others and glorifying His name?

CHAPTER 24

THE CHRISTIAN AND GIVING

For some Christians, giving is synonymous with tithing! Some give grudgingly, some give as a matter of duty, and some think that once they have given their tithe, they have fulfilled their entire obligation to God! But it is not about tithing that we want to discuss, but about giving *per se*.

It is in the nature of God to give. When He loved us so much and hated to see any of us perish, He was willing to give His Son to die in our place in order to save us (Jn.3:16). When we become His children and His love begins to get poured into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, one of the changes that takes place is a growing desire to serve God and other people, and a willingness even to make sacrifices in order to be able to do that. We become willing to give not just money, but also our time, energy and other resources. This is one reason why Christians all over the world have become known for their service to humanity in various forms.

Tithing was a requirement under the law of the old covenant, but giving is a matter of the new heart under the new covenant. Once we have this heart, we don't need instructions about *how much* we ought to give, but more about *how* to give. For a really godly man, sometimes it is practical considerations that *limit* his giving, and it is not motivational talks that he needs to push him into giving. If people need to be pushed and pushed in order to make them reluctantly do something for the Lord, the chances are that their knowledge of God is not real or strong.

Jesus and the apostles have told us much about *how* to give. Jesus said that our giving must not be with the aim of impressing people or making a name for ourselves for our kindness or generosity, but, so to speak, in secret (Matt.6:1-4).

This is not a special instruction only concerning giving money but everything in our life that is to be lived out before the face of our Father who looks at the motives and intentions of the heart, rather than before people.

Paul illustrated the right way of giving by pointing to the churches in Macedonia who demonstrated their heart of God by giving even beyond their ability (2Cor.8:1-3). This became possible for them because they had actually *given themselves* to the Lord and to His people first (v.5). It is such a heart that should motivate us to give – whether we give of our money, time or energy. It is sad to see leaders and organisations trying to motivate people to give with a view to receiving back many times over what they have given. Jesus tells us to give, *expecting nothing in return* (Lk.6:35).

God loves a cheerful giver (2Cor.9:7). When we are compelled by a 'law' to give a certain percentage, what is lacking may be cheerfulness or eagerness to give! There is nothing wrong with deciding in our own mind to give a certain percentage every month for the Lord, His work or His people, depending on how the Lord has prospered us (1Cor.16:1,2), even if it is ten percent! The point is that we should not give because we think we *have to* give – either to receive a blessing from the Lord or to avoid His displeasure. If we want to be led by the Spirit, then this percentage should not be rigid also, since God can direct our paths in different ways each time and we must be flexible enough to adjust. We must not also forget that God has every right to ask us even to sell off all that we have and to give it away (Matt.19:21)!

When a law is imposed on our giving, it can even become callous. It is true that Jesus highly appreciated the widow who gave two mites, which was all she had. He appreciates sacrificial giving – in whatever form of service we may carry out. But this is not to make a law which demands that one *must* give the tithe to the Lord or sow the seed in order to get a

response from God even when one has nothing to survive with! That is cruelty, and one wonders how much people who insist on it know the heart of God.

To whom shall we give? Of course, we have a primary obligation to the local church we are a part of, to provide for its sustenance and for its ministries. We have a responsibility too to support the leaders who serve us. But our responsibility is not limited by this narrow outlook. Brothers and sisters who are in 'other folds' in the universal church also come under our purview. Beyond that, remember that every human being on the earth is a creation of our Father and we should also share in His concerns for them. The main point in the parable of the Good Samaritan was to say that even those whom people wrongly consider as outcasts are our neighbours who may need our help.

Sad to say, many people seem to consider 'ministries' as sources of employment or means for promoting themselves. But whatever we do – and there are more types of ministries that the Lord may call us to than the ones listed in the Bible – we must do it in order to *serve* our Lord and His people. That is the spirit of giving.

CHAPTER 25

THE CHRISTIAN AND SEXUALITY

When God created mankind, He created them as male and female (Gen.1:27). They are both made equally 'in His image', but both of them are physically and psychologically *different* from each other. God does not value men and women differently (Gal.3:28). The distinction that exists between men and women is only for the time when we are on earth, because there are different roles men and women have to fulfil here. In our life in eternity we will be like the angels who have no gender (Matt.22:30). While we are on earth this distinction also makes for the most intimate relationship possible between two people, and the complementary roles that lead to procreation, family life, and the extension of life from generation to generation. However, because of mankind's fallen condition, this distinction also makes for much misunderstanding that leads to quarrels, abuse, and break-ups of relationship.

For many centuries, women have suffered neglect and abuse, with men treating them without respect, value or validation, as if they were less than human. They have been used, abused and sold as if they were commodities or sex-objects. The rise of the women's liberation movement was an attempt to counter this trend and to restore the status of women to be equal to men. This has brought out big changes across the world, even though there is very much to be achieved still. Many men even now continue to consider their wives essentially only as servants or sex partners. On the other hand, some attempts of the women's liberation movement have overshot their goals, by trying to depict (wrongly) sameness between the sexes in the name of equality, which is unreal. They claimed that whatever men could do they too could, ending up as attempts to obliterate the actual differences that exist and which need to be taken into consideration in practical life.

Towards the end of the twentieth century, research in the medical and psychological fields using fMRI equipment providing insight into the way the brain functions has confirmed what people have actually observed over the centuries, that men and women think, feel and behave differently on many counts. Many books have been written now about this subject, and more and more people are beginning to become aware of this. It has also been discovered that men and women do not respond in the same way towards certain medicines because of the difference in their body chemistry, and the idea of gender-specific medicine came into existence!

Physical differences between the sexes make men, in general, able to do tougher physical work with stronger muscles, larger hearts and lungs, bigger shoulders, etc., compared to women, to fit in to their primary role as breadwinners. Women, on the other hand, are created physically and psychologically to be suitable for their role as mothers. They have better ability to communicate, better rapport with children and the ability to handle multiple tasks at the same time. They are also able to endure physical pain and handle discomfort over longer periods compared to men. Men tend to look at life as a challenge in terms of practical achievements, and they go after one target after another. Women thrive on relationships, and seek to build and sustain different levels of relationships with people. When a man and woman get married, these differences come into play in such a way that if their differences complement each other and what they can do together will be much greater than what they could have done individually. What is needed is mutual respect and interdependence.

The fact that men and women have strong sexual instincts has caused much confusion especially because the Fall has distorted this instinct. What we see now is sexuality with an inclination towards sin. But that was not what God had designed in the beginning. When God created Adam and Eve as male and female (Ge.1:27), obviously there were sexual

differences between them and also sexual desires towards each other that would result in being able to be fruitful and to multiply (v.28). Remember, this was before the Fall! That their sexual desires were pure is seen from the fact that it did not trouble them that they were both naked (2:25). In their pure state, their sexuality did not produce any sense of shame or guilt in them, as it did just after they fell (3:7).

This is the first truth that should set us free in the area of sexuality, that sexuality by itself is not sinful. Normal sexual relations between a husband and wife need not be viewed as a sinful activity or something to be ashamed of. Of course, these sexual acts are to be done in the privacy of their relationship – hidden from the others in that sense – but there is nothing to be ashamed of in the act itself.

When David said that he was born in sin and his mother had conceived him in sin (Psa.51:5), it was only to say that he had received his sinful nature from birth itself from his mother (and father). It does not imply that his mother was sinning when she conceived him. A wrong teaching on this can distort our whole attitude towards sexual relationship and keep us permanently guilty because we find ourselves actually enjoying the relationship but still regarding it as if we have committed sin! If we think that there is something sinful about sex, it could even lead to some forms of sexual dysfunction in marriage.

So, what can make sexual pleasure sinful? Clearly, when it is outside the design of God who has drawn boundaries around it. When we recognise that sexual relationship is a part of God's design to 'multiply' and propagate the generations, that rules out sexual relationship between unmarried couples, adulterous relationships, so-called same sex marriage and masturbation. Between husbands and wives, sexual relationship need not necessarily be aimed at having children, but it is also an intimate and pleasurable expression of love between them, as can be seen from the Song of Songs. Masturbation is outside

the will of God because it is also not in line with self-control, which is a fruit of the Holy Spirit, and it is associated with lust. The many ways in which it negatively affects one's personality also help us to understand that it is not the will of God. Many Christians tolerate masturbation saying that the Bible does not directly prohibit it. It is not right to teach from the silence of the Scriptures, but we ought to draw lessons from what *is* revealed. The other thing that should be unacceptable to Christians comes under 'unnatural acts', even between married couples, because they go against nature itself (and also not healthy), and outside God's design in creation. Some Christians object to this saying that anything married couples enjoy doing with each other should be OK. However, Romans 1:26,27 mentions 'unnatural' and 'indecent' acts that we need to avoid.

Sexuality is a strong and powerful instinct that men and women have that needs to be addressed properly when we look at the practical aspects of Christian life. Proverbs 5:23-35 describes sexual desire to be as dangerous as carrying fire in our bosom or walking on burning coal. David, who had the reputation of being a man after God's own heart, fell low when he saw by chance a woman bathing in the neighbourhood. Instead of turning away from there in haste, he let the fire start burning in his mind, and fell into adultery and murder. Sexual desire is something that can come up like a spark of fire in a moment, and unless we learn to keep it under control and within God's boundaries by relying on the Holy Spirit, it can set fire to our life and even spread it to burn others near us.

Both men and women have strong sexual desires. But even though in general both can *enjoy* the pleasure of sex equally, it appears that men have a stronger physical *urge* to have sex compared to women. Men can easily get stirred up by the sight of women or their pictures, and later on they can get stirred by the memory of what they have seen. Other things such as touch, closeness to a woman, etc., can also act as triggers. A lot depends on what men have learned to define women as.

Those who grow up in good families with normal interaction between brothers and sisters face less of a problem compared to others who grew up with neglect or rejection, who later pick up ideas from the teenage friends about girls being sex objects. Girls generally look for affection and it is affection that leads them to sexual intimacy. Girls who have grown up without sufficient affection or attention from parents may be too eager to get married, and careless about whom they choose. They may yield to sexual advances from boys, fearing that they might lose their friendship otherwise.

Teenage years are the time when we develop sexually both physically and psychologically, and if we learn to interact with boys and girls with pure friendships, mutual respect and practical boundaries, that will provide us with a proper foundation in this area for later years. The Bible talks about boys and men viewing girls and women as sisters or mothers, with purity of thought and behaviour (1Tim.5:2). Keeping a healthy distance in our interaction with people of the opposite gender is always wise. Many affairs develop in the workplace when people start opening up boundaries with their colleagues and let them into their personal lives.

We need to be aware that the best way to avoid getting burned with sexual lust is to avoid it getting fired up in the beginning itself. Once it catches fire, it can easily become uncontrollable. In other words, we should learn to nip the desire in the bud before it can bear fruit in an actual act. When we are drawn towards someone and sexual desires begin to come up, we must recognise what is happening in our thoughts. If we allow these thoughts to develop into imaginations, we have already sinned *in our heart*. The easiest way to deal with temptations in our thoughts is to divert our attention to other subjects! Jesus clarified that looking at a woman with desire towards her was already adultery in the heart (Matt.5:27,28). If we get pleasure in our imaginations, it is still a sinful pleasure even though no physical act has taken place *yet*. If we continue in our

imaginations, our brain will start preparing us physically for the sexual act, and once this happens it becomes more and more difficult to back out and we may end up actually *doing* something sinful. Remember what the apostle James says about how temptation develops into sin (Jas.1:13-15).

Job may have understood this mechanism of sexual temptation to some extent because he decided that he would not allow himself to even *gaze* at a woman (Job.31:1).

Many Christians do not even aim for such purity in life, because they satisfy themselves with merely keeping the Ten Commandments *externally* without understanding how Jesus came to open a greater life for us under the new covenant. But if we carry the fire of lust inside us while we pat ourselves thinking that we are not *doing* anything wrong, it will be like an accident waiting to happen, at a time when we are least expecting it. On the other hand, when we learn to depend on the Holy Spirit to help us, God is able to grant us grace to be faithful in this area of life. Even if we have been slaves to sexual lusts or acts in the past, we must know that Jesus came to set the captives free (Lk.4:18) and to give us an abundant life (Jn.10:10).

With sexual lust being as powerful as it is, and children not getting prepared properly to handle it when they come into the teenage years, it happens that a large percentage of people become enslaved to it in some form or another. The current world situation is such that temptations hit us from so many directions, and it is not easy to live a godly life. 2 Timothy 3:1 says in the *Living Bible*, “You may as well know this too, Timothy, that in the last days it is going to be very difficult to be a Christian.” But Jesus comes with the good news that He can set us free. An important secret of victory is to admit our helplessness against the giant of lust and to learn to depend entirely on God’s strength with honesty and sincerity. When the children of Israel came to the borders of the Promised Land

and most of their spies told them that they looked helpless like grasshoppers in front of the giants in the land and stood no chance of occupying the land, Joshua and Caleb said that if God was with them, they did not have to fear any giant (Num.14:8,9). This is true of victory against any temptation, but especially true of victory over sexual lust. We must not allow pleasures promised by the temptation to pull us in, and we must not allow our thinking to be influenced by worldly wisdom or compromising Christians.

CHAPTER 26

THE CHRISTIAN AND SUFFERING

A question that has bothered people throughout time is why there is so much suffering in this world when God is said to be almighty and full of love. This has also troubled Christians who know that God is their heavenly Father who cares for them and answers their prayers. It is difficult to understand why such a God would permit His own children to suffer – sometimes in great degrees and sometimes unjustly too, even when they cry out to them. God has not given us a complete answer for this, and we will be able to understand things clearly only in eternity. But we can see some parts of the truth that can help us to understand enough to trust Him and come to rest in our mind.

When we come down to it, we see that all the problems in this world are due to sin. When God created the world and everything in it, everything was ‘very good’ (Gen.1:31). But when Adam and Eve disobeyed God’s commandment and sinned, everything changed. The earth and everything in it began to physically go bad, sickness began and bodies began to degenerate and die, and corruption came in into every aspect of life including personal relationships (Ge.3:14-19). This Fall has distorted our faculties of thinking, feeling and making decisions. Obviously this kind of effect on the earth and everything in it has been increasingly leading to immeasurable suffering in people’s lives. In every generation we can see things going from bad to worse.

A broad classification shows us that sometimes we suffer because of our own foolish and sinful behaviour (Gal.6:7,8). We also suffer from other people’s behaviour even when we are innocent (just as they suffer from our behaviour!). All of us also suffer from natural calamities, accidents, etc., that are quite unpredictable, and the results of huge human errors like

dictatorship, wars, irresponsible use of pesticides and food additives, wrong decisions by government, workplace, church, etc., that affect a large number of 'innocent' people.

What we can see is that we do not always suffer according to what we deserve. Many people hold the view that good people get rewarded and bad people get punished and therefore whatever we experience is the result of what we have done. This is wrong because *everything* we experience is not related to what we have personally done, as we have seen in the previous paragraph. So, we should stop judging other people by attributing sin to them when we see them suffer. This was what Job's friends did when they saw his suffering, even though *we* know from the Bible that it was not true at all; he was being tested to see if he would still hold on to his integrity in the midst of suffering (Job.2:3-6). We should also stop condemning ourselves when we suffer, imagining that God must be punishing us for something we *might have* done. We know we are justified before God by faith and that He has taken away His wrath towards us because Jesus took it on Himself.

Some Christians wrongly believe that everything that happens is the will of God. When someone says God is completely in control of everything and everything that comes to us is from the hands of God, it appears to magnify God as supreme. But, if we look at the statement as it stands, it is wrong! If we think about the practical implications we can see how this distorts the true nature of God. It would imply God not only does good things, but He is also responsible for all the evil in the world! In seeking to magnify God's infinite power and sovereignty, it ends up caricaturing Him as a partly evil person whom we can't adore but only live in fear of, wondering what He will do next!

We must not forget the limited sovereignty (free will) God has given us in His sovereignty! It is this sovereignty Adam and Eve misused in disobeying God and submitting to Satan. It is this free will that people use to do evil to one another, and everyone

suffers. If we abdicate our sovereignty thinking that God will anyway do everything according to His will, we can even blame Him for our sins! We need not lift even our finger to do things rightly if we believe anyway it is God's will that will get done. We need not preach the Gospel to our children (or others) if we think they will anyway get saved if God has sovereignly elected them! But truly, God works in us, therefore let us work it out in our practical life (Php.2:12,13). He has given us everything, so let us 'add' to it from our side (2Pe.1:3,5).

Why do Christians get this kind of understanding? I would say that one major reason is a misunderstanding of the inspiration of the word of God. They take each sentence in the Bible as the direct word of God without considering that it is written in a human language with its finiteness of expression and imprecise meaning. As a result, God's truth has to be gleaned from all over the Bible. If we do this we will find that truths in many verses are completed and balanced by other truths in other parts of the Bible. So when we come across verses that tell us about the absolute sovereignty of God we need to see them side by side with truths about the freedom of choice that God has created us with.

An absolutely sovereign God who is responsible for everything that happens, including evil of the worst kind, ceases to have any attraction for man. Isn't it the love of God that prompted Him to give His Son to die for us that draws us to Him? If we were to think that this God may send the worst kind of sicknesses or accidents our way tomorrow because of some inscrutable part of His nature, would we bow down before Him and adore Him? If any calamity comes our way should we simply submit to it as a gift from our Father?

I know that a cold reading of some individual verses can give such ideas. That is why I am emphasising the need to look at all the truths in the Bible together as different dimensions of God. Our worldview must include not only God but also

demons and people of all kinds. Our understanding of inspiration must also include the part man had as the joint author. In our zeal to exalt God and His works let us not insult Him by ignoring some parts of His truth.

So when suffering comes our way, let us not get angry with God. A quick examination of our conscience will tell us whether we have done anything wrong that has not been set right with God and people for which God may be disciplining us. He disciplines His children because He loves us and does not want us to go wrong (Heb.12:5-11). If there are wrongs to be corrected, let us deal with them straightaway.

If we find that the Holy Spirit does not remind us of anything like that, we can next see if we are suffering because of someone else's fault. If so, at least we have rest in knowing where it came from! Then we can forgive them. We have looked at forgiveness in an earlier chapter, and we have seen that we do not have to wait for an acknowledgement or apology from the other person before we can forgive. We also know that as recipients of undeserved mercy from God we have no right to judge anyone. We may be still suffering from what they have done to us, but at least our mind can find some rest knowing that we have cleared ourselves before God. When we leave vengeance in God's hands (Rom.12:19), we can be free from such desires, and we can be sure that God will take care of it with perfect justice and mercy.

If we are suffering as a result of living in this sin-cursed world with sickness, accidents, natural calamities or similar reasons, we can take comfort from knowing that it is not our fault and that other people in the world are also going through such problems (1Cor.10:13).

If Satan is at the back of our suffering, however he may have used other people or things to trouble us, we can believe that God has a special purpose in giving him permission, as in the case of Job.

Why does God permit suffering? *All* His plans towards us are for our welfare and not for our calamity (Jer.29:11). We ought to believe this about God even when we cannot figure out what is happening to us. Sometimes He tests us to see what is in our heart, sometimes He wants us to learn special lessons that we cannot learn otherwise, sometimes He trains us through the suffering to become able to comfort others. None of us likes suffering and from our side we would certainly wish we did not have to suffer. But it helps us to know that suffering is to be expected in this world (Jn.16:33) and we had better learn to cope with it in the right way. God sovereignly watches over us in such a way that even when people deliberately do evil towards us, He will cause something good to come out of it for us (Rom.8:28 NASB). A classic example is how Satan tried to do evil to Jesus and got people to kill Him, but it turned out to be God's greatest blessing for mankind. Joseph's brothers sold him off as a slave, but that path led him to become their saviour (Gen.50:20).

When suffering comes into a man's life, it can either make him a better person closer to God or it can break him and make him bitter towards God. This is what we have to keep in mind when we go through suffering, to ensure that our response and behaviour will draw us closer to God instead of becoming bitter. If we humble ourselves before God and allow Him to mould our thinking and behaviour, that suffering will produce some character in us that will be precious in eternity (2Cor.4:17). Here we have to walk by faith, trusting in our Father and His wisdom, and not by sight or what we feel about it.

When we are going through suffering it comforts us to know that our Saviour understands just how we feel, because He Himself has been a Man and knows our weaknesses and our feelings (Heb.4:15,16). He will never leave or forsake us (Heb.13:5). Our Father knows our frame and knows how frail we are (Psa.103:13,14). He will control things in such a way

that things will never become more than we can bear (1Cor.10:13). We may not think so when we are in the midst of suffering, but we will be able to handle things better if we look for the way He opens before us to walk in. God will either take us out of our problem, but more commonly, He will help us to go through it with His help.

One of the things we learn from David's life as we see from his psalms is that he was very open and frank before God. When he was in trouble, he cried out to God and openly expressed whatever he felt. When we pray to God we don't have to use pious language or the King James version with Thou's and Thee's! Believe that He already knows what is in our mind, and that He is not going to be shocked when we tell Him things as they are. This will help us to have fellowship with God in our prayer.

Another help God has provided for us in our troubles is fellowship with *fellow* pilgrims. We should not assume that no one would understand us or that no one would care anyway. Of course, there are those who do not care to understand, but there are also those who care. We can open up to them as much as we have confidence in them, and then they can encourage and comfort us, and perhaps guide us to take the right steps. If we stand alone we may miss seeing other dimensions of what God is doing, and it is always to walk in fellowship with others (Ecc.4:9,10).

So, when we believe in God's love, goodness, wisdom and power, we find rest in leaning on Him when we are in trouble. Then He is able to work for us to bring about an 'eternal weight of glory' (2Cor.4:17) for us as we go through our suffering in the right way.

CHAPTER 27

THE CHRISTIAN AND SICKNESS

We have already seen that degeneration of God's creation in every direction began as a result of sin, and sickness is a part of that degeneration that causes a lot of suffering. We have understood some of the philosophical and theological problems related to suffering and also how we should address them. What we want to do here is to examine the theological aspects related specifically to sickness and healing.

There are some Christians who insist that when Jesus died on the cross, it not only dealt with salvation from sin but also healing from sickness and a guarantee of perfect health. There are three problems with this. The Bible, on the whole, does not teach it, the experience of early Christians as reported in the New Testament does not agree with it, and the general experience in the present day does not validate it.

But let us start from the fact that God is almighty, and there is nothing He cannot do. He can heal any sickness miraculously and it is not difficult for Him even to raise people from the dead. Let us also accept the fact that God *does* miraculously heal and raise people from the dead occasionally even today. But what we are examining is whether there is any promise from God for complete health for all of His children on this earth or even for healing every time a child of God becomes sick.

“With His stripes we are healed” (Isa. 53:5 KJV) is the famous part of a verse that most people quote to teach that when Jesus was scourged and then died on the cross, that paid the requirement for our healing just as His death paid for our forgiveness. To understand the correct meaning of this sentence, we need to see its meaning, its context within the passage it occurs in and its support in terms of other passages

in the Bible.

The word 'healed' can refer to any type of healing including physical and spiritual healing. What God meant here needs to be understood in the context of the rest of the passage. It is very clear that rest of the passage is referring to spiritual healing, i.e., salvation from sin because of the death of the Messiah on behalf of people. The root of all the problems on this earth was man's sin, and the Son of God had come to set man free from sin. His death for the punishment of our sins sets us free from punishment and gives us blessings, the greatest of which is to become like Jesus in our character. But could we say that perhaps God meant physical healing in this verse as an additional factor? In order to verify this, we can look at what the rest of the Bible, especially the New Testament, teaches about physical healing.

Jesus healed many people and raised a few from the dead, and the apostles also did similar things. When Jesus did these miracles, it was said that He did it out of compassion for the people (Matt.14:14), or as a sign of who He was (Jn.2:11). But there is no record of Jesus teaching that because of His death everyone could be healed. Considering that the epistles were written as instructions to the churches, and especially that the Book of Romans describes the doctrines of salvation, there is no teaching on healing or a promise that all who believed would be healed.

There are two special references to be examined. The first is where Matthew notes after saying how Jesus healed people and cast out demons, that this was the fulfilment of what Isaiah had said, "He took our weaknesses and carried our diseases" (Matt.8:17). This is quoted from Isaiah 53:4 where the text is, "Surely our griefs He Himself bore, and our sorrows He carried." There is a difference in meaning between the two. Compare this also with the quotation Peter makes, "He Himself bore our sins in His body on the cross, so that we might die to

sin and live to righteousness; for by His wounds you were healed” (1Pet.2:24). Here the healing is related to sin, as we have seen from Isaiah 53 earlier. In view of this, as well the rest of the corroboration that we shall see, it looks as if Matthew was only saying that the acts of physical healing were one instance of fulfilling what Isaiah said. We cannot take it to mean that all who believe in Jesus will be healed.

The second instance is what James tells us to do if we become sick. We are to go to the elders of the church, and request them to anoint us with oil and pray for us, confessing our sins (in case it was our sins that led to the sickness). James says that the prayer of faith will heal the sickness (Jas.5:14-16). We would have thought this was a promise for healing for all time, except that there are several cases in the New Testament where it did not happen.

Timothy had a problem with his stomach for which his mentor Paul advised him to take some wine (1Tim.5:23). Knowing how radical Paul was with regards to doctrine, this is not what he would have said if he believed that because Jesus was wounded for us we had a claim to be always healed. There was Trophimus whom Paul left behind sick as he travelled (2Tim.4:20). Epaphroditus, Paul’s co-worker, was at one time almost at the point of death (Php.2:25-27), which would have been unbelievable if health was our right. We do not know what Paul’s ‘thorn in the flesh’ was, whether it referred to a physical problem, but God’s solution was to help Paul to bear it rather than to remove it (2Cor.12:7-9). What this shows us is that there are times when God allows us to suffer, and He has not promised to take away all our pain and suffering until we are in eternity (Rev.21:4).

We are all aware that even in our days, even most godly people die of sickness and with suffering in spite of all the prayers that are offered on their behalf. It is not possible to write these off as lack of faith, presence of unconfessed sins, ancestral curses,

etc. It is not right to think that if someone does not get healed it must be because of a lack of faith or sin in his life. If someone asks for prayer for healing, it shows he has faith, and even a mustard seed size of prayer should be enough for God to heal (Matt.17:20), if that was what was needed. What about sin? It is possible that sometimes sickness is a discipline for sin that is not dealt with (1Cor.11:28-32). Then it should be confessed and forsaken before asking for healing. But it often happens that even when people have confessed all known sin they remain sick! When Jesus went around healing everyone who came to Him, can we think that all of them had great faith and no sin? There are things we do not understand now about God's wisdom, and we do not know why some are healed and others are not. But facts go to show that healing is not a guarantee for all.

Some people quote the promise of freedom from sickness that God gave to the people of Israel as they left for the Promised Land (Exo.15:26). We have to recognise that this was conditional on their obedience. Possibly this was also related to that period in history as a special protection for those people on their way. Another special thing was that they had food dropping from the sky and water coming out of rock, and their shoes did not wear out! It is not right for us to take such as promises for us.

So, what can we conclude? Sickness is a part of the curse that is on the earth as a result of the original sin. Just as in the case of other effects of the curse what we have to bear on the earth, this is also something that will be removed only in the new heavens and the new earth. Even the last part of our salvation, namely glorification, is kept waiting for us till that time. If we become ill, we have a right to go to our Father and ask for a healing believing that He is able to heal us. But we will have to accept it as an inscrutable part of His wisdom if He chooses not to heal miraculously. Then we have to go for the second best, which is to go to the doctors. We will have to wait

till we stand before Him before we can understand all His reasons. But let us not forget that even sickness can become a means by which we partake a little more of His glory (2Cor.4:16).

There are those who refuse to take medicines trusting in Isa.53:5, and there are those who have died as a result. There are also others who have experienced miraculous healing as a result of prayer. What we can conclude is that God does heal miraculously sometimes, but He has not given a blanket promise of healing for everyone. If God gives someone the gift of faith (as we discussed in the chapter on faith) to believe that he would be healed miraculously, only then can one be sure that it will certainly happen. It appears that there are some people like that, but then it is not right for them to teach that everyone must have the same type of faith because it is a special gift!

When it comes to mental illnesses, many Christians are confused about how to deal with them. Some insist God has given them a 'sound mind' (2Tim.1:7) and refuse to accept the possibility of any mental disorder. But the verse refers to 'discipline' rather than to an healthy mind, as modern translations bring out. Some others are quick to call all of them demonic manifestations. Some severe mental disorders do have symptoms similar to demonic oppression or possession, such as hallucinations, violent behaviour, or epileptic attacks. But it is necessary to understand that there are many types of biological malfunctions that affect the brain that need to be treated with medicines. There are also mental disorders that are triggered by traumatic experiences in life or a combination of biological and environmental factors that need to be addressed through psychotherapy. Just as we would go to doctors for medical problems there should be no hesitation to prayerfully address mental disorders through psychiatrists, psychologists and counsellors depending on the type of the problem. If we suspect demonic causes it will be good to look at

possible reasons for them as described in the chapter on Christians and demons.

CHAPTER 28

THE CHRISTIAN AND PROSPERITY

Preachers and writers want a large following, and so they offer the people what they *like* to hear instead of what they *need* to hear. Satan wants to lead people away from the true gospel of God, and so he entices them away from God with *another* ‘gospel’ that looks very appealing. That is what has happened with the ‘prosperity gospel’ or the ‘health and wealth gospel’. False teachers have arisen, leading people astray by misquoting and misinterpreting Scripture. Many are deceived because they are being offered what looks to be really good news for them and also it appears to be from the Bible, and they are not knowledgeable enough in the Scriptures to be able to understand when they are being deceived.

Two of the most serious things that cause suffering to people are sicknesses and poverty. We have already seen how an offer of health attracts people even though it is based on wrong interpretation of the Bible. Something similar is happening when it comes to the offer of prosperity.

“Beloved, I pray that in all respects you may prosper and be in good health, just as your soul prospers” (3Jn.2). Without realising that the third letter of John is a personal letter written to a brother called Gaius and that this is a line of greeting at the start of the letter, people are taking this verse to mean that it is a promise from God of a life of all-round prosperity! Actually if we understand the meaning in the original Greek, this would be equivalent to a modern writer saying, “I hope this letter finds you well in every way”!

“Christ redeemed us from the curse of the Law, having become a curse for us ... in order that in Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham might come to the Gentiles” (Gal.3:13,14). Since everyone knows that one of the things that was promised to

Abraham was that his children would inherit the Promised Land, this promise to the Christians is interpreted as material prosperity! But we only have to read the rest of the verse, “So that we would receive the *promise of the Spirit* through faith,” to see that God is talking to us about spiritual blessings!

“For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though He was rich, yet for your sake He became poor, so that you through His poverty might become rich” (2Cor.8:9). It really looks like God is promising us riches through this verse! But if we look at the context we can see that Paul is telling them to learn to give to others in need just as Jesus did to us! If we want to use this verse to mean that Jesus is going to make us rich, we have to put aside His teachings and example as well as those of the apostles.

That is what these false teachers go on to do. Just because Jesus and His disciples had a money box in the hands of Judas Iscariot to help them with their expenditure (Jn.13:29), they say Jesus must have had *lots* of money for His ministry! The soldiers at the cross divided His clothes to share them, but when they saw a tunic woven without seams (Jn.19:23,24), they did not want to tear it but cast lots for it. Preachers now say Jesus used to wear ‘designer clothes’ and expensive dresses! This too when Jesus dissuaded people from following Him for the sake of gain by saying He did not even have a place to lay His head (Matt.8:20), and it was a few people who were supporting Him as He and the disciples moved from place to place (Lk.8:1–3)!

It looks as if preachers have identified the great longing people have to have wealth, and in order to support such a pursuit found verses that can be misinterpreted to fit it to their theory.

Jesus said very plainly that we could not seek after God and wealth at the same time because one of them would take priority over the other (Matt.6:24). The love of money that propels man to run after it will soon lead him to all kinds of evil

(1Tim.6:10). Those who are hankering after more and more money will fall into traps that will finally ruin them (v.9). For example, when we are in need, we think we would be content once those needs are met. But when they have been met and we have money in hand, needs that were beyond our means and dreams earlier become alive! Then we want to get more money. The more money and possessions we have, our worries and concerns about them also increase, as also responsibilities to take care of them. We become so preoccupied with such thoughts that there is less and less space and time for God in our thoughts. God becomes just someone who can give us money. We can also try to convince ourselves that the more money we get, the more money we will be able to give to ministry. But we may find in reality that what we spend for our needs is much more than what we give for ministry!

When we become occupied with our pursuit of money, we also find that we think it is alright to cut corners to avoid losing money and to get more of it quickly! We find excuses to justify our unrighteousness ('Everybody does it', 'If we have to live in this world we can't be so fussy with legalistic rules', 'Our intention is good', 'God wants us to enjoy life', 'We must be shrewd to get things done'). The Devil is eager to give us wealth so that he can get us caught in his trap.

We can argue that there is nothing wrong with money in itself and that it is the love of money that is wrong (1Tim.6:10). Jesus referred to money as the 'unrighteous wealth' contrasting it with true riches (Lk.16:11). Money can lead us to unrighteousness easily, but true riches are the spiritual wealth of becoming like Jesus. But we shut our eyes towards the love of money that comes in when we begin to go after it earnestly, and it begins to occupy prime spot in our mind, even when we tell ourselves we are only trying to meet our needs. But the funny thing is, our needs are never satisfied! The Bible tells us to learn to be content (v.8). But we point out that Abraham and Job were wealthy, and quote verses from the Old Testament.

We don't seem to realise that the focus changed in the new covenant to becoming like Jesus (Rom.8:29) and gathering treasure for eternity (Jn.6:27). Jesus tells us to seek God's kingdom and His righteousness *first* and promises to give us all what we really need (Mt.6:33), and not to be like all the other people who are eagerly seeking after earthly things (vv.31,32).

There are riches that pass away, as Jesus illustrated in the parable of the rich (Lk.12:16-21), and treasures that will have value in eternity (Matt.6:20). There are pleasures that are sinful, or that take our mind away from God, and there is immeasurable pleasure living in the presence of God (Psa.16:11) and pleasures beyond imagination stored up in heaven for us (1Cor.2:9). When we set our heart on God, pleasures on earth will become less meaningful and less attractive. Our joy comes from being pleasing to God.

We also know that however much wealth we may accumulate here on earth, none of that will be of any use to us in eternity. What is eternally valuable for us is how much we have partaken of the nature of Jesus. This is the greatest promise for us in the new covenant (Rom.8:29).

How sad to fritter away our time and energy by pursuing after money and its pleasures while we are storing up nothing in heaven by serving God, His kingdom and His people! Let's keep to the bottom line – we *cannot* serve God and wealth at the same time (Matt.6:24). It is better to believe this than to discover it too late!

At the same time, we are *not* saying that there is virtue in poverty. That is another extreme position some Christians take. Poverty means that we do not have enough to meet our needs and that we are constantly at the mercy of other people. This is a cursed situation because God's promise is that if we seek Him first, He will give us all that we need. God does not want us to remain in poverty. Whether we were born poor or we became poor because of our folly or anyone else's fault, God's

promise is to provide for our needs once we begin to seek Him. We may have heard sermons that tell us that God has only promised to meet our needs and not our greed, which is true. But we do not have to remain poor. We may need to temporarily 'tighten our belts' and learn to manage whatever money we have, and we also need to learn to work hard to earn more and to be able to save for the future.

Jesus said that sometimes the people of this world were smarter in handling their affairs than God's children. Some of God's children wrongly imagine that God would just give them money in some miraculous way and so do not work hard to earn it. If they are in debt they just pray and hope for a miracle. It is good to pray, but we must not palm off our own responsibility to God! Another thing people do is to give some 'seed money' to some preacher, thinking that God would give them back a hundredfold! It is these preachers who are getting rich at the expense of these poor believers, and they do not seem to have any heart for their brothers whom they are bleeding to deeper poverty! Just praying or making 'positive confessions' cannot substitute for hard work.

If we are in debt we need to cut down whatever expenditure we can afford to avoid and start paying back even in small instalments. There are things that are not absolutely necessary for us to have especially when we are in such difficulty that we need not buy, and there are other things for which we can buy less expensive brands. We need not try to keep up a good impression before the others, because that way we may end up making ourselves a spectacle before the others! We need to avoid buying things on credit because usually the final expenditure including the interest will be more than double the actual cost, and in the end we might find ourselves more in debt than before.

Some Christians think that if they saved any money, it would be like having no faith. But having faith does not mean

avoiding doing what we have to do from our side. We trust in God to give us wisdom and strength and cause all things to work for our good, and then we do our part. The foolish thing is to sit quietly and expect God to do even our part!

A large part of our spiritual growth comes from learning from our mistakes. If we have made mistakes in the past, as all of us have, it does not mean that we have to keep doing the same things. We can make changes when God shows us what went wrong and make sure that every time we do things more wisely.

God does bless and take care of those who seek His kingdom and righteousness first in their lives by providing for them all that they need. When we have what we need, we can be content, and when we have more than what we need, we can then help others who are in greater need. But the seeking for prosperity will end with our losing God in our life too.

CHAPTER 29

THE CHRISTIAN AND DEMONS

When it comes to demons, there are three *extreme* positions Christians seem to take. Some just pooh-pooh it, saying that there are no such things as demons, and that they were just myths believed by the people of Jesus' days. They say Jesus just went along with popular understanding and did not try to contradict them with information about psychotic experiences! A second group of Christians believe that demons are very active, and attribute every trouble to demonic interference. They bind and cast out demons left and right. A third group of Christians say that they believe in the activities of demons, but they are not disturbed about it because they believe that since Jesus has won a victory over demons they don't have to worry!

The gospel narratives mention many times about Jesus casting out demons and how He authorised His disciples to do the same thing as also healing the sick (Lk.10:17-20). Demons are real, even though many people have never come across demon possessed people. Putting together truths from different parts of the Bible we can conclude that they are fallen angels who were thrown out of heaven along with Lucifer, the chief of the angels, who later became known as the Devil or Satan. They are furious with God because He threw them out, and because they are powerless against Him. Their fury has now turned to His creation, man, and especially to His children (Rev.12:17), and their goal seems to be to trouble and destroy mankind (Jn.10:10). Satan has organised demons in hierarchies (Eph.6:12), and some have been placed in charge of different areas (Dan.10:13,20), and we cannot rule out the possibility that there may be demons given the task of watching and studying each of us, reporting to Satan, tempting us and troubling us. Demons accuse us (Rev.12:10), oppose us (1Thess.2:18), attack us as in the case of Job, and deceive us

(Rev.12:9). They have supernatural powers like causing large winds, bringing fire down from the sky, and inciting people to attack others, as we see from Job's experience. One of the ways they deceive us is by counterfeiting the genuine work of God in our life such as by producing false signs and wonders (Matt.24:24) and false doctrines (1Tim.4:1).

We are warned to be careful because Satan is looking around for someone to catch (1Pet.5:8). We are to protect ourselves by putting on the full armour of God (Eph.6:11). We must be sober-minded and discern the schemes of the Devil so that we may not be caught unawares (2Cor.2:11). So, Satan and his demons are our declared enemies, and we must watch out against them. We cannot imagine that the victory Jesus won on the cross will automatically preserve us.

At the same time, we do not have to live in fear of the Devil or his demons. Jesus has not just defeated them on the cross, but stripped them of their power (Col.2:15). They are still on the earth trying to trouble us, but we have been given authority over them in the name of Jesus (Lk.10:17-20). At the appropriate time, they will be cast into a bottomless pit and locked up for a thousand years (Rev.20:2,3), and in the end, cast into a lake of fire forever (v.10). Our authority over demons is based on the name of Jesus, which means He has authorised us to use His name as a guarantee of the authority over demons that He has. Since His authority is settled forever, we do not have to relate it to our knowledge, experience, maturity, level of holiness, etc. The least of us can stand against Satan and command him because of this.

We can think of this like a traffic policeman on the road who signals a truck to stop. The truck driver stops, not because the policeman has any strength to overpower the truck, but because he represents the government that has the power to penalise the truck driver and to confiscate the truck! This is the boldness we need to have when we face demons in real

situations, because they can easily see if we are scared or doubtful. They can try to scare us with dramatic behaviour to see if we will crumble. But if 'we resist, firm in the faith' they *have* to obey (1Pet.5:8,9).

We don't have to go around casting out every demon we notice. In some cases, just binding a demon which is causing trouble is enough for that occasion. We must realise that if a man has given permission for a demon to possess or oppress him, even if we cast it out it can get back again. If he wants the demon to stay out, he has to repent, renounce the ways that opened up the access for the demon to enter or oppress, and accept the power of Jesus in his life.

As we see from the experience of Job, God has put a hedge around His children in such a way that demons cannot touch them without specific permission from God. We know that even for demons to enter pigs when they were being cast out from a demon possessed man, they had to obtain permission from Jesus (Matt.8:31). Therefore we do not have to fear that some demon or other may attack us whenever they like.

But the Bible tells us that there are ways in which we can make ourselves vulnerable to demonic attacks. Ephesians 4:26,27 says that if we *continue* in anger, we may give a foothold (foothold - NIV, place - KJV, opportunity - NASB) for the devil in our life. This is true of any sin that we continue in without repentance or resisting. It is not that if we fall into some sin, demons can get access into our life. But if we continue wilfully, that can open up the access. This is one reason we need to set things right with God and people as soon as we realise we have fallen. Another example the Bible gives about continuing in sin is about an unforgiving attitude that continues (2Cor.2:10,11).

We would have noticed, for example, if we get angry with someone and we chew over that anger in our mind, that we begin to get thoughts in our mind that stir us up about the

person we are angry with, and that our anger is increasing fast. The Devil is putting ideas into our mind, and trying to control our thoughts and behaviour. If we accept these ideas and begin to act according to them, the Devil is beginning to control us. If this progresses and becomes worse and worse, we can even become *possessed* by demons. When someone is possessed by demons, he has practically lost control of his life and the demon is now controlling him.

The question comes if a born again believer in Christ can be *possessed* by demons. The simple answer is no. This believer has the Holy Spirit who is in possession of his life, and he cannot be also possessed by demons at the same time. But as we see from the warnings above about continuing in sin, it is possible that demons can begin to control a small part of the believer's life where he is yielding continually to sin. That is the meaning of giving the Devil a foothold/place in one's life.

Modern scholars use the word 'demonisation' instead of 'demon possessed' for better clarity of what happens. The Greek word that is translated as demon possessed by the KJV is *daimonizomai*, which actually means 'to be troubled or vexed by demons'. Since the examples given in the gospels are those of demon possession, the translators may have chosen to use that translation. 'Demonisation' is to use the Greek word *daimonizomai* almost as it is as a new English word (transliteration). Demonisation can mean any activity of demons, from oppressing someone to possessing him. It becomes only a matter of degree. So, while believers cannot be possessed by demons they can be troubled or oppressed by demons, or in other words, demonised to a smaller or greater degree! We do not know for sure if this small level of demonisation happens from *outside* a person or when the demon *enters* a person. But that is immaterial as far as the effects are concerned, and a lack of understanding on this should not stop us from dealing with the problem.

This is more common than we would imagine. There are believers who may be controlled by demons in certain parts of their lives (anger, unforgiving attitude, pornography, drinking, smoking, sexual promiscuity, etc.) where they have virtually no ability to control themselves. Even when they do not want to yield to the temptation, they find themselves unable to stop. (This may happen even when they may be holy in every other area of life!) There may be demonisation, natural habits, or both. If they continue yielding to these, they find other forms of demonic activities in their lives such as repeated scary dreams, seeing black objects moving in the room, windows or doors opening or closing by themselves, lights going on and off, hearing voices, to begin with, and if it continues, going into confusion of mind, out of body experiences, madness, etc.

The next question is whether such 'manifestations' are really due to demons or psychological/psychiatric problems. Those who have the spiritual gift of discernment of spirits may be able to identify demonic sources. The other way is to check if people have given access to demons by their own activities. Also, when it comes to serious levels of demonisation, there will be a marked hostility towards Jesus. They may be unable to confess that Jesus is Lord, or pray in His name.

When we look at giving access to demons, apart from continuing in sin, two other gates are involvement in occult activities and idol worship. Occult activities such as Ouija boards, tarot cards, astrology, séances, crystal gazing, wearing of 'charms' or items that have been 'blessed' by occult practitioners, witchcraft, black magic, voodoo, table tipping, yoga meditation, transcendental meditation, etc., provide direct contacts with evil spirits, and it is no wonder if demons have been given access. Here again, it is not a one-time exposure to some activity that opens the access but a hearty involvement in the process. Sometimes it is possible that one participates in an occult activity without knowing that it is occult, such as freemasonry where Satan is being worshipped surreptitiously.

We know that idols are nothing in themselves (1Cor.8:4). They are man-made things of wood, stone or other materials. But we see that even supernatural things happen when people pray devotedly to idols. The power that works behind idols is from demons who impersonate gods (1Cor.10:19,20). Even 'Christian' idols are the same! That is how idol worship can give access to demons. There are cases where parents have dedicated their children to idols, and as they grow up they may experience demonic activities.

Some people bargain with demons that if they give power, money, position, answer to prayer, etc., they would serve them. But demons are out to steal and destroy (Jn.10:10). They grant the request, but afterwards begin to increasingly take control over their lives.

Now we see how we ought to walk carefully before God and avoid giving any foothold to the devil in our life.

If we need to cast out a demon(s) from another person, it is good to ask him how the demon got access, and explain to him that the access needs to be closed once the demon has been cast out. Then we can command the demon to come out and keep away from this person using the authority of the name of Jesus. We do not have to shout or scream or use a Bible or cross to do this, because the power to cast out demons is with Jesus and not with any of those! If the demon tries to scare us, we can calmly tell it that it has to leave because Jesus has defeated all demons on the cross and we are standing in His name.

After the demons have left, we need to help the person to repent, renounce all the activities through which the demons gained entry, and ask Jesus to forgive them and to be their Saviour. This is the only way that will keep demons out.

If we realise that we ourselves have been demonised through any of the ways mentioned above, and we have a true

relationship with Jesus, we can ask the demons to leave using the authority of the name of Jesus. For that to happen, we must acknowledge to God what we have done that gave access to the demons, and ask Him for forgiveness and cleansing (1Jn.1:9). Then we need to break all connections with demons that we are aware of, and command them to leave us in Jesus' name. But we must be aware that we can be tempted again, and therefore avoid all future possibilities of temptation and build up our relationship with God through reading the Bible, prayer and fellowship with other believers.

We need to be aware that even though demons are able to place ideas into our mind, probably through our spirit, they are not able to read our thoughts. For example, they had no idea that when they put Jesus to death He was going to come back to life and ruin all their plans for mankind! Only God, as the One who created every part of us including our brain, can know our thoughts (Psa.139:2). So, when we need to ask the demons to get out, we need to say it with our lips (even a whisper is enough).

There are many practical things we can learn about this subject as we deal with them in practice. However, one word of caution is to avoid making doctrines based on our experiences alone (which can be deceptive) without checking with the Bible. Most of the books on this subject are sadly based on experiences alone!

Finally, it is foolish for us to get occupied with the thoughts of demons. It is far better to be occupied with God and fellowship with Him. The right way to protect ourselves is to wear the full armour of God. Hanging a cross on the wall, keeping a Bible under the pillow, sprinkling holy water, or sprinkling the imaginary blood of Jesus around the house will not help!

CHAPTER 30

THE CHRISTIAN, WITCHCRAFT AND CURSES

Witchcraft, black magic and curses are some of the things some Christians live in fear of, and whenever things go wrong which they cannot explain, some 'well-wishers' suggest that perhaps it is some such thing that is at the back of the problem! Then there are 'pastors' and 'experts' who are willing to oblige and start the process of breaking these 'influences' by asking for fasting, special prayers and planting 'seed money'! It is the general lack of the knowledge of the Bible on the side of the general public that nurtures this industry!

A curse is usually only a malicious 'wish' someone expresses against another person. We human beings do not have any power to curse and make things happen. The one who has such supernatural power is God Himself, and demons to some extent. But demons can only exercise this power subject to permission from God or the victims.

God said that He would Himself curse those who disobeyed His commandments under the old covenant. Deuteronomy 28 describes the kinds of blessings He would give to those who obeyed Him and the curses that would come on those who disobeyed Him. As God knew already, it turned out that *no one* was able to keep the Law entirely, and naturally everyone came under the curse (Rom.3:9,10). Then God brought out the new covenant of grace (undeserved favour) under which the curse that we deserved was placed on Jesus when He hung on the cross in our place (Gal.3:13,14). Instead, we were granted blessings similar to Abraham. The ultimate blessing he received was that through him all the nations of the earth would be blessed. That happened when Jesus was born in Abraham's family. Now in Jesus' name and as children of God we are to be a blessing to the world around when we proclaim the Gospel of Jesus and also when we stand witness to the grace of God in

our dealings with people.

Now that God has placed us under His blessings, how can He also curse us at the same time? Balaam said concerning Israel as he prophesied, “Behold, I have received a command to bless; *when He has blessed, then I cannot revoke it.* He has not observed misfortune in Jacob; nor has He seen trouble in Israel; the Lord his God is with him, and the shout of a king is among them” (Num.23:20,21). If this was true of Israel, the chosen nation of God, how much more for His children? No witchcraft, black magic or curse can work against us, “For there is no omen against Jacob, nor is there any divination against Israel” (v.23).

This should assure us and give us boldness to stand without fear about what the Devil or people can do against us. “If God is for us, who is against us?” (Rom.8:31). Whatever happens around us or even to us, when we cannot figure out why it is happening, we must hold on to the confidence that God is with us to bless, and no curse or evil power can work against us. There must be some other explanation for what is going on. If we waver on this point we can become more and more confused and even play into the hands of evil spirits who are waiting to deceive us. The Devil may roar against us like a lion, but we must remember he is chained, and cannot attack us.

One heretical teaching that came up towards the end of the twentieth century is that of generational or ancestral curses. This says essentially that if we notice a common problem that is occurring in a family line, such as a proclivity to cancer, diabetes, etc., or a hot temper or laziness that runs in the family, it could be a curse from God on the generations of one of our ancestors who had sinned against God. Another way it is supposed to work is that if we are facing a problem that refuses to be resolved no matter what we try, it could again be due to a curse because of ancestral sin. According to a Bible verse they quote, a curse like this could run to three or four generations,

and any of our 30 ancestors in the earlier four generations could be the culprit!

But isn't this unfair, especially when we don't even know most of these ancestors? How can God punish innocent people for someone else's sins? If this was true, why didn't Jesus or the apostles teach us about it?

The proof text for this doctrine comes from, "You shall not worship them or serve them; for I, the Lord your God, am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children, on the third and the fourth generations of those who hate Me" (Exo.20:5). This is the last part of the second of the Ten Commandments. What does this mean, to visit the iniquity of the fathers on the children? It is easy to assume that it means children would be punished for their fathers' sins. Sad to say, a few English translations of the Bible have done this. But Hebrew scholars do not all agree. For us, when we know that God cannot contradict Himself, and He says in Ezekiel 18:10 and Deuteronomy 24:16 that children shall not be punished for their fathers' sin (or *vice versa*), we know this is *not* what the verse in Exodus means. Many scholars believe that visiting the iniquity means that the natural consequences of one's sins may be felt by succeeding generations, in the way they affect their upbringing, reputation, financial conditions, relationship with others, opportunities for growth, etc., that we can all see happening.

But then, how do we explain diseases and behavioural patterns coming down generations? As we have seen in an earlier chapter, diseases are the result of the presence of sin in the world and the general curse on the earth that makes things degenerate. A part of sickness is that it may affect our genes and get passed on to the next generations. It cannot be taken as the result of one ancestor's specific sin and the curse of God upon him. Secondly, behaviour patterns can be learned by observation, as it happens when children learn to imitate their

children. This is what may have happened between Abraham and Isaac, both of whom lied about their wives being their sisters in order to avoid getting killed. This cannot be explained as God cursing Abraham (who was blessed by God!) and then Isaac getting that curse.

How can we explain the curses Noah made on his grandson Canaan and Elisha on the young boys who insulted him? Starting from the point that we human beings can only 'wish' and have no power to make things happen to others, we can imagine that it was God who made these curses to work by His intervention that He would have considered as special cases. We know that so many people curse, and nothing happens, even though those who believe in what they call 'the power in the word' want us to think that once words are spoken, things will happen accordingly. One proverb points out that if someone curses us for no fault of ours nothing will happen (Prov.26:2). This cannot be true if spoken words would automatically accomplish themselves!

Witchcraft, black magic, voodoo etc., work directly with the power of demons with whom people are in allegiance. Since we know that demons have supernatural powers, we must recognise that these things can work, and they do work in many ways. But what we also need to remember is that we have God as our heavenly Father and we are under His protection. He protects us by placing hedges around us just as He did for Job, and demons have to get special permission from Him before they can do anything to us. So, witchcraft and black magic cannot work against us, however much people try to do things against us. If we notice people doing such things against us we should not allow fear to grip us, but we must hold on to God and stay close to Him.

When it comes to people who are not children of God by faith in Jesus Christ, there is no protection to the level we enjoy. We can assume there is some minimal level of protection God

offers to all people against demons (otherwise all of them would have been destroyed!), but the fact is that such people do not have any hesitation towards sin or anything else, as long as they provide them some advantage. For some people, demons are also to be worshipped for the power they will give! So, it is only natural that such people may suffer a lot from demonic intervention in their lives depending on how much access they give. But as long as we keep ourselves close to God and avoid giving access to demons in our life, the great protection of God will surround us on every side.

Problems come if we open our lives towards demons, as we mentioned in an earlier chapter, through continued sin, occult practices or idol worship. Then we *allow* demons to cause trouble in our lives. If we do not believe in God's protection but continue in fear, *that* can also provide a foothold for the Devil to start working in our lives.

So, let us not allow ourselves to get preoccupied with curses or witchcraft. Our privilege is to have God as our Father, and it must be our goal to get closer to Him, become more pleasing to Him and to enjoy all His blessings.

CHAPTER 31

BACKSLIDING

The Christian life is like rowing a boat against the current; the moment we stop rowing, we lose speed and start going back with the current. The current we are rowing against comes from the lusts in our flesh, the attractions of the world and the manipulations of the Devil. One of the meanest lies that the Devil has spread among Christians is that once we are saved and become children of God we are safe, and many churches are actually teaching this as a doctrine. Just one verse, “Take care, brethren, that there not be in any one of you an evil, unbelieving heart that falls away from the living God” (Heb.3:12) should be enough to warn any sincere Christian about the danger. It is addressed to Christian brothers (and sisters), and it talks about the possibility of unbelief coming in, and finally the possibility of our falling away from God. There are many more warnings from the Bible as well as real life examples we can see before our eyes.

There are some who give up on God when one of their sincere prayers is not answered. There are some others who get confused by the conflicting philosophies of this world and are not able to figure out how an almighty and loving God allows evil to happen, especially when it touches them or their loved ones. These were real Christian who, at one time, started trusting God but who got waylaid by the Devil. When we read *Pilgrim's Progress* by John Bunyan, which is not the word of God but based on general observation of life along with Biblical understanding, we can see how it describes the many traps a Christian can fall into. It will be silly of us if we imagine that nothing can happen to us, go ahead and get caught in a trap.

When we talk about backsliding, many think in terms of a gross turn around, such as a believer going back to drinking, getting caught in an affair, publicly making statements against

Christ or the Bible, etc. But in defining backsliding in this way, what they miss is to notice the beginning of backsliding.

Backsliding does not begin as a major fall; it is a cooling of love towards God that can go unnoticed for a long time, by others and the person himself, till it reaches deep levels. People who have begun to backslide can be blind about it because they are still involved in external religious acts such as reading the Bible, attending church, taking part in church activities, etc., without really recognising that their heart is going away from God.

This can happen to *any* of us. It happened to the leader of the church in Ephesus. Once he was known for his zeal for God's work, uncompromising attitude towards evil and false doctrine, discernment, perseverance under trial, etc. But now his love for Jesus had become lukewarm (Rev.2:2-4). Perhaps most of the people in the church did not recognise this, and he was still the leader. But Jesus wanted people who loved Him with devotion, and He was not happy with half-hearted ones or those with a divided heart. That is the challenge for us.

Therefore we need to be sensitive to how our heart stands towards God and His people. Are we losing our first love? Are other things or people becoming more important for us? Are we beginning to think that His commandments are a bit burdensome? Are we getting tired of having to carry our cross every day and deny ourselves? Are we becoming envious of others who are not making the sacrifices that we have made and still prospering? Do we think we deserve to enjoy ourselves more rather than deny ourselves all the time? Are we getting upset with God for not rewarding us for all that we are doing for Him? Is there some sin that we gave up earlier beginning to have an attraction for us? Are we being tempted to think that we cannot afford to give up some earthly position or someone's love just to keep what we think are some details of God's laws? There are many other questions we can ask ourselves that can show us which direction we are heading – closer to God or

away from God.

It is obvious that the only way to stay faithful to God is by seeking all the time to get closer to Him. If we slip up at times, we need to pick ourselves up, confess our failure, get back to God and ask for His grace to learn from our mistake and become more careful. This is not drudgery, but the regular routine of a faithful man or woman of God. We are in the process of growing up spiritually to get to the full stature of Christ (Eph.4:15;Col.1:27,28). Therefore we need to proactively *press on* towards that maturity (Heb.6:1). It is not going to happen automatically, and if we do not press on in that direction, we will soon find ourselves sliding in the opposite direction. Let us beware, lest we fall away after all that the Lord has done for us and in us. The Lord is able to keep us from falling (Jude.24), but we must not think that *we* can never fall away (1Cor.10:12).

CHAPTER 32

CONCLUSION

I hope this has blessed you. What we have received freely from the Lord is something we do not deserve at all, and none of us has seen or understood all that He has prepared for us. I hope, as much as it has helped me in writing this, that you also have been encouraged to press on towards God. Let us learn to walk constantly before Him in humility (Gen.17:1), cleanse ourselves from every defilement of flesh and spirit (2Cor.7:1) as God reveals them to us, and complete the race He has enlisted us in. Let us also encourage one another as the end of days approaches (Heb.3:13) and things become tougher (2Tim.3:1). Let us pray, “Lord, help me to be what You want me to be, and help me to do what You want me to do.”

Please visit my website *Comfort & Counsel* at www.c-n-c.org to read practically all I have written. If you have comments, you can contact me through the website, or write email to me (jninan@c-n-c.org) .

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APPENDIX

INTERPRETING THE BIBLE RIGHTLY

The Bible (with its 66 books – 39 in the Old Testament and 27 in the New Testament) is the word of God for man. The Bible itself says that every part of it was inspired (God breathed) by God “for our teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness; so that the man of God may be adequate, equipped for every good work” (2Tim.3:16,17). In it God reveals Himself to us, and He also tells us about His expectations from us and His actual dealings with man from the time of creation. This word of God is the basis on which we live, and form our doctrines and practices; the Bible forms our final point of reference with respect to the whole of our life as Christians. It is clear that how we interpret the Bible will be of paramount importance to us in every area of life.

One of the first things that we notice in the Bible is that all parts of the Bible are not of the same nature. Each part has its own value in God’s revelation, but certainly some parts are more critical for us to understand than others. Another thing we notice is that different books in the Bible follow different styles and approaches – some are historical, telling us of what happened in the past, some are instructions for man to follow, some are prophetic about what is going to take place in the future; some are prose, some are poetry, some use plain language, some figurative language, etc. It must be obvious straightaway that we cannot interpret all parts of the Bible in the same way.

Another important point to understand is about the mechanism by which ‘inspiration’ took place. A common teaching on this subject says that even though God used human authors to write down the different books, He supervised the process in such a way that the final output was

exactly what He wanted, word for word. This can be somewhat misleading because God was not using the authors as writing machines that moved according to His control, but He had to give some amount of freedom for the authors to use their own vocabulary and writing style within the scope of their understanding. This 'freedom' is obvious if we compare the different books. If God had dictated every word in some way, all books would have been the same in style, accuracy and precision. What we see is the use of human language, with its limitations in precision and accuracy. Some parts of the Bible use a more precise language than others. This has to be taken into consideration when we interpret any part of the Bible. One cause of much error is the assumption that every word or sentence in the Bible is equally precise and accurate.

When God inspired the authors (more than 40 of them who lived in different places over a period of 1500 years) to write the scriptures, another issue He had to face was how to convey what He had in His mind using the limited understanding and abilities of the human authors. Most of the times what He had in mind was far greater than what they could comprehend even if He had tried to explain to them. So He chose to work within the limitations of man in such a way that what He had in mind would come out somehow but not as perfectly as He would have done without these limitations of man. One of the practical results we see is that the truths of God are revealed in the Bible not in a precise unambiguous way such as in the form of a text book, but spread throughout the Bible in bits and parts. To understand what God has to say, we need to read the Bible as a whole, and not take verses from here and there independently. If we fail to understand this point, we may make many mistakes in interpretation.

More details of the principles of interpreting the Bible are given in my books *Understanding the Bible – for ordinary Christians* (www.c-n-c.org/utb.htm), and *Understanding the Bible – and where people go wrong* (www.persontoperson.org).

About the author

Jacob Ninan is a Bible teacher and Christian counsellor. He and his wife Susan have five children and seven grandchildren.

Other books by the author

Understanding the Bible – for ordinary Christians

Understanding the Bible – and where people go wrong

Pointers along the way Vol. 1-7